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Austrian Centre for Country of Origin
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Afghanistan:

Report on the impact of the Taliban's information practices and legal policies, particularly on women and girls

February 2025



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Origin & Asylum Research and Documentation

Report on the impact of the Taliban's information practices and legal policies, particularly on women and girls

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This report serves the specific purpose of collating legally relevant information on conditions in countries of origin pertinent to the assessment of claims for asylum. It is not intended to be a general report on human rights conditions. The report is prepared within a specified time frame on the basis of publicly available documents as well as information provided by experts. All sources are cited and fully referenced.

This report is not, and does not purport to be, either exhaustive with regard to conditions in the country surveyed, or conclusive as to the merits of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Every effort has been made to compile information from reliable sources.

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List of Abbreviations

AFF	Afghanistan Freedom Front
CDC	Community Development Council
DFA	De-Facto Authorities
GBV	Gender-based Violence
GBVIMS	Gender-Based Violence Information Management System
GDI	General Directorate of Intelligence
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
IPV	Intimate Partner Violence
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NRF	National Resistance Front
PVPV	Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice

List of interviews with expert sources featured in this report

Interviewee 1: 26 July 2024

Interviewee 2: 13 August 2024

Interviewee 3: 15 August 2024

Interviewee 4: 21 August 2024

Interviewee 5: 27 August 2024

Interviewee 6: 27 August 2024

Interviewee 7: no show

Interviewee 8: consent to use information revoked

Interviewee 9: 2 September 2024

Interviewee 10: 25 September 2024

I10 has nearly two decades of working experience in Afghanistan, focusing on the health sector, service development, training, and capacity building.

Interviewee 11: 16 October 2024

Interviewee 12: Zahra Hashimi, 17 October 2024

Zahra Hashimi is the co-founder and director of the Omid Online School, which was established in 2022. The Omid Online School provides online education to girls in Afghanistan from grades seven to twelve and offers psychological support to the girls.

Interviewee 13: 21 October 2024

Interviewee 14: Thomas Ruttig, 23 October 2024

Thomas Ruttig is an expert on Afghanistan and co-founder of the independent research organization/think tank Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN). He has more than 40 years of experience in dealing with the country and has spent a total of more than 13 years there, including as an employee of the German Democratic Republic's embassy, the German embassy, the United Nations, as deputy EU special envoy and independent researcher/analyst.

Interviewee 15: Abdul Ghafoor Rafiey, 28 October 2024

Abdul Ghafoor Rafiey is the founder of the Afghanistan Migrants Advice & Support Organization (AMASO), an organization based in Kabul which was active from 2014 until 2022 and focussed on assisting Afghan migrants and voluntary and forced returnees. The organization has since suspended its activities. The support it provided included counselling,

accommodation/temporary shelter and awareness raising. Abdul Ghafoor Rafiey, who has left the country in August 2021, has continued the work on a personal basis and has also been closely monitoring a range of topics, including the situation of minorities, especially the Hazara, but also of women and girls.

Interviewee 16: 31 October 2024

Interviewee 17: 7 November 2024

I17 is an academic and practitioner with extensive experience in Afghanistan. I17's areas of expertise include civilian peacebuilding, forced displacement and drivers of migration. I17 has visited the country in various capacities under the first and the current Taliban rule as well as under the Islamic Republic, including as an advisor to local humanitarian organizations.

Review 1: Emran Feroz, January 2025

Emran Feroz is a journalist and book author. After studying political science and Islamic studies, he worked as a freelance journalist, covering Afghanistan for a number of international media outlets. He is fluent in Dari and Pashto and has travelled extensively in Afghanistan to gain an in-depth understanding of the country.

Emran Feroz has contributed significantly to the content of this report by thoroughly reviewing chapters 2 to 6.

Review 2: 19 February 2025

A second review was done by staff members of an international organization with a presence in Afghanistan.

Please note that additional information on individual pseudonymized expert sources can be provided upon request. For more detailed information on why it was necessary to withhold further information on the interviewees by default, please see to the first chapter of this report on methodological remarks.
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1 Methodological remarks

1.1 Aim of the report

In light of the Taliban's increasingly restrictive policies (IPS, 15 November 2024; WHO, 14 October 2024, p. 18; UN Women, 4 June 2024, pp. 15, 19; UN Women, August 2024, p. 5) and the publication of the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (PVPV) law in August 2024 (UNHCR, 8 December 2024, p. 1; AAN, 31 August 2024), which further codified the extensive restrictions on the Afghan population, particularly women and girls, this report deals with the impact of legal, administrative, and social restrictions on the human rights situation in the country. In addition, the report addresses how these restrictions have adversely altered the flow of information within and on Afghanistan since the Taliban's resurgence in August 2021. Thereby, the report aims to provide supplementary information primarily on the situation of the female Afghan population in order to fill gaps in existing COI; gaps that have arisen due to various reasons, including restrictions on media freedom, restrictions on the work of humanitarian actors in the country, self-censorship for fear of consequences and fear of jeopardising the already highly constrained space of freedoms (for more details in this regard, see [chapter 2](#)). To this end, the report draws on 16 interviews conducted remotely by ACCORD between July and November 2024.

As this report is based almost exclusively on information gathered through interviews, it is primarily intended to serve as a "supplementary tool". It seeks to provide a detailed insight into how the situation – particularly that of the female population – is perceived within the country. Due to this very focused range of sources, it is essential to draw also on other sources in order to obtain a comprehensive picture of the current situation in Afghanistan. Some chapters of the report offer specific recommendations for further reading. In general, ACCORD recommends the following as important documents:

- IOM – International Organization for Migration et al.: Summary report of countrywide women's consultations, April 2024
https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2120283/situation_of_afghan_women_april_english.pdf
- IOM – International Organization for Migration: Information on the situation of girls and women in Afghanistan, 9 January 2025 [Login required]
https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2120151/Answer_to_info_request_Afghanistan_situation_girls_and_women_Jan_2025.pdf
- UNAMA – UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan: Media Freedom in Afghanistan, November 2024
https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2118212/unama_report_on_media_freedom_in_afghanistan.pdf
- UNAMA – UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan: De Facto Authorities' Moral Oversight in Afghanistan: Impacts on Human Rights, July 2024
https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2112252/moral_oversight_report_english_final.pdf
- UN OCHA – UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs: Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2025, December 2024
<https://www.unocha.org/attachments/f27aee21-5770-46a5-9706-fa3a0f92f945/Afghanistan-Humanitarian-Needs-and-Response-Plan-2025.pdf>

- UNHCR – UN High Commissioner for Refugees: UNHCR Afghanistan; Women and Girls Factsheet; October 2024, 8 December 2024
https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2118837/Women_and_Girls_Factsheet_-_October_2024.pdf
- UN Women: Afghanistan Gender Country Profile 2024, 4 June 2024
<https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/Gender-country-profile-Afghanistan-en.pdf>
- UN Women: Resolve of Afghan Women in the Face of Erasure: Three Years Since the Taliban Takeover, August 2024
<https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/resolve-of-afghan-women-in-the-face-of-erasure-three-years-since-the-taliban-takeover-en.pdf>

1.2 Access to information and precaution of anonymity

In order to compile this report, ACCORD conducted 16 interviews between 26 July and 7 November 2024. These interviews were conducted online via a video conferencing tool. All interviews were transcribed afterwards and the transcripts approved by the interviewees for final use. The interviewees comprised international and national humanitarian workers and academic scholars. Eleven were located in Afghanistan (eight primarily in Kabul, three in Kandahar), the remaining five coordinated projects in Afghanistan while being based in various other countries or had recently visited Afghanistan, providing valuable insights into the situation on the ground. Moreover, after the first draft of the report was completed, it was reviewed by journalist and Afghanistan expert Emran Feroz. An additional review was done by staff members of members of an international organization with a presence in Afghanistan.

Out of the 16 interviewees, only three agreed to be quoted by their real names, all of whom are currently based outside Afghanistan. All other interviewees were pseudonymized to ensure their safety. One interviewee (I8) revoked consent during the drafting of the report due to feeling unsafe even when anonymized, resulting in only 15 interviews being quoted in the report. The eighth interview was, thus, used solely as background information during the drafting process.

Although it is generally advisable for COI purposes to identify experts by full name, job title and institutional affiliation, as this practice enables readers to evaluate sources, contextualize information, and assess the weight of their statements, in the current Afghan context significant security issues prevent such a level of transparency. The fact that all the experts interviewed who are still in the country refused to be named, citing security concerns, highlights that even professional insights cannot be shared openly without jeopardising one's safety. This lack of identification of not only the name but also the organization that the sources are affiliated with, underlines the difficulty of information gathering and dissemination under the Taliban de-facto authorities (DFA). This is illustrated by a statement of one interviewee, whose interview was rescheduled due to an unplanned home-office day and the interviewee's preference not to speak with us when at home:

“You don't have privacy, you don't have all these things, you cannot dare to speak about that. Even, for example, yesterday, I was not comfortable doing this interview using my Wi-Fi at home; even though I know it is password protected. [...] So, it is an issue of privacy.

This is the situation, you realize you need to think twice about what you say, what you speak, what you talk about. And you have to be careful.” (I3, 15 August 2024)

1.3 What and how to report in an environment of diminishing freedoms

Many interviewees told us that the situation in Afghanistan is becoming increasingly restrictive and that it is difficult to report on the few freedoms or niches that still exist in the country, as the Taliban DFA closely monitor all information and reporting on the country. Interviewees also told us that some organizations tried to include humanitarian initiatives that are officially banned by the Taliban DFA in programmes that are not banned, which takes a lot of time and energy. As part of a “do-no-harm approach”, ACCORD tried not to overemphasize these niches of remaining freedoms in the report. In order to achieve this, and not to jeopardize certain individuals or initiatives, the original quotes have sometimes been adapted using square brackets. In some cases, this was also done to avoid drawing conclusions about the gender of the oral source from direct quotes. In some cases, personal experiences described by interviewees in great detail were replaced by ACCORD with a reference to more general anecdotes in order to avoid revealing personal experiences. Whether an anecdote mentioned in this report was passed on as such by the source or was personally experienced by the source, therefore, remains inaccessible to the reader. Although the fact that some of the events described were directly experienced by the interviewees underlines the relevance of these accounts, this strategy was used to ensure the anonymity of all sources at all times.

1.4 Considering different social categories

This report primarily focuses on the impact of the Taliban’s policies on the female Afghan population. However, the report also addresses the situation of men and boys in some of its sections, as the male population of Afghanistan is also exposed to the Taliban’s laws and regulations and has to face the consequences of non-compliance. (See [chapter 3](#), [chapter 5](#) and [chapter 6](#) for more information in this regard.)

The report encourages readers to consider how gender interacts with social categories to determine someone’s overall vulnerability. In the Afghan context, the experiences of women and girls can vary significantly based on factors such as age, health, sexual orientation, ethnic background, and whether they live in rural or urban areas or specific provinces:

“The Taliban do whatever they want to do, especially, when you belong to a minority group. When we are talking generally about Afghan women, all of them have a very difficult situation. But if you’re a Hazara, for example, [or belong to] a minority group [...]. So, [...] if the situation for Afghan women [since the Taliban takeover] has become worse, [...] let’s say by a 100%, for the Hazara women, it has become worse by 150%, because they are Hazara.” (Rafiey, 28 October 2024)

“I would say that there are vulnerable groups that have heightened risk right now. So, of course, women and girls. But I think there’s an intersectional risk which is elevated, for example, elderly women [or] all women and girls who have disabilities of any type: developmental, physical, sensory, emotional, all the different disabilities.” (I10, 25 September 2024)

Similarly, I16 noted that intersecting vulnerabilities (such as gender and disabilities) and their impact should be considered:

“So, especially when it comes to women and girls, who are already highly vulnerable, having disabilities creates increased vulnerabilities. I think that’s often also an aspect that is certainly [...] overlooked, because for a person with disabilities in general, there are numerous human rights issues. [...] Already imagining being a woman and a girl not being able to go outside your home, but then having a disability and not even be able to reach out through other channels is [...] a really heightened risk and vulnerability. [...] So, it’s just one additional layer of intersecting vulnerabilities that needs to be considered. [...] And which makes it even more difficult.” (I16, 31 October 2024)

Furthermore, it is crucial to consider the economic circumstances of “ordinary people” when assessing the impact of the Taliban’s policies and regulations on the population. This viewpoint was highlighted by I3 during an interview in August 2024:

“What we are missing are the perspectives of the ordinary people, which is a highly important component. For example, for a former minister who is currently in Afghanistan, maybe the situation is much, much better than for an ordinary Afghan. But when you speak with a woman who is struggling to buy a piece of bread, she would describe the situation differently. So, we need to look at the information from a protection standpoint to get a better understanding of these issues.” (I3, 15 August 2024)

2 Information Situation

2.1 Lack of information, limitations on reporting

In an interview conducted in October 2024, Thomas Ruttig, co-founder of the Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN), highlighted the lack of information and the challenges of gathering information inside the country. He noted that it has become “impossible” to investigate certain issues on a national scale through direct observation or interviews. However, other than in previous times, this difficulty is no longer due to the security situation, which has improved significantly since the end of the insurgency, but to specific restrictions imposed by the Taliban. In the context of the current information environment, Ruttig argued that most of the time, the information that is available is merely anecdotal and gives the following example:

“So far, the ban [of live images of living beings in television]¹ has been imposed in Kandahar, the Taliban’s headquarters, and in the northern province of Takhar. You might ask: why these two provinces? Or is it just that we haven’t heard about other provinces? Even though word travels fast in Afghanistan.” (Ruttig, 23 October 2024 [original in German])

Similarly, I3 noted a significant interest in information, particularly new information, which is however constrained by “the current restrictive circumstances [...] limiting the media’s ability

¹ More detailed information on the ban on displaying images of living beings, see the following report: UNAMA - UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan: Media Freedom in Afghanistan, November 2024 https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2118212/unama_report_on_media_freedom_in_afghanistan.pdf

to report on certain issues.” In regard to the situation of the Afghan media, I2 mentioned that “media is really restricted, [...] we don’t really know, what is happening around us anymore, information through media is very limited.” I3 as well as Thomas Ruttig indicated that the Taliban DFA are trying to suppress the reporting of the remaining independent Afghan media (I3, 15 August 2024; Ruttig, 23 October 2024). I3 further stated:

“I think we cannot say that we have a free media in Afghanistan. All the media are strictly monitored and controlled by the DFA and they only allow them to cover those topics that are in their best interest. And journalists [...] have to face arrests and a lot of intimidation, many have actually fled Afghanistan because of this situation. And even border monitoring reports confirm this.” (I3, 15 August 2024)

During an interview in September 2024, I10 explained that there are restrictions on information collection and dissemination in the country. Nevertheless, according to I10, it is still possible to gather information, “but a lot of organizations avoid it because they don’t want to be barred from the country [as they] have a long-term goal of staying there and being involved.” Long-term stakeholders such as Samuel Hall, ACAPS, Drops, and other entities remain committed to “keeping the flow of the information dynamic”. These organizations aim to make sure that “information is reaching Afghanistan, and that information is coming out.” However, the Taliban have implemented numerous obstacles that complicate this process significantly (I10, 25 September 2024). To underscore the challenges faced by those attempting to report on the human rights situation in the country, I10 cited the example of Richard Bennett, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, who was barred from entering the country by the Taliban DFA after they criticized his work and accused him of spreading propaganda (see e.g., IBA, 9 September 2024; OHCHR, 21 August 2024):

“Richard Bennett has now been subjected to a travel ban. He’s not allowed to enter Afghanistan because he made statements and released a report about media transparency, about the status of women and girls, access to education, all of which came from that activity of collecting information.² He did interviews. He sat in on focus group discussions. He read transcripts, met with many, many Afghans, gathered information, was able to do his important work. But then the consequence, the Taliban were like, ‘OK, sure, you can do that. [...] We don’t need you here. You are biased against us.’ [...] When this happened, he said that’s not a legitimate reaction, ‘all I did was describe the situation on the ground. These are not my interpretations of that. These are not my opinions. These are facts.’ [...] So, what he’s done, is he took a stance, Mr. Bennett, knowing that there might be a consequence like this, but he at least planted the flag, ‘on this date, we acknowledge that what we’ve collected are facts. And these are rejected by the Taliban.’ So, the whole world can say, ‘OK, well, actually he’s a very respected advocate and representative of the global community for the rights and the visibility of girls and women in Afghanistan. If on this date he said this is the truth and the Taliban reject it, then at least we know from this

² The report referred to by I10 can be accessed here: UN General Assembly: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, Richard Bennett [A/79/330], 30 August 2024 <https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2118768/n2425329.pdf>

point going forward, this is a possible consequence of disseminating information.” (I10, 25 September 2024)

Given the lack of information available, online and social media platforms have reportedly become the primary source of information. Except for potential limitations in access due to financial and power constraints, these sources have so far remained unrestricted (Ruttig, 23 October 2024). I2, however, mentioned that Afghans are afraid of expressing anything openly via social media, since the Taliban DFA are closely monitoring social media as well as traditional media (I2, 13 August 2024). In his review, Emran Feroz noted that this situation is also apparent on various YouTube channels, where the content of prominent YouTubers often remains superficial. Additionally, due to fear, many individuals are now reluctant to participate in interviews (Feroz, 10 January 2025).

According to Thomas Ruttig, as a consequence of the current information environment, sources not influenced by the Taliban – for example, social media, diaspora and opposition sources – are receiving greater attention. However, these sources also need to be treated with caution, as they tend to spread rumours quickly, exaggerate information or even spread disinformation for political reasons or due to a lack of direct access or simple professional inadequacies (Ruttig, 23 October 2024). Emran Feroz underlined this fact, adding that sometimes people in Afghanistan also fall for disinformation, even if they are only a few kilometres away from the events (Feroz, 10 January 2025).

Moreover, Emran Feroz noted that in his opinion, it was not possible to report independently from Afghanistan with the DFA’s knowledge (Feroz, 28 January 2025). According to I3, many journalists reportedly faced intimidations or had been arrested; many had left the country. Reporting on certain topics – in the media or other contexts – had become challenging (I3, 15 August 2024).

In another interview, DFA restrictions on reporting are discussed in a non-media context, specifically related to humanitarian reporting activities. In October 2024, I11 stated that although pictures are considered important for their organization’s reports and for the donors, they complied with the Taliban DFA ban on pictures to “avoid getting into trouble” (I11, 16 October 2024). For more detailed information on the impact of the DFA restrictions on humanitarian information dissemination, please see [chapter 2.3](#).

The limited access to information presents a significant risk for the spread of misinformation, particularly regarding narratives intentionally propagated by the Taliban. During the interviews, this issue was illustrated by the interviewees’ discussions on corruption. According to Thomas Ruttig, the Taliban see no need to communicate transparently when it comes to issues such as corruption, for example, especially not with foreigners and the media: “They do not see themselves as having a moral obligation to account to us or to their own people.” (Ruttig, 23 October 2024 [original in German]). Both I3 and I10 highlighted that there seems to be a prevailing belief that corruption has decreased under the Taliban, which, according to them, contradicts the reality on the ground (I3, 15 August 2024; I10, 25 September 2024). This misconception is sometimes even echoed by international actors (I10, 25 September 2024). I3 points out that the current form of corruption makes it challenging to report on it (I3, 15 August 2024), while I10 notes that development partners are reluctant to address corruption issues because it might jeopardize their ability to remain involved in the country, “because why would they want to deal with a thing which is going to lower their chance of being able to stay

involved?” If allegations are made against the Taliban regarding their ongoing involvement in pre-existing forms of corruption or the introduction of new forms of corruption, those making the accusations may be barred from the country (I10, 25 September 2024).

Another subject where, according to I10, the Taliban deliberately present a different picture from the reality on the ground is media transparency. The Minister of Information and Culture recently delivered a speech in summer 2024 claiming that media transparency has been improved. However, it was observed that the environment in which this statement was made did not allow for any critical questions to be raised. Reporters who were present at the speech were unable to question the Minister about the absence of women, the restrictions that mean that the media can report only on approved content, or the limited list of 63 approved experts, which excluded women and public health specialists. The fear of severe repercussions, such as disappearance or disciplinary actions, prevented any dissenting voices from being heard (I10, 25 September 2024).

2.2 Self-censorship, fear of tightening already scarce spaces of freedoms

Self-censorship due to fear of repercussions from the Taliban DFA was mentioned in several interviews. I1, I2 and I3 stressed the fact that the reason people remain silent is not because they agree with the Taliban’s rule or policies, but because they are scared of the consequences (I1, 26 July 2024; I2, 13 August 2024; I3, 15 August 2024). This is because people who openly opposed the Taliban DFA were disappeared (I1, 26 July 2024), women who spoke out were allegedly subjected to sexual harassment, sexual abuse in detention centres and various forms of intimidation (I3, 15 August 2024). However, on the issue of sexual harassment and sexual abuse in detention centres, Emran Feroz mentioned that he had once done some research on the subject and found that several of the sources claiming these things were more problematic than anticipated (Feroz, 10 January 2024).

Additionally, the Taliban reportedly often threaten family members of those who do not comply with their rule, making it even more difficult to raise one’s voice:

“People keep quiet, because they are afraid.” (I1, 26 July 2024)

“I cannot express anything freely. I am afraid. I am afraid for myself or for my family [...]” (I2, 13 August 2024)

“The DFA established an atmosphere of fear [...] in which everybody has the concern, that, ‘if I speak up, I will face the consequences and the DFA will show me consequences.’” (I3, 15 August 2024)

One interviewee discussed the historical context of Afghanistan’s restrictive regimes, noting that there have always been ways for people to express their dissatisfaction, albeit limited. I3 explained that even during the first Taliban rule, it was somehow possible to express dissatisfaction at the community level. Under the current Taliban authorities, however, there are many reasons to complain, and people would complain if they could, but:

“For example, just imagine that in the capital for 2 weeks the water supply system, which should be open every day, is only pumping waters for 3 hours. Do you think people would not complain about it? People would complain, but: First, there is nobody to listen, and second, if somebody tried to express frustration, the DFA will take him, and they clearly

indicate that nobody has the right to complain. [...] Sometimes you even think, ‘If I speak with my brother, will he report that or not?’ Because everybody is in a very difficult situation.” (I3, 15 August 2024)

Similarly, I17 noted that distrust and self-censorship make it hard for people in war-torn Afghanistan to trust each other or identify allies:

“So, yes, it’s the government, but it’s also society or elements in society. [...] And, I think, if that is the case, that’s why people self-censor. That’s why people don’t trust each other anymore because they no longer know which side their neighbour is on. And that’s the ultimate success of a police state, to make you doubt at any point in time, who has your back and who doesn’t. [...] Trust always was, [...] exceedingly difficult for Afghans, [...] because after many years of war, why would you trust people? [...] and giving trust to people is dangerous. [...] In the end, I think it makes for a very difficult space, right? Because, you don’t know who’s your ally and who’s not.” (I17, 7 November 2024)

When they regained power in 2021, initially, there was a belief that the Taliban might have adopted softer stances. However, this notion was gradually eroded as they began to “tighten[...] the situation with their decrees”. Over time, they introduced more than 50 decrees, with the majority specifically targeting women and girls in Afghanistan (I3, 15 August 2024). Regarding the Taliban’s tightening of the already narrow spaces of freedom, I13 explained that the Taliban had restricted women's freedoms from day one of their new rule, with each decree being an attempt to crack down on the niches that women still had:

“The Taliban takeover was a drastic draconian change for women, [...] because it halted women in the public sphere almost from day one. [...] They stopped so many things right away [...] and then women said, ‘you don’t want us? Then, we’re going to all go and hide in the beauty parlour.’ Then, beauty parlours were cut. It’s like women found the ways to navigate around the bans and then the DFA identified those spaces and then, they cut, cut, cut.” (I13, 22 October 2024)

Two interviewees emphasized the importance of protecting still existing niches or newly found safe spaces, stressing the need for NGOs to be cautious in protecting these areas from Taliban intervention and to strategically avoid publicising these niches (Ruttig, 23 October 2024; I17, 7 November 2024). For instance, Thomas Ruttig noted that the inconsistent enforcement of new laws creates certain niches, since some Taliban officials occasionally turn a blind eye. (Ruttig, 23 October 2024). In this regard, Emran Feroz added the following during his review:

“In cities like Kabul, I think it’s more than occasionally. Often, it is said that Taliban members like the Haqqanis in Kabul have become ‘more liberal’ and don’t agree with decisions made in Kandahar.” (Feroz, 10 January 2025).

For more detailed information on the varying implementation of laws, please see [chapter 3](#).

In addition to the limited information available due to Taliban restrictions and fear of repercussions, certain issues are not discussed because they are considered socially taboo. I1 and I4 mentioned the example of gender-based violence (GBV) in this context. Even under the

previous government, GBV was a stigmatized subject, making it difficult for victims to address (I1, 26 July 2024; I2, 13 August 2024; I3, 15 August 2024; I4, 21 August 2024). (For more detailed information on GBV and Taliban restrictions regarding support services for GBV victims, please see [chapter 4](#).) According to I1, suicide is another topic that is similarly treated (I1, 26 July 2024). Thomas Ruttig mentioned that reporting on sexual assault by the Taliban also seems to be affected by social taboos. Although there are numerous reports of female activists returning from prison pregnant, for example, the issue is rarely addressed in the media or in public. However, Ruttig argued that it is difficult to say whether the prevalence of sexual assault has actually increased compared to the situation under the previous government. According to Ruttig, it seems that reporting on this topic was not opportune under the previous government; before 2021, there were hardly any reports of sexual violence, especially in state institutions (Ruttig, 23 October 2024). Emran Feroz agreed, adding that even before 2021 reporting on a topic like prostitution was not a possibility in Afghanistan (Feroz, 10 January 2025).

2.3 Humanitarian actors' ability to gather and disseminate information

Current restrictions hinder the effective operation of local and international NGOs and UN agencies in Afghanistan. NGOs and international organizations still operating in Afghanistan are severely restricted in advocating for certain issues, such as women's rights (I11, 16 October 2024). In December 2023, the Taliban Ministry of Economy reportedly released a letter "discouraging public awareness, peacebuilding, conflict resolution, advocacy activities and other activities categorised as 'soft activities'" (GPC, January 2025, p. 3). Three interviewees mentioned that these organizations have to be particularly careful when using certain terms such as "human rights", "women's voices", "gender-based violence", "democracy" or "gender equality". When discussing sensitive issues, great care must be taken to avoid potential repercussions (I3, 15 August 2024; I11, 16 October 2024; I13, 21 October 2024).

"Conflict or the scale of conflict luckily ended, let's be honest about that. But unfortunately, in terms of space for humanitarian organization – although we have now been able to expand our geographical coverage – we are experiencing a lot of interference, meaning limitations imposed by the de-facto authorities." (I3, 15 August 2024)

In general, humanitarian work in Afghanistan is severely hampered by a number of factors. A major problem is the lack of understanding of concepts and initiatives on the part of the DFA, which makes implementation difficult. It is described as oftentimes challenging to work with DFA officials, many of whom are new to their positions and lack the necessary technical knowledge (I1, 26 July 2024; I4, 21 August 2024). Moreover, during their review, a staff member of an international organization with a presence in Afghanistan added that it is not only a lack of understanding but also the conservative cultural context that influences decision-making:

"Many DFA officials argue that the policies they implement are in line with the Afghan community's expectations of how Afghanistan should be governed, and they feel compelled to adhere to these ideas rather than act against them. Additionally, in some provinces, there is an element of caution among lower-level DFA officials. While they are open to allowing certain programs to be implemented, they often feel the pressure of

being ‘under watch’ by their superiors, which makes them hesitant to push forward with initiatives that might be perceived as conflicting with higher-level directives or traditional norms.” (Review 2, 19 February 2025)

In addition, there are significant delays in the approval of Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs), which are necessary for humanitarian activities to take place (I3, 15 August 2024; I4, 21 August 2024). These delays are exacerbated by frequent changes of personnel at the provincial level and sometimes the need to translate documents into local languages (I4, 21 August 2024). Another obstacle is the refusal of many DFA members to communicate with or meet female staff, which severely hampers the work of women in leadership positions (I6, 27 August 2024; I5, 22 August 2024). Finally, sanctions against the Taliban make financial support and long-term planning difficult, as no funds are allowed to flow to the Taliban (I1, 26 July 2024; I4). I17 additionally mentioned that operating in Afghanistan has become increasingly challenging for humanitarian organizations, as the Taliban seek to exert control over their activities, hiring procedures, and purchasing decisions..

“For the Taliban, it’s all about ‘curbing corruption’. They see NGOs as highly corrupt in a financial and moral sense [...]. So, that’s why they want to control what kind of projects [humanitarian organizations] do, but also how [these organizations] implement.” (I17, 7 November 2024)

Nevertheless, some interviewees acknowledged that humanitarian actors are not generally hindered in their work (I2, 13 August 2024; I3, 15 August 2024); this was particularly mentioned in relation to the health sector (I11, 16 October 2024; I13, 22 October 2024), while during the review of this report, staff members of an international organization with a presence in Afghanistan stressed that “women were banned on several occasions to work or provide health services”. The reviewers also highlighted female staff requiring a mahram for field work, instances of male family members being denied mahram cards, and instances where mobile health services had to be suspended (Review 2, 19 February 2025). The need to intensively navigate through and around DFA restrictions and requirements in order to carry out their work was mentioned by several interviewees (I1, 26 July 2024; I3, 15 August 2024; I6, 27 August 2024; I11, 16 October 2024; I13, 21 October 2024). Humanitarian actors were described as having to constantly adapt to the ever-changing requirements of the DFA, not least in order to ensure the safety of their staff (I6, 27 August 2024). This reportedly includes, for example, adapting terminology (I13, 21 October 2024) and repackaging initiatives or projects (I3, 15 August 2024).

In particular, with regard to the collection of information and the possible avenues that remain open to humanitarian actors in the context of the ongoing situation in Afghanistan, Thomas Ruttig noted that humanitarian or development NGOs may be operating in sensitive areas when conducting surveys or interviews with, e.g., beneficiaries, as certain questions are not welcomed by the DFA. Those involved in such activities face considerable challenges (Ruttig, 23 October 2024). According to I3, the same seems to hold true for those interviewed in such surveys, as they reportedly do not feel comfortable talking to humanitarian staff, e.g. when interviewed at the border:

“People are not able to express these things even when they are speaking with humanitarian staff, despite the efforts we are taking to establish trust and confidence and using interview techniques that are required in order to encourage individuals to express their concerns and problems. Sometimes this makes it difficult to collect that kind of information, and in that sense, it might give a different picture of the situation, which isn't actually the reality. There needs to be an awareness of how difficult it is to collect [such] information.” (I3, 15 August 2024)

I4 added to this, that some potential beneficiaries also might refrain from sharing information with humanitarian actors, as they perceive it to not be effective since they know that certain support services are not any more in place due to Taliban restrictions. This was described by I4 in the context of legal support services for women confronted with GBV:

“So, we actually do not have services on the ground that could directly help them. And that is why some of the women are not sharing such information because they know that there are no services which can provide directly help to them, so why should she disclose this kind of information?” (I4, 21 August 2024)

Several interviewees pointed out that it is very difficult to collect certain information when women are not allowed to work in NGOs or other organizations (I4, 21 August 2024; I10, 25 September 2024; Ruttig, 23 October 2024). This restriction prevents women from conducting household surveys or interviews, particularly on sensitive topics like family planning, where female interviewers are essential for accurate data collection, as described by I10:

“If women cannot work in NGOs or in foundations or organizations because they're prevented because of their gender, that means [that one cannot go and conduct] a household survey about access to family planning, for example. You would need women to go and facilitate and conduct and document the encounters. An interview or a survey with women. You can't have a man go and talk to a man about that woman in the other rooms, experience and hopes and needs and fears and expect that what you've collected is accurate or complete. The Taliban literally do not care about that. Because that's not their priority within the current system. What they think is that a man should know what is the best thing for a woman. That this is his obligation. So independent from the Taliban, there's the activity problem, reaching the right target to get the information that you need, and then there's the sharing of it.” (I10, 25 September 2024)

Additionally, movement restrictions and the requirement for a male guardian (Mahram) further complicate the ability of female staff to engage directly with female recipients, impacting the quality and completeness of the information gathered (I4, 21 August 2024; I5, 22 August 2024; Ruttig, 23 October 2024). Female humanitarian workers face bans from fieldwork, and interviews must be conducted via telephone, often mediated by male staff, which affects the depth and accuracy of the information collected (I4, 21 August 2024). The Taliban's restrictions on female employment in NGOs have severely affected humanitarian service provision, as women are essential for delivering certain aid services that men cannot provide (I5, 22 August 2024). However, there also seem to be situations where (some of) the Taliban are willing to

negotiate or turn a blind eye, because they are aware that it is necessary for certain initiatives to reach women (I5, 22 August 2024; Ruttig, 23 October 2024).

In regard to information dissemination, several interviewees mentioned that the Taliban banned awareness raising activities or so-called prevention components (I1, 26 July 2024; I5, 22 August 2024; I11, 16 October 2024; I3, 21 October 2024):

“[P]revention component[s are] not really existing at the moment, because a lot of the prevention strategies have been banned by the Taliban. Outreach activities, for example, door-to-door activities, are all banned.” (I13, 21 October 2024)

The Taliban’s ban on images of living beings moreover forces NGOs and humanitarian actors to adapt their information materials to avoid even seemingly non-sensitive images, such as “a nurse with a baby or a counsellor with a woman crying” (I13, 21 October 2024). These restrictions have a negative impact on access to services, but also on service delivery:

“Unfortunately, these restrictions and bans make it difficult for those who need services to access them and for those who provide them to deliver them.” (I5, 22 August 2024)

NGOs and humanitarian organizations moreover face challenges with data protection, prompting them to ensure cautious and standardized communication in this regard. Organizations struggle with the DFA’s lack of understanding of data protection and confidentiality (I1, 26 July 2024). and with the Taliban DFA constant pressure to share sensitive data (I1, 26 July 2024; I13, 21 October 2024):

“I’ve been here two years and eight months already – over time the Taliban have become more and more interested in details of the programme and more and more request information such as: lists of staff, lists of beneficiaries, things like this.” (I13, 21 October 2024)

Similarly, Zahra Hashimi, co-founder of the Omid Online School for girls in Afghanistan, mentioned in her interview that when she contacted the Taliban’s Ministry of Education to discuss the school’s recognition to ensure that graduates received an official certificate, their initial response was to request more information, specifically a database, which put a halt to her efforts (Hashimi, 17 October 2024).

As stated by several interviewees, humanitarian staff has to make significant efforts to ensure data protection (I1, 26 July 2024; I3, 15 August 2024; I13, 21 October 2024; Hashimi, 17 October 2024), such as avoiding sensitive topics in interview questions to prevent the DFA from accessing sensitive information (I3, 15 August 2024), or use secure methods of communication, such as secret email accounts or encrypted messaging services to avoid detection by the DFA (Hashimi, 17 October 2024). In particularly sensitive project areas, such as GBV, this results in no data being collected at all:

“[I]t has become quite challenging to get information on GBV, to implement programmes in regard to GBV; although it is still an issue, particularly in our region. [...] There’s no centralized GBV data collection system in Afghanistan [...] I know that we have that question regularly by donors. Everybody wants to have GBV data. Well, we don’t have it, and it doesn’t exist; for the beneficiary, it is too dangerous to collect. We also don’t have

beneficiary lists and names in order to ensure the safety and security of our beneficiaries. [...] We are not collecting the names of beneficiaries because even if we put the list in a locked cabinet [...], the de-facto authorities can come at any time and request all documents to be handed over. They can also detain and/or arrest staff [...]. So, you have no protection. We cannot give that responsibility on to the staff on the ground, you know.” (I13, 21 October 2024)

2.4 Thematic shifts due to legal and administrative restrictions

Several interviewees highlighted the Taliban’s selective acceptance of certain humanitarian and development efforts, particularly those involving cash assistance and infrastructure projects like building roads, clinics, and schools (I1, 26 July 2024; I5, 22 August 2024; I6, 27 August 2024; I10, 25 September 2024; I11, 16 October 2024; I17, 7 November 2024). However, projects related to protection, gender equality, women’s rights, and gender-based violence are banned and cannot be openly implemented (I1, 26 July 2024; I5, 22 August 2024; I6, 27 August 2024; I11, 16 October 2024). The Taliban administration prefers so-called “hard components” of humanitarian activities, such as food distribution and medical treatment, over “soft activities” like awareness raising and psychosocial support:

“The DFA is somehow very sensitive when it comes to ‘soft activities’, and particularly, when it comes to the topic of GBV. They really believe in ‘hard components’ of humanitarian activities.” (I2, 13 August 2024)

“We have women who are [...] in complete despair, [...] some because of violence, some because of other reasons and all of them require the support [...] if we come upon a survivor – and we do – it’s so limited what we can do. [...] The Taliban don’t believe in helping in distress. They believe in [...] pure medical treatment [...]; helping in distress is called a ‘soft component’ by the DFA.” (I13, 21 August 2024)

“For humanitarian actors, to implement activities in regard [to GBV] has also become increasingly difficult. Such activities have been halted by the DFA. They do not really see what benefits such activities would bring to the population. They think of such activities as being merely ‘soft activities’, but they want activities that bring ‘big chances’, like new school buildings. So, they do not see the importance of these ‘soft activities’.” (I4, 21 August 2024)

“The Taliban don’t like what NGOs locally call ‘soft projects’. They want to see tangible things that you can see: food aid, construction etcetera. They don’t like peace projects because obviously they brought peace. So, it’s a non-issue. They don’t like the democracy discussion because it’s a non-issue, they are not a democracy. They don’t like human rights, [...] because they feel that we [i.e. international actors] haven’t actually ever followed human rights [...] in the past. They see us as hypocrites basically. So, a lot of what is soft work [...], e.g., empowerment, forget these projects, they don’t like them, and you can’t officially do them. The only way you can do them is piggyback them on other projects. [...] So, the project focus has shifted.” (I17, 7 November 2024)

However, I4 noted that the implementation of certain programmes or initiatives varies by region. For example, in the southern part of Afghanistan, particularly in Kandahar, mental health and psychosocial support activities have been halted or delayed. In August 2024, I4 stated that the DFA was still reviewing these initiatives in the south, while in other provinces these activities were progressing as normal (I4, 21 August 2024).

In another interview it was mentioned that especially when implementing protection-related initiatives, humanitarian actors face challenges. The Taliban's perception of these initiatives as foreign propaganda has led to a lack of space and funding for such activities. This has created a downward spiral:

“As a result, there is a lack of space to implement protection-related activities, which leads to a lack of funding for such initiatives, which in turn leads to less space being available for these issues, which in turn leads to less and less information being available on protection-related topics.” (I1, 26 July 2024)

Nevertheless, in their review, staff from one international organization working in Afghanistan emphasized that, while acknowledging the shrinking spaces and restrictions for women, there were “still open windows” for intervention in terms of protection and women's protection programmes, by combining such activities “with hard components, and using local capacities”. (Review 2, 19 February 2025).

3 Background

3.1 Humanitarian and security situation three years after the Taliban takeover

Several interviewees described the current situation in Afghanistan as “quite tough, getting tougher day by day” (I6, 27 August 2024), as “really frustrating [and] becoming increasingly dire” (I9, 2 September 2024), as “very bad” (I4, 21 August 2024), and as being “most difficult for those groups who are the most vulnerable” in Afghanistan, such as persons with disabilities (I5, 22 August 2024) and women and girls (I5, 22 August 2024; I9, 2 September 2024). However, in general, the entire population was reported to be affected. According to I9, the lack of an education system has severely impacted the nation's development, leading to a lack of sustainable jobs and forcing many young people to emigrate and seek opportunities abroad (I9, 2 September 2024). Emran Feroz pointed out that this was already an issue before the Taliban's return, adding that even then young people were complaining about a lack of “job opportunities because of corruption and decreasing financial aid from the international community” (Feroz, 16 January 2025).

The humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan has worsened since the Taliban regained power. Sanctions and decreased funding have increased the poverty in the country (I5, 22 August 2024), with the “majority of the Afghan population in dire need of cash, in-kind and livelihood support” (I9, 2 September 2024). The DFA rule has brought significant changes for humanitarian organizations, including increased interference and limitations imposed by the DFA, which have complicated the work of these organizations, as described by I3:

“In comparison to previous times and previous administrations ruling the country, the situation in Afghanistan really changed under the new Taliban rule. Unfortunately, it

became a lot more complex. Conflict or the scale of conflict luckily ended, let's be honest about that. But unfortunately, in terms of space for humanitarian organizations – although we have now been able to expand our geographical coverage – we are experiencing a lot of interference, meaning limitations imposed by the de-facto authorities.” (I3, 15 August 2024)

Regarding the security situation in Afghanistan, Thomas Ruttig mentioned in October 2024 that ISKP attacks continue sporadically, mainly against religious/ethnic minorities, but in decreasing numbers (Ruttig, 23 October 2024). While Emran Feroz suggested that there had been some increase in attacks by the anti-Taliban National Resistance Front (NRF) and Afghanistan Freedom Front (AFF), but that information on this had been censored by the Taliban (Feroz, 16 January 2025), Ruttig mentioned that attacks by armed anti-Taliban groups were relatively marginal and rarely noticed in the region (Ruttig, 23 October 2024). However, although the security situation has improved in terms of physical safety (I1, 26 July 2024; I3, 15 August 2024; I4, 21 August 2024; Ruttig, 23 October 2024), the Afghan population was described as suffering mentally, socially, and economically due to various restrictions and the lack of basic needs (I9, 2 September 2024). According to I3, the lack of mental safety undermines other forms of safety, such as physical safety:

“There are different types of safety: there is physical safety and there is mental safety. At the moment, in Afghanistan there is physical safety, but there is no mental safety. The number of people complaining about the psychological situation is expanding day by day. So, there is no mental safety. And if you don't have mental safety, I think any other type of safety, like material safety, legal safety, economic safety, physical safety, I think they don't have any value. Because when you are mentally safe, I think you can do a lot of things. But now people are not mentally safe, they are frustrated, but they fear to express it.” (I3, 15 August 2024)

I1 and I4 stressed that half of the population cannot benefit from the “improved security situation” in the country, due to the DFA restrictions the female population has to face:

“Half of the population cannot benefit from this security, because they have to stay at home. There is physical access in theory. But meaningful access – women don't have it. So, if a woman in rural Afghanistan is asked if her life has changed since the Taliban retook power, she'd probably answer that it changed not that much: Before there was no security, but she could go out; now there is security, but she cannot go out. So, when people argue the situation has improved so much, you always have to ask for whom?” (I1, 26 July 2024)

“In regard to security, yes it has become better. If you are going to the suburbs, if you are going to provinces, as a male you don't have to be afraid anymore. As a male you just can go there, no one can stop you, no blast is happening, no bomb is there. So, in this regard, it has become much more secure. But women do not have this freedom, they are not having the concern that something will happen security-wise, but the Taliban-restrictions, they stop them.” (I4, 21 August 2024)

On a more general note, Emran Feroz stressed in his review that referring to an “improved security situation” under the current Taliban rule “is always problematic”, as:

“It should always be mentioned that the Taliban were heavily responsible for much of the violence that took place during the 20-year war in Afghanistan. Thus, the security situation also improved because the Taliban are now the DFA and stopped their violence (suicide attacks, bombings etc.).” (Feroz, 16 January 2025)

3.2 Taliban DFA: lacking recognition, political self-understanding, branches

I1 and I10 described the interactions with the Taliban DFA as very particular: On the one hand, the Taliban authorities are positioning themselves very strongly as the de-facto power in Afghanistan (I1, 26 July 2024), on the other hand, they are not recognized as the official government by any other country worldwide (I1, 26 July 2024; I10, 25 September 2024). Although the Taliban DFA maintain some consular relationships, such as sending ambassadors to certain countries, I10 pointed out that this does not mean that the authorities of these countries and the Afghan authorities “are in an equal footing of recognition”. I10 emphasized that even countries with their own gender restrictions find it challenging to cooperate with the Taliban due to their extreme viewpoints in this regard. According to I10, “none of [these countries] can get along with [the Taliban] because [the Taliban] cannot accept, for example, that a woman could be a lawmaker or a ... anything” (I10, 25 September 2024).

I10 argued that the lack of political cooperation between the Taliban DFA and other governments has centralized power in the hands of the Taliban. This concentration of power enables the Taliban to manipulate humanitarian aid and resources to their own benefit, leaving little room for negotiation or external influence (I10, 25 September 2024):

“It means they can decide, they can manipulate and dictate and leverage everything about what happens. If they don’t like an activity, they can just tell that line ministry or the local authority, ‘don’t sign the MoU, don’t do it, stop it, arrest those people or make those people quit this kind of activity.’ In the past, we would negotiate every aspect of these things, but now we don’t have any negotiating power.” (I10, 25 September 2024)

In his review Emran Feroz added the following about the Taliban DFA’s official and unofficial relations with other countries:

“Although many countries don’t want to work with the Taliban officially because of their repression, many more than in the 1990s are willing to work with them unofficially through Qatar (see deportations from Germany) or other channels. Many countries have also accepted Taliban personnel in the former embassies and consulates of the fallen republic.” (Feroz, 16 January 2025)

In regard to the sanctions imposed on the Taliban leadership, I1 described that those really affected by the sanctions are not the Taliban leaders facing some kind of travel bans, but the Afghan people. According to I1, three years after the takeover, it became clear that the sanctions do not represent a sustainable solution:

“No one has an interest in Afghanistan becoming even poorer and poorer, having an illiterate and very frustrated population. So, donors have to figure out how to proceed: You don’t want to recognize someone, but you have to work with them. Where is the line?” (I1, 26 July 2024)

In regard to the Taliban's political self-understanding, I10 argued that after decades of insurgency marked by violence and the willingness to inflict harm on innocent people, the Taliban did not merely engage in combat preparations. According to I10, they also groomed a generation of men to anticipate victory, as from the outset, they expressed confidence in their eventual triumph. Consequently, instead of developing a governance plan over time, they focused on a control strategy. Governance, as promoted by NATO and other stakeholders, aimed at establishing a transparent, reliable, and stable system that was representative and inclusive. In contrast, the Taliban's ideology centred on exclusivity and systematic exclusion. In this context, I10 mentioned that the demographics reveal that 78 to 80% of the population are either female or under 25 years of age. The Taliban's approach implies that only 20% of the population — men over the age of 25 — should feel empowered, while 80% should be subject to control. According to I10, this control-focused approach greatly differs from governance principles of inclusivity and representation (I10, 25 September 2024).

Similarly, Thomas Ruttig noted that the Taliban's societal vision does not regard society as a community of equal members. Instead, the higher Islamic clergy (the Ulema) is considered the decisive class, responsible for interpreting Sharia and proposing laws. This system could be compared to a class-based system where the influence of individuals is weighted according to their social status (Ruttig, 23 October 2024).

Several interviewees pointed out that there are differing perspectives within the Taliban movement (I1, 26 July 2024; I10, 25 September 2024; Hashimi, 17 October 2024; I17, 7 November 2024). Some of these differences emerge in various branches and factions, influenced not only by regional affiliations, such as those focussing around Kabul or Kandahar, but also by tribal loyalties, making the internal dynamics quite complex. For example, in different ministries in Kabul some staff members disagree with the policy that prohibits girls from attending school beyond the sixth grade (I1, 26 July 2024). Moreover, I1 emphasized the need for a more nuanced approach due to aforementioned differences within the Taliban movement. For example, there are differences between the Taliban DFA and ordinary members of the Taliban, since the latter may consist of individuals who joined the Taliban movement mainly because they were "disillusioned" with previous events and appreciate the current security (I1, 26 July 2024).

According to I10, there are two distinct perspectives within the Taliban movement: the practical and the ideological one. While the ideological faction is willing to use extreme violence to achieve their goals, including harming civilians and even fellow Taliban members, the practical faction is more subdued. As an example, I10 mentioned that when the former Minister of Public Health, a minister I10 described as being pragmatic, faced opposition, he chose to step down quietly rather than resort to violence or confrontation with the supreme leader: "He just quietly went away. He's pragmatic. He wanted to survive, so he did." (I10, 25 September 2024)

I1 suggested that, so far, the Taliban appear to see more benefit in maintaining unity against external actors, despite their significant disagreements. This perspective may stem from concerns about the potential division of the country between Kabul and Kandahar (I1, 26 July 2024).

3.3 Legal Situation

Thomas Ruttig explained that shortly after the Taliban regained power, the Taliban leader made it clear that Sharia law would be the only legal basis in Afghanistan and that all laws of a “secular nature” would be abolished. At the same time, Ruttig described a certain “duality in the legal system” that still exists in Afghanistan, as many practical issues are still governed by tribal laws from previous governments, sometimes even from royal or communist times, because these issues are not directly regulated by Sharia (Ruttig, 23 October 2024). In this context, I16 mentioned the following:

“As we said, it’s very difficult for us to now assess whether laws still apply or they don’t apply, because some of them are still like in practice applied, although they formally don’t apply.” (I16, 31 October 2024)

I6 described a form of arbitrariness in the way the Taliban DFA formulate laws and regulations, noting that some of the Taliban’s requirements are not based on religious principles. This was exemplified by the issue of face coverings and in regard to the implementation on the new PVPV³ law:

“From the religion’s side it is permitted. But the DFA, they are using their powers for whatever they see proper or perfect. They just put that into a law and implement it on the people.” (I6, 27 August 2024)

“It is just whatever they decide. We have to like respect it and we have to implement it. Otherwise, we will be punished.” (I6, 27 August 2024)

I2 and I5, who were interviewed before and immediately after the Law on the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (PVPV) came into force, stressed that there is no legal framework in place in the country:

“There is no law, there is no rule of law.” (I5, 22 August 2024)

“There is no law, there is no framework, there are no procedures in place. So, I think the entire country is now struggling with access to justice, with access to a legal system. [...] There is no legal system in place. When there is no legal framework, then it is very difficult.” (I2, 13 August 2024)

As a result of this lack, I5 described the practice of ad-hoc “solutions”:

“If the DFA see something happening in the streets they just ‘solve’ it right there. They decide who was the perpetrator and who the victim, right there, they are judging you. There is no investigation, no court.” (I5, 22 August 2024)

³ Please note that the Law on the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (PVPV) took effect in August 2024, codifying many of the DFA’s policies, particularly those affecting the rights of women and girls, that had previously been enacted through edicts by local leaders. This report focuses on the PVPV law and its implementation in a separate section in this chapter, please see [section 3.3.2](#).

As Emran Feroz points out, there are also “Taliban courts” which may occasionally make decisions in favour of women or victims. However, there is generally insufficient data on this. Moreover, according to Feroz, it is clear that such courts still function as “kangaroo courts” (Feroz, 16 January 2025 [original in German]).

In mid-August, I4 explained that the sheer volume of new edicts and regulations issued by the Taliban – at least one every month – is affecting the work of humanitarian organizations. The various types of bans on activities affect not only women, but also humanitarian activities in the field (I4, 21 August 2024).

In addition, I2 and I4 emphasized that the legal situation in the country is particularly problematic for women, as there are little to no opportunities for women to file complaints, especially in the southern region of the country (I2, 13 August 2024; I4, 21 August 2024). For more detailed information in this regard, please see [chapter 4.8](#). I2 further noted that the prohibition of having a legal representative, such as a lawyer, significantly impedes individuals from filing cases, as there is no one to represent them in court (I2, 13 August 2024). Similarly, I4 and I16 stated:

“The lack of legal aid is a very big problem” (I4, 21 August 2024)

“And [...] it’s difficult in terms of any access to justice, [...] If I don’t have a legal system in place that can support me, how will I even disclose a case?” (I16, 31 October 2024)

In this regard, I2, I4, I5 and I6 mentioned informal justice mechanisms such as Shuras as alternative to the official legal system (I2, 13 August 2024, I4, 21 August 2024; I5, 22 August 2024; I6, 27 August 2024). According to I4, “Shuras represent a non-formal setup, they are made up of community elders, family members”, but are only seen as appropriate mechanisms for certain issues (I4, 21 August 2024). I2 mentioned that in rural areas, people prefer resolving issues through informal systems by involving relatives or influential community figures rather than through formal legal procedures (I2, 13 August 2024). Regarding the functioning of Shuras and Jirgas, I6 explained:

“More informal institutions of justice, like Shuras and Jirgas are still used for issues in regard to housing, land and property. In Afghanistan, it is always suggested that if you can solve a family matter or an issue regarding housing, land and property, it is best to solve it through the Shura or through the Jirga. This is very helpful, because [...] bringing an issue to court is perceived as breaching of the honour or breaching of norms or culture. So, it is good that there are more informal justice systems as well. And if a matter cannot be solved this way, you can still approach a court afterwards.” (I6, 27 August 2024)

In terms of the issues that these informal justice mechanisms are intended to address, I9 not only cited housing, land and property issues, but mentioned that “traditional justice systems of community Shuras, elder Shuras” deal “with any criminal issue”. While Kandahar-based I9 stated that “the DFA accept these informal justice councils” (I9, 2 September 2024), Kabul-based I5 explained that informal justice mechanisms, such as Shuras, which were implemented in every province, still exist, but have lost their power under the Taliban, who do not permit these community-based institutions (I5, 22 August 2024). According to I4, the informal system of Shuras does not provide equal access to justice for all community members:

“Due to the nature of these shuras, there may be some information or issues that women would prefer not to bring up in these settings. In theory, male and female community members should have equal access to justice through these informal mechanisms, but they are often characterized by favouritism.” (I4, 21 August 2024)

As a general remark on “existing Shura structures” and “dispute resolution in Afghanistan”, staff members of an international organization with a presence in Afghanistan clarified during their review that “such a system also existed in the past, but the difference today is that most of those structures are [now] infiltrated and closely monitored by [the] DFA. Therefore, such mechanisms are not reliable and ineffective in handling cases in particular related to women’s rights anymore.” (Review 2, 19 February 2025).

3.3.1 Policy implementation & legal uncertainty

In early August 2024, I2 indicated that the DFA is reportedly addressing legal issues due to the many problems existing in this regard. I2 moreover mentioned that while “the legal situation is the same throughout the country”, the implementation of “legal edicts and guidelines” varies (I2, 13 August 2024). Several interviewees mentioned that the implementation of the Taliban’s DFA rules and decrees depends in part on the individual Taliban member in charge (I4, 21 August 2024; I13, 21 October 2024; Ruttig, 23 October 2024; I16, 31 October 2024) and is not implemented in the same way in all parts of the country (I2, 13 August 2024; I4, 21 August 2024; I13, 21 October 2024; Ruttig, 23 October 2024; I16, 31 October 2024; I17, 7 November 2024):

“It is possible that the Taliban take a harsher stance in some provinces than in others. It certainly depends on who’s the executive power – provincial governors, provincial heads of the Ministry of Virtue and so on – as was the case under the previous Taliban regime until 2001, and even under the government of the previous Islamic Republic.” (Ruttig, 23 October 2024 [original in German])

“So, it’s differently implemented, and it also depends on the area in which you live. The DFA are acting differently in different regions, some are broad-minded, others are narrow-minded. Some allow something, some don’t allow it, some are flexible, some are not flexible.” (I2, 13 August 2024)

“What I mean by ‘totally different’ is that you cannot really compare the regions to each other, the responses by the DFA are quite different in the south, where there is much more pressure, compared to Kabul for example, where the DFA act much more flexible. So, we cannot compare the south of the country with its north, its north with its east – it is totally different. This also depends on the mentality of the DFA people who are in charge for certain things in certain regions. Because some of them, they are in favour of everyone having access to education, for example. They have some education themselves and have a bright mind. So, they have some flexibility in terms of the restrictions. But others are very strict, [...] And that is why there are these differences.” (I4, 21 August 2024)

“These decrees are not applied the same in all provinces. [...] There is inconsistency in the application to the advantage sometimes and sometimes to the disadvantage: [...] stricter

in some provinces, less strict in others. [...] So, it's not black and white." (I13, 21 October 2024)

Thomas Ruttig also explained that the implementation of DFA regulations and decrees varies in its stringency and rigor over time and described the implementation as a kind of "wavelike movement" (Ruttig, 23 October 2024).

According to Abdul Ghafoor Rafiey, the different implementation of certain rules or regulations in different regions also seems to depend on the particular issue they regulate, i.e. there are regional differences on the issue of land grabbing, for example, but no real differences when it comes to the situation of women in the country:

"So, there are different shapes and forms of oppressions going on in different parts of the country based on their nature. The issue of Afghan women is kind of the same in every part of Afghanistan. There is no province better than the other." (Rafiey, 28 October 2024)

However, focusing on Taliban restrictions regarding women, both I1 and I13 highlighted the inconsistent and often illogical nature of the restrictions, which can vary significantly depending on the context (I1, 26 July 2024; I13, 21 October 2024). I1 gave an example of Taliban restrictions within humanitarian settings, where women and men, despite working together in the same office, were not allowed to attend training sessions together (I1 26 July 2024). On the other hand, I13 pointed out that in the private sector, certain jobs such as banking and airport security allow women to work without interference, while other professions like beauty parlours, education, judges, and police do not have such exemptions:

"This is where it doesn't make any sense. Where it suits them, they have exceptions. Beauty parlours, education, judges, police don't, other things do." (I13, 21 October 2024)

I2, I3 and I13 stated that another reason for exemptions is that there are sometimes cases in which it is possible to circumvent certain rules and negotiate with the Taliban's DFA or individual Taliban members (I2, 13 August 2024; I3, 15 August 2024; I13, 21 October 2024).

"People have found ways to navigate and negotiate. And there are some exemptions, [...] which allows for life to go on." (I13, 21 October 2024)

In this context, I3 explained that one organization had managed to secure a solution regarding the jobs of its female staff. In the end, they received a verbal assurance from the Taliban, but "it is always a verbal confirmation by the DFA that is achieved in these high-level discussions and advocacy efforts". This was also mentioned by I17, who stated that many agreements with DFA ministries or directorates are often only verbal, making them easily revocable at any time (I17, 7 November 2024). Similarly, when it comes to humanitarian activities in the field, which fall into categories that are generally not supported by the DFA, it reportedly takes a lot of effort to navigate the regulations and find solutions (I3, 15 August 2024).

According to I2's perspective, "in practice it is sometimes also possible to directly talk to the Taliban", providing the example of playing music at wedding celebrations:

"[The Taliban] might tell you to not tell anyone and to lower the volume after 12:00 o'clock. So sometimes it is possible to somehow cope with some of the issues. These are practical examples. However, there are opposite examples as well. If the Taliban say no to music at

a wedding and music is played anyway, the groom might be taken into custody.” (I2, 13 August 2024)

Historically, the enforcement of laws and centralized power in Afghanistan has been inconsistent, leaving significant gaps and leeway. However, Thomas Ruttig suggested that the current Taliban DFA have the capacity to enforce their rules and regulations consistently across the country. According to Ruttig, the Taliban possess an extensive repressive apparatus, including the Ministry of Virtue, the police, and the intelligence service, which enables them to enforce regulations if they want to:

“Afghanistan is a large, topographically difficult country, and some areas are still difficult to access despite the expansion and improvement of overland roads. Examples, however, show that the DFA can deploy forces quickly to affected area, even in the event of minor unrest or street protests.” (Ruttig, 23 October 2024)

Several interviewees explained that the DFA’s inconsistent and somehow unpredictable approach towards its laws and regulations also leads to a sense of insecurity and fear among the population (I1, 26 July 2024; I2, 13 August 2024; I13, 21 October 2024; Ruttig, 23 October 2024; Rafiey, 28 October 2024). According to I1, the legal arbitrariness with which the Afghan population is confronted represents a form of insecurity. I1 elaborated that it is not like these edicts are discussed with the population beforehand: “No one knows what [the Taliban] are working on. It is always a surprise; it comes all of a sudden. There’s an insecurity, a constant fear of what’s coming next” (I1, 26 July 2024). I2, I13 and Thomas Ruttig pointed out that the DFA’s implementation practices, in particular, create a sense of fear among the Afghan population:

“There is always a degree of uncertainty. So people are afraid, to be honest. I mean for a number of things they don’t want to be caught. For example, you can never be sure what kind of reaction by the DFA you will be facing. [...] So yes, there is always this fear.” (I2, 13 August 2024)

“It also means that the Taliban are not all enforcing in the same way, but they come and check. For example, they’ll stand at the entrance of the hospital, and they’ll pick spots to reinforce the hijab wearing [...] So, again, it puts that pressure, it puts that fear on the women.” (I13, 21 October 2024)

“This creates a great deal of uncertainty and fear: if the Taliban return to stricter measures after a period of leniency, they can say: ‘We warned you’. So, if women in Kabul wear a colourful headscarf for a few months, they may still be questioned, persecuted or punished for it anytime, making it difficult for them to argue ‘it’s always been like this’.” (Ruttig, 23 October 2024)

In addition, Abdul Ghafoor Rafiey highlighted the arbitrary nature of situations in which the Taliban DFA carry out operations without any legal justification:

“In the western part of Kabul, there have been several instances where girls have been stopped for no reason. They have simply been taken to Taliban vehicles. This was also reported on in social media, mainly. There have been cases where girls were kind of

kidnapped while they were just walking down the street. They were taken into vehicles and were imprisoned or taken to the police station. Then, they were investigated, they were tortured, before they were let go. Some of the girls [...] were in custody for several days without being given any reason. [...] The Taliban do whatever they want to do, especially when you belong to a minority group. [...] If there was anything verbally communicated or any decree, then [...] we could understand, but most of the time, they were just taken out in their vehicles, investigated, most of the time also tortured, beaten up in custody. [...] So, these are the kinds of things that that are happening without any [...] decree or a law or anything.” (Rafiey, 28 October 2024)

Thomas Ruttig, moreover, highlighted that the handling of complaints about misconduct within the Taliban largely depends on individual members. According to Ruttig, the Taliban do not publicly address these incidents. However, as reported by a Taliban source, over half of those imprisoned by the Taliban are members of their own movement:

“This implies that the Taliban do take action against abuse within their ranks, albeit within their self-imposed limitations. It is likely that such actions often pertain to issues like corruption and other transgressions.” (Ruttig, 23 October 2024 [original in German]).

Referring to the Law on the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (PVPV), which came into force in August 2024, Ruttig explained that the law, much like the Taliban’s overall governance, operates primarily on the principle of deterrence. Individuals cannot be sure whether they will be punished for specific violations of the very narrow limits set by the DAF. Despite the new legislation, the situation remains contradictory. The Taliban authorities can still act arbitrarily, though now within a very loosely defined framework. Overall, both the law and the governance of the Taliban deviate significantly from international legal norms and international conventions to which Afghanistan, as a member of the United Nations, is still bound under the Taliban regime (Ruttig, 23 October 2024).

3.3.2 Law on the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (PVPV)

The Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN) published a basic translation of the 114-page, 35-article Promotion of Virtue and Vice Law (PVPV), in which the Taliban Supreme Leader outlines the responsibilities, powers and penalties of the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, and lists various acts and behaviours that are either mandatory or prohibited for the Afghan population. The basic English translation without footnotes can be found here:

- PVPV Law – The Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice Law, enacted on 21 August 2024, basic unofficial English translation (without footnotes) by AAN – Afghanistan Analysts Network
<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2024/08/Law-on-Virtue-and-Vice-Basic.pdf>

On 21 August 2024, the new law on the propagation of virtue and the prevention of vice (PVPV) consisting of 35 articles, most of which impose restrictions on the female population, was enacted (I6, 27 August 2024). According to I13 and I17, this law consolidated and formalized previously communicated decrees by publishing them as codified law in the official Gazette

(I13, 21 October 2024; I17, 7 November 2024). With regard to the content stipulated in this law, some of the interviewees cited already existing restrictions, such as the obligation for women to wear a full body and face covering when leaving the house (I5, 22 August 2024; I6, 27 August 2024; I16, 31 October 2024).

In connection with the new law, other interviewees also mentioned travel restrictions for women without a mahram, which were first communicated in December 2021 (see e.g., BBC News, 27 December 2021). For more detailed information on the freedom of movement of Afghan women and girls and the regulations on this subject in the PVPV Law, please see [chapter 4.1](#).

Furthermore, several interviewees pointed out that the new PVPV law prohibits women from raising their voices in public (I9, 2 September 2024; I10, 25 September 2024; Rafiey, 28 October 2024, a rule that is new to all regions of the country (I6, 27 August 2024). I9 noted that this ban could severely impact women's ability to work from home, as the law stipulates that a woman's voice should not be heard, even through phone or other communication means (I9, 2 September 2024). However, Thomas Ruttig mentioned that the Deputy Minister for PVPV provided a statement to the Pashto service of the BBC in early October 2024 that somewhat eases or contextualizes some provisions of the law (Ruttig, 23 October 2024). In the interview with the Pashto service of the BBC, Deputy Minister Maulvi Mohammad Faqir Mohammadi explained that while women should not raise their voices outside their homes, they are allowed to be heard in gatherings that include both men and women. Furthermore, if women leave their homes for daily needs, their voices are not considered "women's voices" (BBC News, 3 October 2024).

Another provision, which was not known before the publication of the PVPV law,⁴ is that Afghan women are prohibited from having friendships with non-Muslim women (I5, 22 August 2024; Ruttig, 23 October 2024; I16, 31 October 2024; I17, 7 November 2024). According to Thomas Ruttig, I17 and I16, this provision may also affect cooperation between colleagues, as some organizations still employ international staff (Ruttig, 23 October 2024) and potentially also between female beneficiaries and international humanitarian staff (I16, 31 October 2024). The law also contains provisions that specifically or equally target the Afghan male population, as noted by Thomas Ruttig, I9 and I16:

"In addition, there are provisions that could be described as somewhat comical from another perspective, such as the ban on wearing crosses or even ties, as these are apparently shaped like a cross in the eyes of the Taliban and are therefore considered a Christian symbol. However, we already knew this from the Taliban's first rule (1996-2001)." (Ruttig, 23 October 2024 [original in English])

"Men are also affected by the restrictions. They are instructed to grow beards. Barbers are strictly instructed not to shave beards and not to change men's hairstyles." (I9, 2 September 2024)

⁴ Article 22(20) of the PVPV law states: "An enforcer is duty-bound to prevent the following individual, wrongful acts: [...] Befriending non-Muslims and assisting them; imitating them in one's appearance or character" (PVPV Law, August 2024, article 22).

“It is basically targeting society. It’s part of the greater vision of the Taliban of how they see society function. Most media tend to miss the part that there’s actually regulations [In the PVPV law - and a few other regulations as well] for men as well, such as the beard [provision], which existed during the 1st Emirate as well, [or provisions for men on] how you dress, etcetera.” (I17, 7 November 2024)

According to Emran Feroz’s review, these measures are not being enforced uniformly across the country, particularly when it comes to hairstyles. He further noted that “this is something that isn’t really controlled on the street but has more significance if you visit university or work as a government clerk etc.” (Feroz, 16 January 2025).

According to I17, the new law has a potential positive aspect – however debatable – as well, as it does not explicitly prohibit women from working. [PVPV] inspectors focus on compliance with hijab regulations and office segregation rather than whether women are working (I17, 7 November 2024).

Regarding the enforcement of the PVPV law, I6 explained that the people implementing the regulations are members of the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice who wear white coats like doctors and, for example, go around telling shopkeepers not to allow women into the shop without a male guardian. In this context, Thomas Ruttig outlined the following on those in charge of enforcing the PVPV law:

“It is important to note that in this law, the Taliban stipulate the tasks of the ‘virtue police’, the ‘police force’ affiliated with the ministry (muhtaseb = policemen, probably mostly unarmed). The law states, for example, that the enforcers are not allowed to enter private homes ‘without permission’⁵, potentially hinting towards a search warrant. However, we know from experience that there are of course house searches – but it is unclear to me whether some kind of search warrant is presented. Such raids seem to take place after attacks by armed opposition groups, for example.” (Ruttig, 23 October 2024 [original in German])

I6 and Thomas Ruttig also discussed the options available to those in charge of enforcing the PVPV law. I6 pointed out that the law requires people to be given a verbal warning if they break the rules before they can be sanctioned:

“In terms of these restrictions, when people are not adhering to the regulation, they will be verbally advised to behave differently. So, the DFA start with verbal advice, with verbal threatening. But if the non-compliance continues, if a person continues to behave in a manner not in line with the regulation, they are put into jail for one hour, in serious condition up to 24 hours and in worse scenario up to three days. This for example also applies for the male population. If they are for example late for the prayer, if they were not attending the prayer, they will be advised, but if they continue to do the same thing, they will be punished.” (I6, 27 August 2024)

⁵ See article 10(4) of the PVPV-law: “When promoting virtue or prohibiting vice, not prying into people’s private sins; avoiding entering their homes, except in cases when it is allowed, according to Islamic law.” (PVPV Law, enacted on 21 August 2024 [unofficial English translation by AAN])

Thomas Ruttig emphasized that the law gives the enforcers the possibility to impose sanctions immediately and without trial, and mentioned possible levels of escalation, ranging from immediate punishment to reporting to superiors to arrest. According to Ruttig, a decision on whether to bring the accused before a court is made during detention (Ruttig, 23 October 2024).

Sources' views on the PVPV law

Although it was too early to fully assess the impact of the new PVPV law, as stated for example by I13 (I13, 21 October 2024), many interviewees have shared their initial thoughts during the interviews. Several interviewees stressed a general sense of concern and anticipation that the situation might worsen due to the new law:

“At the very least, what [the new law] does is, it incites fear and then it creates concern. And then, [...] you will probably see that women will be more worried about going somewhere and accessing any kind of services.” (I13, 21 October 2024)

“I think, it [...] created some fear [...] in women mostly, because it's codified now.” (I17, 7 November 2024)

“We are very much concerned about this new law, which also prohibits the voice of women.” (I9, 2 September 2024)

“Actually, you know that the situation is quite tough, getting tougher day by day; especially with this new promoting virtue and preventing vice (PVPV) law.” (I6, 27 August 2024)

“Afghan women are already living under fear and oppression and hearing about the [PVPV] law or the decree from the Taliban [...], just made it worse for the Afghan women. [...] They were already [facing] depression, before anything like this came out, to be honest with you [...]. And the decree has made life a lot worse for them. [...] So, of course, the general [...] response to this [law] is very negative for the people who are living under this regime in Afghanistan. They are afraid that they can expect a lot worse than what they have [seen already].” (Rafiey, 28 October 2024)

In this context, Abdul Ghafoor Rafiey also emphasized that the Afghan population is afraid because they do not know where to turn for help in this situation (Rafiey, 28 October 2024). Similarly, I10 described how this lack of help and hopelessness may have led to what might be perceived from a Western perspective as a lack of defiance:

“[In regard to the new PVPV law,] I think that there's a [perceived] deficit of defiance, which is confusing in the West. People wonder, 'how can women accept this? How could men accept this for their daughters, for their wives?' There's not much defiance because the Taliban have systematically stripped away opportunities to defy them. So, they have disappeared thousands of people. They have dumped, tortured and killed victims everywhere in the country to warn everyone else. And also, after decades of struggle and conflict, I think the vast majority of the population are beyond exhausted. They're depleted. So, if they see it as 'OK, this is going to be really terrible. But what am I supposed to do to overturn this? It's not like I can vote. I'm not allowed to stand on the street with a

sign. I'm not at all allowed to march. I'm not even allowed to listen to a broadcast which opposes this so that I feel strengthened and more self-confident.' There is nothing." (I10, 25 September 2024)

On the other hand, interviewees also noted that the new law essentially consolidates many pre-existing rules and decrees and therefore does not change much in substance:

"I don't think much has changed in Afghan society since the Vice and Virtue laws started in August 2024." (I11, 16 October 2024)

"[N]ot very much has changed from my point of view, because the law ultimately brings together and sets down in writing what previously came from the Taliban in the form of decrees and similar legal requirements." (Ruttig, 23 October 2024 [original in German])

"To be honest, all these decrees were already in place. So, for us, we had mitigation measures around it. There is nothing new in here that is causing a new restriction. [...] Compared to before the Vice and Virtue law came into force, not much has changed. The Taliban takeover was a drastic draconian change for women, [...] because it halted women in the public sphere almost from day one. Those decrees were just driving to where they hadn't found a niche to stop the women. Because, anyway, they had stopped the schools right away. [...] It depends on who you will talk to." (I13, 21 October 2024)

The differing perspectives underscored the complexities and uncertainties associated with the implementation of the law but also of preexisting rules and decrees across different regions. Several interviewees indicated that the new PVPV law may lead to a more consistent implementation of the DFA rules throughout the country:

"What changed due to these new laws, is that before it was just, let's say, on paper for some of the regions. In some of the cities, or especially in the capital, [women] could travel alone from home to the market or to the office or to the hospital. [...] In the media, however, we could see that it was implemented in the provinces. And now also in Kabul they are enforcing the law that females are not allowed to travel alone even inside the city. [...] In the provinces, I personally witnessed that this law is already implemented. So, things like not being allowed to travel without a male family member or having to cover one's face, have in part already been implemented in some provinces. But in Kabul they are just starting to begin implementing them. But the restrictions on females using their voices in public, this it now new for all of Afghanistan." (I6, 27 August 2024)

"In regard to the implementation of the new law, we had a countrywide meeting last week. Colleagues shared their views and experience about the implementation of new PVPV law from different regions in Afghanistan. Kandahar often depicts an exception from other Afghan regions. In the eastern region the new law strictly applied. In some provinces people had been very open-minded and they had been enjoying life, going for entertainment, and shopping but since the new PVPV law released, all the free movements have been suspended by the DFA." (I9, 2 September 2024)

“Our colleagues in Kabul told us that nothing has changed in the practice of the Ministry of Virtue in Kabul following the [PVPV] law, for example in terms of the intensity of checkpoints, searches or arrests of women allegedly not wearing their veils as required. However, according to an exile media report,⁶ the Taliban leader has since called for the full implementation of the [PVPV] law at a cabinet meeting in early November 2024.” (Ruttig, 23 October 2024 [original in German])

“The content somehow was already there. [...] But I think, it somehow sharpened it a bit and it also [...] sent with the message to all local authorities, that wherever there was flexibility given or space given by the local authorities, that this is now the law that needs to be enforced. [...] It didn’t have a different legal character in that sense, because [...] there is no such thing as an executive order, and then a parliament or whatever. So, it’s the same, the supreme leader says something, and it needs to be done, but I think, it had a different character in the strength of the message. [...] We also saw that on the ground, [...] things [...] started to happen.” (I16, 31 October 2024)

“So there have been information sessions. I think, there was one in Kandahar [...] I think, [the Emir is] calling the governors to make sure that everybody really knows about the law and that the law should be implemented. I think, there was a session even with the private sector in Kandahar, where they were telling them, yes, the law applies to everybody.” (I17, 7 November 2024)

The PVPV law’s implications for ‘legal certainty’

According to I16 and I17, the new PVPV law can be perceived as an internal enforcement mechanism that elevates the status and power of the Ministry for the Prevention of Vice and the Propagation of Virtue:

“I think, what happened with the new PVPV law is somehow an internal enforcement – this is also how we interpret it – [...] it is [...] increasing the status of the Ministry for the Prevention of Vice and the propagation of Virtue [...] as opposed to other authorities, and really creating that space for them to enforce the law in full, and all these decrees, in full, and sort of consolidating that body of decrees, and giving the PVPV more power in enforcing it.” (I16, 31 October 2024)

“It probably also shows that the Amru-l-Ma’ruf [originally an Arabic term meaning ‘promotion of virtue’, used in Afghanistan to refer to the PVPV Ministry], as they call it, is trying to assert itself as one of the powers, as they were in the 1st Taliban Emirates already, because before then they probably hadn’t had that clear power. [...] They run around in

⁶ Ruttig referred to the following article: 8am.media: Source: Taliban leader holds meeting with cabinet members to fully implement the law [original title in Farsi], 6 November 2024, <https://8am.media/fa/source-the-leader-of-the-taliban-has-held-a-meeting-with-the-cabinet-members-of-this-group-for-the-full-implementation-of-the-law/>

white coats as spiritual doctors, [...] to look at the morality [...] in the country.” (I17, 7 November 2024)

Several interviewees mentioned that the fact that what people have to deal with now has the status of an official law, and is no longer a loose regulation that can be implemented in different ways, changes the situation for the population:

“The new vice and virtue law is big deal because it codified [the rules]. So, it went from a sort of a description of culture, or tradition into written. Now these things depict red lines.” (I10, 25 September 2024)

“It [the Vice and Virtue Law] will give them a lot more power or backup to do whatever they want, because there is a law and there is [...] a regime or the whole government who is supporting this law. So, [...] it will make it much worse for the Afghan women.” (Rafiey, 28 October 2024)

“Prior to these new laws entering into force last week, there was some kind of flexibility. Before the DFA were just verbally advising people to not do this and not to do that. But now it became a law and regulation. So now they have something in written which is already shared with everyone. So, I think yes, if there was a flexibility before, now those flexibilities will be also removed as they have like the proper and complete regulation for this kind of activities. And since it’s a law now, the consequences of non-compliance with the restrictions are also written out now.” (I6, 27 August 2024)

“[The DFA] just formalized it, let’s say. Now, [...] what might become a problem is that the PVPV [Ministry] now will start to enforce, and they now have a law to enforce. It’s in the enforcement that we might start seeing some real problems. But we haven’t yet. (I13, 21 October 2024)

More specifically, Abdul Ghafoor Rafiey argues that the law’s existence provides some sort of legal backing for actions that were previously carried out without formal support, potentially leading to more severe and widespread implications for those affected, being first and foremost women and girls:

“Now, when it comes [...] in a shape of a law, that itself makes it a lot worse for the Afghan women, because the Taliban [...] are not trained enough to deal with the Afghan people or the Afghan population. [...] The fear that the people have is that the Taliban or the Taliban army or the police or whoever on the streets now have a legal backup to say that now, they are allowed to do whatever they want to do with the women, with the young girls. [...] they were already doing these kinds of things without any legal backup. Now, that they have this kind of legal backup or say a law or a statute, [...] they will have much more free hand to make life miserable for you.” (Rafiey, 28 October 2024)

By way of contrast, Thomas Ruttig outlined a slightly different perspective. According to him, the law seems to straddle the line between vaguely worded “rubber paragraphs”, which create some niches due to their inconsistent implementation, and at least some kind of clarity or basic

framework that even creates a certain degree of legal certainty (Ruttig, 23 October 2024). On the later aspect he explained the following:

“Despite all the justified criticism of the Taliban’s actions, the codification of all these prohibitions and provisions in the new law also represents, at least in theory, a certain degree of legal certainty or accountability, something that could perhaps be described, in quotation marks, as the ‘Islamic rule of law’. The legal framework within which Afghans must operate is now comprehensively made known to us and, of course, especially to the Afghan population – on the exclusive basis of Islamic law, the Sharia – and replaces the previous, barely comprehensible multiplicity of decrees by the Taliban leader and orders by sub-national Taliban authorities.” (Ruttig, 23 October 2024 [original in German]).

Therefore, Ruttig suggested that the Taliban authorities could be expected to adhere to their own guidelines and that violations from the Taliban side could therefore possibly be objected to. However, it remains questionable as to whether individuals will feel empowered enough to do so in view of the vaguely formulated legal framework; if Afghans, for example, feel capable to request to see a search warrant (Ruttig, 23 October 2024). In this regard, I17 mentioned the complaints committee within the PVPV ministry, where people can submit complaints if you feel that a Taliban member, especially a PVPV inspector, is not complying with their own laws. However, according to I17, at the beginning of November 2024, it was still too early to assess whether this provided a real opportunity to complain in practice (I17, 7 November 2024). Regarding the extent to which the new law provides legal certainty and a basis for the DFA’s conduct, I10 critically assessed how these well-intentioned-sounding legal provisions might be implemented in reality and their potential impact on the daily lives of the Afghan people. The Ministry of Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice provides that the DFA should follow a 3-step process of “information-influence-intervention” to address the Afghan population in case they do not comply with the law. While this might appear reasonable in a formal setting, its practical implementation could lead to adverse effects in domestic environment:

“[O]f course, [this] sounds really reasonable in a way. It sounds fine in a press conference stated by the Ministry of Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. But in a household setting where you’ve got a tired, exhausted, hungry, frustrated 50-year-old dad who has four daughters and four sons and he watches this: the very first thing that’s going to happen is not a ‘let’s all gather around and share information about what’s allowed.’ He’s going to say, ‘if I find any of the four of you on a mobile, out! You’re no longer part of the house because I will not have these boys’ futures ruined by bad choices by one of the four of you, girls.’” (I10, 25 September 2024)

4 Situation of Women and Girls

The situation of women and girls in Afghanistan was described by interviewees as “very restrictive” (I9, 2 September 2024) or “very bad because of the many restrictions” (I4, 21 August 2024), with “females feeling like they are prisoners now [under the second Taliban DFA]” (I9, 2 September 2024), restricted in the public as well as in the private life, the restrictions leading “to women being forced to withdraw from society” (I5, 22 August 2024). In June 2024, when the DFA’s PVPV Law had not come into force yet, I1 stated that the limitations on women and girls were arriving at a level that nobody had imagined (I1, 26 June 2024). Early September 2024, I9 noted: “It is a really frustrating situation now. The situation for Afghan women and girls has become increasingly dire since the Taliban regained control in August 2021” (I9, 2 September 2024). With regard to the then newly introduced PVPV Law, I5 noted in August 2024:

“One week ago, the DFA introduced a new guideline, focusing on women. Women are not allowed to ride in a bus without a mahram anymore. The Taliban say that the whole face and body of a woman need to be covered. They even say that a woman cannot be friends with a non-Muslim woman. Three years ago, it was not like this. [...] No one [...] [stopped women and told them] how to walk, where to go, which activities to do and which not. And that’s not all. In the private life as well, women are restricted. They are for example not allowed to go to the park to have a picnic for example. But Afghan women are much stronger, even in this hard situation, they try to work as a humanitarian aid worker, they try to work as much as possible.” (I5, 22 August 2024)

I5 explained that “all these restrictions have an irreversible impact on the lives of women and girls in Afghanistan” noting that “deprived from society”, women were “confronted with extreme mental challenges” (I5, 22 August 2024). I13 noted regarding the European Court of Justice decision concluding that gender and nationality alone were “sufficient” for countries to grant asylum to Afghan women (The Guardian, 4 October 2024; see also ECJ, 4 October 2024):

“To me it should be like this, because the reality is that it is a prison for women with zero protection, no matter which way you look at it, whether you’re directly experiencing the violence or not. It is such a massive oppression every day. [...] You’re so restricted. [...] And now, also this public voice thing⁷. Already, outreach was not allowed. But then, the public voice. Anyway, we don’t know if and what that means exactly, but it’s very oppressive.” (I13, 22 October 2024)

Women’s and girls’ access to basic rights, including education and employment (I2, 13 August 2024; I5, 22 August 2024; I9, 2 September 2024), health care (I2, 13 August 2024; I9, 2 September 2024), justice and services (I2, 13 August 2024) as well as capacity building opportunities and income generation activities was restricted under the DFA (I9, 2 September 2024). Furthermore, I9 noted that women and girls had no “decision-making participation, no political participation - there are no empowerment chances available anymore. Entertainment

⁷ Referring to the PVPV Law’s article 13(3) stating: “Women’s voices (in a song, a hymn, or a recital out loud in a gathering) are also something that should be concealed” (PVPV Law, August 2024).

places are ceased for women, participation in public life is restricted for women”, while free movement without a mahram was not possible. The “lack of freedom of expression, freedom of gathering and access to education” was “badly” affecting women in Afghanistan, I9 explained, further noting that women who were able to go to the office to work from there, were “feeling lucky”, because there they would find a space to discuss matters with people outside their families and “release some stress”, while for other women, who had “to sit at home”, no stress release opportunities and spaces existed. This in turn was “putting them in [...] really difficult situations, [...] particularly affecting their well-being in a negative way” (I9, 2 September 2024). I5 noted that when the “government does not respect the rights of women, [...] within the family it is also not the case” (I5, 22 August 2024).

In regard to reportedly improved security and access, I1 agreed that it was better now, but insisted that half of the population could not benefit from this security, because they had to stay at home. According to I1, there was physical access in theory. But “meaningful access – women don’t have it”. As also noted in section 3.1, I1 elaborated that if a woman in rural Afghanistan was asked if her life had changed since the Taliban retook power, she would probably answer that it had not changed that much. “Before there was no security, but she could go out; now there is security, but she cannot go out. So, when people argue, the situation has improved so much, you always have to ask for whom?” (I1, 26 June 2024). I3 explained that “it’s not that the Afghan women or the half of the society accepts these things”, but that due to the suffering endured by women in Afghanistan “almost half of a century, 50 years of suffering,” women could not “bear it anymore”. I3 also noted that it was very difficult for Afghan women, because they already knew the consequences (I3, 15 August 2024). I2 explained on that note: “When it comes to women, almost all their rights are somehow violated, or they are deprived from their rights. That’s a general challenge. But [...] also the male Afghan population has mothers, sisters, daughters at home. So, it means [...] [they] are also suffering” (I2, 13 August 2024).

While the lack of access to employment and education was “really affecting the overall situation” according to I2 (I2, 13 August 2024), interviewees described the following groups as being particularly vulnerable under the situation described above: female-headed households (I2, 13 August 2024), persons with specific needs, particularly women with specific needs (I5, 22 August 2024; I9, 2 September 2024; I16, 31 October 2024) and women with specific needs without a mahram (I9, 2 September 2024), women who were members of minority groups, including Hazara women (Rafiey, 28 October 2024), elderly women (I10, 25 September 2024) and adolescent girls (I16, 31 October 2024). On the note of Hazara women, Rafiey explained:

“When we are talking generally about Afghan women, all of them have a very difficult situation. But if you're a Hazara, for example, [or belong to] a minority group [...] Kabul is kind of divided in different parts, so different ethnicities live in different parts of Afghanistan. Hazara are mainly living in the western part of Kabul. So, [...] if the situation for Afghan women [since the Taliban takeover] has been worse, [...] let’s say by a 100%, for the Hazara women, it has been worse by 150%, because they are Hazara. So, these are the kinds of minor things that keep on happening, not only in Kabul, but of course in the other provinces of Afghanistan too.” (Rafiey, 28 October 2024)

In contrast, Emran Feroz noted regarding Hazara women during his review: “When I was in Bamiyan in 2022, Hazara women were roaming more freely than women in Kabul in my opinion.

Also, in Kabul and other cities, Hazara women are hired by the Taliban as security guards, policewomen etc.” (Feroz, 21 January 2025). This statement was, however, challenged in the course of the second review by staff members of an international organization with a presence in Afghanistan added, stating that they and their sources could not confirm this observation (Review 2, 19 February 2025).

On the note of vulnerable groups with heightened risk under the DFA, I10 elaborated:

“I think there’s intersectional risk, which is elevated, for example, elderly women, all women and girls that have disability of every type: developmental, physical, sensory, emotional, all the different disabilities. If you’re a woman or a girl, you are triply then required to have a sensitive, caring, patient male advocate for you. That is just not going to happen under these conditions for most women and girls.” (I10, 25 September 2024)

Regarding adolescent girls or young women, I1 described situations where I1 was talking with young women: Many of them spoke English, because they were educated, they had had access to good schools, to jobs and they told I1 that they saw no future, that they had no dreams, no hope. Then they asked I1 to give them something to look forward to. I1 shared that in these situations, I1 just did not know what to tell the young women (I1, 26 June 2024).

I17 noted to have heard from several women in Afghanistan that it was “better now” compared to the first Taliban government, “because they’re not beating us on the streets”, while the women also shared that they were “mentally torturing us”. However, in I17’s view, women were trying to cope with the situation by convincing themselves that it was “not so bad” as otherwise they would not be able to bear the situation. According to I17, for females in Afghanistan, it was a “constant mental pressure of [...] having to think what happens, if [they] leave the house” (I17, 7 November 2024).

As a result of the restrictions on women’s access to basic rights, including education and employment, I5 noted, “under-age-marriages are increasing, violence against women is increasing, women are suffering from depression. The mental health situation of women is getting worse day by day” (I5, 22 August 2024). I17 elaborated that in the face of closing spaces, women were “clearly getting more worried” and there was “a high level of anxiety among women, [...] and fear” as well as in society in general (I17, 7 November 2024). I9 explained the relation between a rise in domestic violence and the economic situation of women as follows:

“The economic situation of women is totally broken. Women are no longer able to support their dependents. So, it is a very tough situation. [...] Women finance is totally broken, and this also leads to domestic violence in families. In the past, the majority of Afghan women were also supporting their families. The work opportunities were available for them to support their families. Many men have become addicted to drugs and women were supporting the families. But now men and women, both are jobless. And this situation leads to constant tensions within the households.” (I9, 2 September 2024)

According to I2, the lack of respect for the rights of girls and women furthermore led to people being disappointed, in particular the female population, which in turn resulted in females being reluctant to send their children to school. Under the current circumstances, these women would not see any job opportunities for their children and hence would not see any sense in sending their children to school or to higher education. I2 concluded that “this situation also

impacts the children and the future of the children, the future of their education and their careers. So, it has a very big impact, I would say" (I2, 13 August 2024).

Regarding the DFA's view on the Afghan female population, I10 explained:

"I would say that Afghanistan was on a path towards an inclusive representative [republic], but these guys [the DFA] have the exact opposite mindset. [...] these guys cannot accept, for example, that a woman could be a lawmaker or a ... anything. It is so deeply embedded in their culture, they have an idiom in Pashto, which is, you've probably heard this, 'a woman's place is in the home or the grave.' That's it. Those are the two options. And that's not just a light-hearted ha-ha-ha kind of statement. That's actually their philosophy. There is no justification for a woman to be outside of the home unless she's about to be buried." (I10, 25 September 2024)

While I3 noted in regard to societal views on women in Afghanistan:

"And unfortunately, some say that all Afghan men are against women. No, except for 400-500 people who are in power, and who are probably expressing that because of their political interest. Other than that, nobody dares to think about ignoring a woman in this country; particularly the educated people, because uneducated people, they don't know much about these things. So therefore, it became like a custom. I would not call it culture. It became like a custom." (I3, 15 August 2024)

I17 explained that the DFA's ideology was at least in parts carried by society, noting:

"Once a woman said to me, there's Taliban in our homes, there's Taliban in the offices, there's Taliban on the streets. And I think, they meant that quite generally because I mean, that's the argument that everybody says, [that] nothing supports the ideology in society. But I would say, [...] it's like [...] the German saying, nothing supported the Nazi ideology in Germany. And I think it's just wrong to view it like that [...] and I'm pretty sure that part of the ideology of the Taliban is supported by (or resonates with) society or at least elements in society. And I feel that some men are actually quite happy that they can put women back into their place. That I find the scarier element of this, because now they've got a law to point to [the PVPV Law]. [...] It's codified now. [...] And right now, it's a very traditionalist regime in power. But it doesn't mean that society doesn't support [any of] it. There are elements in society that support a very traditional view of women in society. [...]. So, I think [...] changing a society's view of women takes a long, long time. And I just don't think we achieved that shift in the last 20 years. [...] some people will probably disagree with me, but I actually think, if we had achieved more of a shift, men wouldn't be normalising [the restriction on women's rights] as fast as they're doing in Afghanistan. And I think, men are. Not all [...]. I don't want to generalize, but enough [...]. And probably some women also look at working women as [...] not being pious enough. [...] There's an urban-rural gap, probably, [...] but we have to also remember that now with the Taliban coming into the cities, they're bringing that mentality with them as well [...] So, yes, it's the government, but it's also society or elements in society [that disagree with women having as many rights as they did in the past twenty years]." (I17, 7 November 2024)

Three interviewees highlighted the role and importance of humanitarian work for women in Afghanistan (I2, 13 August 2024; I4, 21 August 2024; I5, 22 August 2024). I4 emphasized that the Afghan people, and in particular women and girls, for whom the situation due to the many restrictions was very bad, “really need support and help right now. We hope that international donors and organizations are aware of this” (I4, 21 August 2024). I2 highlighted the importance for humanitarian actors to “use one voice and really advocate for the rights of women. That would really play a crucial role in helping the women in the Afghan society. [...] I mean, when you advocate for something, it takes time, but if it’s continuing, it will somehow succeed one day or another” (I2, 13 August 2024). I5 explained in that regard:

“It is a problem, that some of the donors say they cannot support Afghanistan, because they cannot only support half of the population, because the other half of the population is female. They argue, ‘When women are not allowed to work, they are not allowed to pursue education, they are not allowed to participate, why should we give funds only considering half of the population?’ But I think this argument is not right. When the male population suffers under the economic conditions, and fathers, brothers, husbands do not have jobs, the first individuals that will suffer within the households are women. Even if women or children are not the direct beneficiaries of humanitarian aid programmes, it nevertheless will affect them. [...] I think the international community should not forget about the Afghan women and not be silent. Afghan women need to be perceived as human survivors, [...] as resilient, not as victims.” (I5, 22 August 2024)

4.1 Freedom of movement and access to civil documentation

“You can observe this already when you visit a bazaar or see it in the streets, there are less and less women.” (I5, 22 August 2024)

After the Taliban took over Afghanistan in August 2021, women’s movements outside the home were restricted by new rules and public announcements, including the need for women to be accompanied by a male chaperone (“mahram”) (UN OCHA, 7 January 2022, p. 24; GiHA Afghanistan, 30 March 2022, p. 15; USDOS, 12 April 2022, section 2d). While social customs restricted the movement of women without a mahram inside the country prior to the Taliban takeover in certain areas of the country (USDOS, 12 April 2022, section 2d; GiHA Afghanistan, 30 March 2022, p. 15), a new directive issued on 26 December 2021 (USDOS, 12 April 2022, section 2d; BBC News, 27 December 2021) prohibited long-distance travel for women without a mahram (USDOS, 12 April 2022, section 2d; Tolo News, 28 December 2021). An RFE/RL Radio Azadi article published on 26 December 2021 in Dari reported that the DFA’s PVPV ministry had confirmed the recommendation for city transportation drivers, including taxi drivers, not to transport women without a mahram and women who did not adhere to the DFA’s hijab requirements (Radio Azadi, 26 December 2021).

Some sources reported that the mahram requirement affected women travelling more than 72 kilometres (Die Zeit, 27 December 2021; BBC News, 27 December 2021) or when travelling “outside a certain perimeter from their home” (GiHA Afghanistan, 30 March 2022), while regional variations in enforcement were also reported (USDOS, 12 April 2022, section 2d; GiHA Afghanistan, 30 March 2022, p. 15). Representatives of the DFA’s Ministry of Justice and Economy also provided conflicting information, with some stating that a mahram was required

for women to leave the house and for visits to official places, while others stated that women were allowed to move within the province without a mahram (GiHA Afghanistan, 30 March 2022, p. 15). The mahram regulation is not included as a provision in the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (PVPV) Law (see PVPV Law, August 2024; Ruttig, 23 October 2024), which was enacted on 21 August 2024 (AAN, 31 August 2021). A tracking report published by the Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group (GiHA) for Afghanistan in November 2024 noted that the August 2024 PVPV law added the “prohibition on drivers and transportation companies offering unaccompanied women a lift” (GiHA, 4 November 2024, p. 3). Regarding the changes that came into effect as a result of the mahram regulations, I6 explained that “before it was just, let’s say, on paper for some of the regions. In some of the cities, or especially in the capital, [women] could travel alone from home to the market or to the office or to the hospital”. I6 continued to describe the case of a woman, who had not been stopped by anyone when “coming and going to and from the office” (I6, 27 August 2024), further elaborating:

“In the media, however, we could see that it was implemented in the provinces. And now also in Kabul they are enforcing the law that females are not allowed to travel alone even inside the city. [...] So now we are afraid that in Kabul it will also be more restrictive. That it will be more restrictive in all the cities, where these laws have not been enforced so far.” (I6, 27 August 2024)

The above-described differences in enforcement were also reflected in the interviews. Some interviewees reported that women and girls are not allowed to move in the public space without a mahram, regardless of the reason (I4, 21 August 2024; Ruttig, 23 October 2024; I11, 16 October 2024), while others noted that the requirement only applied to women travelling over 72 km (I9, 2 September 2024; I13, 22 October 2024). I13 explained on that note:

“If I take a female medical doctor from any province, Logar, Badakhshan, whatever, and I bring her to [another province] for a training, she needs a mahram because of the distance. If she goes to work, to the hospital in her city or to the clinic in her city, she doesn’t need the mahram. The beneficiary can go to the hospital without the mahram. Now again, you’ll go to some provinces, where they always accompany their women (wives, daughters, sisters), because [...] they are more conservative. They did it before the Taliban takeover and they continue to do it now. [...]

Anywhere, where there is a distance, any services that are any kind of remote. As soon as you travel a little bit, then you’ll get stopped [...]. They check, [...] if you’re out of that radius, you know [...] and the reality in Afghanistan is that there’s a lot of these remote areas. So, those women are affected. They were affected from the beginning and still today they need a mahram, if they travel. But those that have a service in their village, in their city, they don’t need to have a mahram. It’s a radius issue.” (I13, 22 October 2024)

Regarding the required minimum age of a mahram, one interviewee stated that a mahram “must be at least 16 or 17 years old. If a woman has a son younger than that, she can’t go out with him. For travel, [he] must be 17 or older” (I11, 16 October 2024). I6 recalled having observed one situation in Mazar-e-Sharif, where a woman who was in a taxi in the company of her seven-year-old son was ordered by the DFA to get off the car, because she had no mahram with her (I6, 27 August 2024). According to I11, in some provinces, women were allowed to go

out to purchase something having a “small baby” with them (I11, 16 October 2024). I4 explained that in the south it was possible for women to go purchase something “without a Mahram and maybe taking a small child outside, but beside that there are not many options” (I4, 21 August 2024). I11 noted that in the beginning, “women and girls without a Mahram weren’t allowed to go out to buy anything. In some provinces, they were taken to a special office and told not to come back without a Mahram” (I11, 16 October 2024). I4 explained in that regard:

“[...] going outside once a week or twice a week, twice a month to [the] bazaar, you may not have to face consequences. But if a woman goes outside too often, people who are monitoring, they might stop her. Sometimes they notice it and react, sometimes they just ignore it. But either way, when women go outside, they do not know what will happen, so they are afraid either way. Anything can happen. Sometimes, maybe nobody is stopping them for 2 or 3 months, but [other times, they] may be stopped, especially when a woman is moving around alone.” (I4, 21 August 2024)

I11 explained that though possible within limitations, purchasing things was “still not common because many people [women] don’t have anyone to go with them”, describing from personal experience in I11’s family, that “[b]efore, during the Republic, women usually handled the shopping [...]. Now, it’s mainly the male family members who do it” (I11, 16 October 2024). Several interviewees said that the fear that women or a (male) family member would be punished in case of non-compliance was a concern (I6, 27 August 2024; I9, 2 September 2024; I17, 7 November 2024). In that matter, I6 described a situation where a woman visited the province from which she originally was and went to get some groceries, as she was used to do in Kabul. When the woman’s brother saw her outside in the local shops close to their house, he asked the woman what she was doing there and told her to get home and stay there, while he would get the groceries. I6 explained: “Male family members are already afraid in such situations” (I6, 27 August 2024).

“Policing” by the wider community was reported as a problem by I16 and I17 (I16, 31 October 2024; I17, 7 November 2024). Regarding developments in this area because of the August 2024 PVPV law, I17 shared:

“I’ve heard these stories from women being asked by random men in the streets about what they’re doing here, that they are not properly dressed and commenting [on them being outside the home].⁸ [...] Afghanistan always was a society of high social control. And now, there’s a law that gives people the ability on what they can control, [...] that they can feel now they can report, if they feel [...] the neighbour’s woman doesn’t wear a proper hijab or she goes out without a mahram, et cetera. [...] For a woman, leaving the house is a constant navigation of who may pull you over and question you. And women will tell that you are being questioned, by either the [Taliban] inspectors themselves or just random men. And I think, the laws like this will put the pressure on society and particularly men. I think, they have to make the choice whether or not they see it as too risky for women to

⁸ In this regard, Emran Feroz noted during his review that “large parts of the society were ‘talibanized’ before the Taliban even returned”.

be going out of the house [...] it emboldened men to control women, which some men take up with more gusto, and some women as well [...] tell on other women, [...] do in other women. [...] In many rural areas, he [the Supreme Leader] probably doesn't need to implement it [the PVPV law] as harshly, because it was already in place. [...] We should not forget that [...] telling a woman to wear a hijab or a burqa, or not leaving the house, some of that may have already been in place from a cultural perspective [...] You can't just look through the urban lens at Afghanistan. I think, in [some] rural areas, for many women, life hasn't changed that much. [...] Of course, it depends on which area [...]. That's probably the fear for every woman that walks out the house, that she can get arrested [...]. I think there was [...] an earlier edict or something that made very clear that men are responsible for women to comply, and that the Taliban will not refrain from arresting men and punishing men, if their women are not complying with the law." (I17, 7 November 2024)

I16 explained:

"What the Taliban are also very good at, is enforcing this [...] community policing [...]. We even see it in our own organizations that, for example, regarding the Mahram requirements, [...] that our [...] female colleagues, any female in the community has to be accompanied by a male chaperone to be able to go to work, go to the market, engage with, etcetera. But it also means a lot of dependency on their own household members, [...] and a lot of power dynamics inside families that that creates." (I16, 31 October 2024)

Abdul Ghafoor Rafiey recalled several instances in which girls had been stopped on the street by the DFA in the western part of Kabul, an area with a larger Hazara community (AAN, 17 January 2022), without being given any reason. According to Rafiey, the girls were taken with DFA vehicles and placed under DFA police custody or were detained. He further elaborated:

"Then, they were investigated, they were tortured, before they were let go. Some of the girls [...] were in custody for several days without being given any reason.

[...] The problem is that [...] these kinds of actions will make life a lot worse for the Afghan women. [...] If before, the families were allowing them to go outside, now, the families will also stop them to go outside, because they would feel, [...] if those girls were kidnapped by the Taliban or taken into custody, their daughter can also be taken into custody. So, if they had this very limited [...] permission from their families, that will also be taken from them, fearing that the Taliban can also kidnap them." (Rafiey, 28 October 2024)

With reference to an interview with the DFA's Deputy Minister for Vice and Virtue published by BBC Pashto in Pashto early October 2024, Ruttig elaborated that the Deputy Minister denied that the mahram regulation was absolute, stating that it did not apply for families without male relatives (Ruttig, 23 October 2024; BBC Pashto, 3 October 2024). However, three interviewees noted that the mahram regulation is a source of distress for women who do not have a mahram in their family (I6, 27 August 2024;), for example because their husbands had died (I4, 21 August 2024; I11, 16 October 2024):

“Some of the females, they are heading their households, they are the only breadwinner. So, we have to wonder, how should they manage to, for example, get groceries from the market or go to a hospital or see a doctor?” (I6, 27 August 2024).

“Many women are the only ones providing food for their families because their husbands have died in the long war. Some women don’t have a Mahram (a male family member), and they are worried about what to do without one. These are just a few of the problems Afghan women are facing today.” (I11, 16 October 2024)

“The need to have a Mahram to go somewhere (even to health clinics) and the restrictions in regard to female employment are also quite challenging, as many women are widowed. Many women are the heads of their households. They need to support their families. This is disturbing to many women and also a psycho-social issue.” (I4, 21 August 2024)

Regional differences in the implementation of the mahram requirement, already outlined above, were noted by I4, according to whom it is not possible to compare the regions with each other, because of the different responses of the DFA. While in the south, “much more pressure” existed, in Kabul, “the DFA act much more flexible”, concluding: “So, we cannot compare the south of the country with its north, its north with its east – it is totally different” (I4, 21 August 2024). A more lenient implementation of the mahram regulation in Kabul was also described by I6 (I6, 27 August 2024) and I17 (I17, 7 November 2024), for example, in the sense that it was possible to go purchase something for a woman without a mahram (I6, 27 August 2024). Relating to regional variations in enforcement, I13 shared:

“I went to Badakhshan recently. In Badakhshan, the women go to the market by themselves. They say, ok, we can’t go to the park, fine. We can’t go to school, but we go to weddings, we go to the market [...] But Badakhshan is an extreme I had not seen [...] I went to Nangarhar, there the women are always under the watch. It is a lot more conservative there. I went to Kandahar, same thing. But in Kandahar, two, three women can also go to the health centre [together]. But they’re in full-on burqa.” (I13, 22 October 2024)

On transport, I5 reported that a DFA guideline had banned women from travelling by bus without a mahram (I5, 22 August 2024). I13 shared on that matter:

“Now, I think, there is also a decree that says a mahram has to be with a woman for any kind of transport. So, before, women used to hop in a taxi and then go [...] now, that’s more difficult because they’ve added that. Again, regarding our services, they come in walking distance to our services.” (I13, 22 October 2024).

According to I2, who was interviewed before the 2024 PVPV law was published, transportation or travel companies would not issue a woman without a mahram a ticket for her travel in the first place, and taxi drivers would not give women without a mahram a ride, adding, however, that this was a matter of distance:

“For example, if it is within the city, I don’t think that this is a problem. But if it’s a long distance, for example Kabul to Kandahar, then it is really a problem. If they don’t comply, they will face consequences. They will not allow her to travel [...] For example, if a woman

is going to the airport, they will not allow her to board a plane. They will tell her to bring her Mahram, if she wants to travel; otherwise, she is not allowed to.” (I2, 13 August 2024)

In the abovementioned situation observed by I6, where a woman accompanied by her seven year old son was ordered by the DFA to get off a taxi in Mazar-e-Sharif, I6 recalled that the taxi driver was beaten by the DFA and asked whether he was not aware of the restrictions, telling him it was forbidden to transport a woman without a mahram (I6, 27 August 2024). I16 explained that after the PVPV law was published in August 2024, taxi drivers started to “proactively implement the law and not take women alone, [...] for example, [female] staff to the office.” (I16, 31 October 2024)

Regarding the effects of the mahram regulations on female beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance, I9 explained that female beneficiaries with specific needs “have not been able to come to get assistance, particularly women without a mahram” (I9, 2 September 2024). On the issue of the effect of the mahram regulations on humanitarian work, I6 noted that before the Taliban takeover, male family members of female humanitarian workers did not have to be present, while they were “on a mission or travelling somewhere. So, this changed.” I6 explained that when a woman was engaged in a mission, a male family member would accompany the woman “in order to not breach the norm and to not be stopped by the DFA” (I6, 27 August 2024). I11 explained that working women need to be accompanied by a mahram when they travel, while female health workers do not require a mahram when working inside a hospital (I11, 16 October 2024). I13 explained in that matter:

“So, I’ll give you an example: [...] Herat earthquake last year didn’t hit in the centre of Herat, it hit outside. Now, to go to these places, you have to travel [...] to some of these remote villages, some one hour, others an hour and a half drive away and for those, all female staff needed their mahrams [...] Healthcare workers who have to travel those distances need a mahram.

[...] we have transportation for our female staff [...] and the driver is kind of the mahram. In provinces, where this is stricter, we put one mahram in the car with them [a male relative of one of the women] and that’s good enough, because they are health workers and they’re going to work.” (I13, 22 October 2024).

Meanwhile I16 found that female staff of the organization I16 works for could not always find a male family member to accompany them on missions:

“Although we have very highly qualified and educated female staff, they also depend on the mahram, if they want to go on mission, which sometimes is not in place. You would assume that it is, but sometimes, they don’t find anybody, who supports them in that sense [...] It’s ocking. [...] Even when you reach that level of education and support, you’re still reduced at this very fundamental level to being dependent on a male chaperone for these basic elements of life, which I think is a very sobering experience, because you cannot educate yourself out of this [...]. So, there’s also these cultural aspects to it.” (I16, 31 October 2024)

In this regard, a staff member of an international organization with a presence in Afghanistan added during their review, that it is not only a question of availability of a mahram, but also if a mahram card had been issued by the PVPV and mentioned instances where these had been denied (Review 2, 19 February 2025).

One interviewee noted that women were not allowed to go to the park alone and had to be accompanied by a male mahram for outings (I11, 16 October 2024). However, according to three interviewees, women had no access to parks or picnic places at all anymore (I9, 2 September 2024; I5, 22 August 2024; I13, 22 October 2024). Emran Feroz, in his review noted regarding the latter: “Heard this literally from all women I know, including Afghan women from the diaspora who visited the country” (Feroz, 16 January 2025). I3 recalled a situation, where a family was trying to “go for a gathering” somewhere and was told that women cannot be taken with the family in public (I3, 15 August 2024).

Regarding access to civil documentation, I9 explained that women needed a male family member to be present when applying for the Tazkira, the national ID document, to get it issued (I9, 2 September 2024). I4 explained on that matter:

“In the community interviews we are conducting, the topic of access to civil documentation is very often raised. This is specifically an issue for people who are returning from other countries. They are often lacking such documents, which sometimes also hinders them or their children from having access to education. In regard to these issues, we can refer them to services, helping them, providing them with ID documents etc. But also in these cases, due to limited resources, it takes time, which makes people frustrated. [...] Having access to civil documentation is difficult in general, not particularly for women. But this again also depends on the area. People who live in the cities have easier access, but in terms of the districts, the process of applying for documentation is much more difficult, especially for women.” (I4, 21 August 2024)

During the interviews, further information on access to civil documentation could not be obtained, but information on civil documentation in Afghanistan, including regarding women and girls, is for example provided in the following publications:

- UNHCR – UN High Commissioner for Refugees: Factsheet; Legal documentation and civil registration in Afghanistan; November 2024, November 2024
[https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2118135/Factsheet on legal assistance Nov 2024.pdf](https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2118135/Factsheet%20on%20legal%20assistance%20Nov%202024.pdf)
- UNHCR – UN High Commissioner for Refugees: Afghanistan; Protection Monitoring Analysis Report: Access to Basic Services/Vulnerabilities 2023, 6 August 2024
[https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2113305/Afghanistan Protection Monitoring 2023 summary.pdf](https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2113305/Afghanistan%20Protection%20Monitoring%202023%20summary.pdf)
- UNHCR – UN High Commissioner for Refugees: Legal Identity and Civil Documentation in Afghanistan, 1 May 2024
[https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2110823/Legal Identity and Civil Documentation in Afghanistan 05062024.pdf](https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2110823/Legal%20Identity%20and%20Civil%20Documentation%20in%20Afghanistan%2005062024.pdf)
- IOM - International Organization for Migration & Samuel Hall: Documentation and Legal Identification in Afghanistan, August 2023
[https://afghanistan.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11071/files/documents/2023-08/documentation-and-legal-identification-in-afghanistan 0 0.pdf](https://afghanistan.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11071/files/documents/2023-08/documentation-and-legal-identification-in-afghanistan_0_0.pdf)

4.2 Freedom of expression and freedom of assembly

Thomas Ruttig noted that – besides women's rights – freedom of expression and assembly was perhaps the area most affected by the new DFA rule, with civil society, political parties, parliament and elections abolished and media severely restricted. Even local initiatives such as Community Development Councils (CDCs), local forms of participation in the distribution of humanitarian aid and funds, had been abolished (Ruttig, 23 October 2024).

Two interviewees mentioned the Law on the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, which was made public in August 2024 and imposed several restrictions on women including the provision that women's voices should not be heard in public (I13, 22 October 2024; Rafiey, 28 October 2024).

However, I13 noted that the situation had been difficult for women already before that law came into force:

“The Taliban takeover was a drastic draconian change for women, [...] because it halted women in the public sphere almost from day one.” (I13, 22 October 2024)

Abdul Ghafoor Rafiey equally stated that women were living under “fear and oppression” already before the law was made public (Rafiey, 28 October 2024). Nevertheless, the law made the situation more difficult:

“The fear that the people have is that the Taliban or the Taliban army or the police or whoever on the streets now have a legal backup to say that now, they are allowed to do whatever they want to do with the women, with the young girls.” (Rafiey, 28 October 2024)

I13 described that women were “removed” from society, from jobs, schools, then beauty parlours were closed (I13, 22 October 2024):

“So you understood already that this was a country run by the Taliban. That women didn't have a space, whether it was written in a decree or not. Everybody understood that you're a woman, you better take your place.” (I13, 22 October 2024)

I5 explained that restrictions extended also to women's private lives as they were, for example, not allowed to have a picnic in a park (I5, 22 August 2024) and I9 mentioned that there was no place for women to “come together for entertainment purposes” (I9, 2 September 2024). Gatherings of women – unless for a reason like in a health facility – were making the Taliban “suspicious”, according to I13, as they would “automatically think that the women are up to something sinister” (I13, 22 October 2024).

I9 noted that regarding the freedom of expression and assembly, women had “little to no influence in any decision-making processes” (I9, 2 September 2024). I2 stated that the lack of these freedoms was an issue for both men and women:

“Lack of freedom of expression is an issue for everyone, not only for women. The restrictions are targeting everyone, everybody is afraid. [...] And it is the same with freedom of assembly. No one is gathering in one place and expressing something. That's the same for both male and female because nobody can gather and demand something.” (I2, 13 August 2024)

Sometimes, I2 explained, people heard about gatherings taking place in Kabul or other parts of the country and that participants subsequently were facing consequences by the DFA (I2, 13 August 2024).

Several interviewees indicated that there had been protests by women (but not only by women (I5, 22 August 2024)) at the beginning of the DFA's rule, but that these protests were silenced by the DFA:

"So right after they came back to power, there was a big protest by women. But slowly they tightened the situation with their decrees. They issued one decree after another, more than 50 and most of them are targeting women and girls in Afghanistan. So they established a situation in which everybody has the concern, that, 'if I speak up, I will face the consequences and the DFA will show me consequences.' For example, many people disappeared, nobody knows what happened to them. They harassed these women and then they kept them in custody without providing explanation, without allowing people to understand their situation and therefore it was very difficult." (I3, 15 August 2024)

"There are no possibilities for women to demonstrate against the DFA anymore. These protests stopped because most of the protestors were arrested and put into jail for several months, sometimes even without disclosing their locations. Some say that some of them even were killed. So, the demonstrations stopped because no one dares to protest anymore or to raise their voices, to use their rights. Freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, are basically not happening in the country anymore." (I6, 27 August 2024)

In his review, Emran Feroz noted that according to his knowledge, Taliban intelligence cells worked independently from each other and made their own decisions which made it difficult to obtain information on victims. There had even been clashes between intelligence and the Ministry of Interior in the past (Feroz, 28 January 2025).

As a consequence, a "context of fear" has been established (I3, 15 August 2024), that prevented people from expressing any demands (I3, 15 August 2024; I5, 22 August 2024) or discontent (I3, 15 August 2024; I4, 21 August 2024).

"So mostly because of the fear they do not raise their voice, because if they raise their voice, they have to fear that maybe the same things will happen to them. What we see in the community is fear. When it is not even allowed to ask for the basic right of education without being put into prison, how should one try to speak about other things, more political issues? So, fear is the reason why people are not complaining." (I5, 22 August 2024)

Moreover, two interviewees noted that even if a woman was not directly targeted by the authorities, they could target a male family member instead and punish him for the woman's alleged non-adherence to a regulation (I6, 27 August 2024) or sometimes even arrest them "in order to stop a female family member" (I3, 15 August 2024). For further information on consequences of non-compliance for family members, please see [chapter 5.3](#) of this report.

One interviewee noted that people might also be afraid to express themselves on social media, as any media might be monitored (I2, 13 August 2024). Two interviewees mentioned that the DFA was monitoring and controlling media (I3, 15 August 2024; Ruttig, 23 October 2024).

“Media are heavily restricted, although independent media continue to operate – but under close surveillance (even with armed Taliban members in the studio), heavily censored and self-censoring.” (Ruttig, 23 October 2024)

4.3 Access to education

Girls in Afghanistan have been banned from attending secondary school after sixth grade (UNHCR, 17 October 2024, p. 7; I2, 13 August 2024; I6, 27 August 2024; I4, 21 August 2024; I17, 7 November 2024) since September 2021 (HRW, 3 December 2024). Girls and women have furthermore been banned from enjoying higher education (I11, 16 October 2024; I6, 27 August 2024; I5, 22 August 2024) since December 2022 (HRW, 3 December 2024), including university education (UNHCR, 17 October 2024, p. 7; I6, 27 August 2024). This made Afghanistan “currently the only country in the world where secondary and higher education is strictly forbidden to women and girls over age 12” (UN News, 14 August 2024). Please also note that during the period in which the interviews for this report were conducted, women and girls reportedly had access to certain medical training and education (I5, 22 August 2024; I13, 22 October 2024), including midwifery (I11, 16 October 2024). However, in early December 2024, women were banned from medical education and training (OHCHR, 5 December 2024; HRW, 3 December 2024), “effectively closing off their last route to further education in the country” (BBC News, 3 December 2024). In his review, Emran Feroz noted in that regard, that he knew of a foreign NGO working in Kabul and elsewhere, which was first informed by the DFA “that they have to stop. But a few days later, they could continue teaching lessons” (Feroz, 28 January 2025).

Citing UN data, Thomas Ruttig noted that the number of children attending school in Afghanistan under the current DFA was higher than it was under the Islamic Republic, including of girls up to sixth grade. According to Ruttig, this was not a surprising development, as the end of the war meant that it was no longer dangerous to go to school (Ruttig, 23 October 2024). Simultaneously, interviewees noted that the Taliban were also building new schools (I11, 16 October 2024), including girls’ schools for education up to the sixth grade (Ruttig, 23 October 2024). At the same time, Ruttig noted that according to UN figures a third of girls dropped out of primary school, often because poor families preferred to send their sons to school before their daughters (Ruttig, 23 October 2024). In response to interviewees who mentioned school construction under the Taliban DFA, staff members of an international organization with a presence in Afghanistan stated during their review that the DFA was building madrassas, not [regular] schools (Review 2, 19 February 2025).

On the matter of girl’s education in Afghanistan, I3 noted:

“I am a strong advocate for education because I know the difference education can make, especially in Afghan society. In my opinion, education is left behind, nobody cares about it. Everybody talks about access to education in Afghanistan, but what does it mean to them? And here again I am speaking as an Afghan and probably I am talking in an emotional way, but it’s really depressing in different ways. My daughter graduated 3 years back and she left behind education for 3 years. Do you think she will have the potential and capacity to continue her education after 5 years? The answer is no. So, what does it mean? So,

education, yes, everybody speaks about it, but you know, there is a realization or understanding or an assumption, especially in the Western countries, that it's a cultural issue. No, it's very painful. It's not a cultural issue,⁹ I can assure you. Even the DFA, their members, some plea for education, but how it is covered, I think it does not create attention." (I3, 15 August 2024)

I2 also shared the experience of I2's daughter regarding the education ban for girls:

"For my daughter, it is very difficult to be honest. She studied up to 9th grade, now she does not have the opportunity to continue. I am teaching her one hour during the night only English language, not school subjects. I tried to manage to have some online classes for her, but these are not school classes, it's not aligned with the Afghan curriculum. I searched a lot to find Afghan education courses, but these are hard to find and arrange. So, she has to cope with all the subjects in English. This is a bit difficult. [...] But we, as a whole, we also go through this dilemma because also the male Afghan population has mothers, sisters, daughters at home. [...] So, my daughter is not able to continue her education, of course, she suffers the most, but [we as parents], we also suffer seeing her that way every day, doing nothing, sitting at home deprived from her right to education. So, it really, really is a problem." (I2, 13 August 2024)

On the question of women who were in the process of obtaining a university degree, when access to university education was banned by the Taliban, I9 noted that "[w]omen are deprived of education now for 3 years. This is a long time! I mean, some girls were [...] in the 3rd year of their university education. But then they were not allowed to finish their degrees. They are still deprived of getting their diploma" (I9, 2 September 2024).

I11 explained that "the government has its own rules and is not letting NGOs hold meetings to discuss girls' education. When asked about when girls can return to school, officials say it's too soon and that only the leaders can decide" (I11, 16 October 2024). Regarding the question whether the ban on girl's education might be removed sometime in the future by the DFA, I17 thought it was "questionable, if the Taliban bring back education [for girls] beyond the sixth grade" (I17, 7 November 2024). Three interviewees reported that some DFA members were in favour of girl's education (I1, 26 June 2024; I3, 15 August 2024; I4, 21 August 2024). In his review, Emran Feroz noted in that regard that he had first-hand information that Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi was in favour of girl's education while there were bureaucrats working under him, who weren't even "real Taliban members", who had no problem with the ban (Feroz, 21 January 2025). Regarding the Taliban's different views on certain issues, I1 explained that in discussions with staff in various ministries in Kabul, they did not agree with the fact that girls could not go to school after sixth grade. And they were quite open about this in meetings with I1's organization. Their daughters were the first to be affected. But with the factions in Kandahar, in Kabul, and the many different factions based on tribal affiliations, there was a very complicated dynamic (I1, 26 June 2024). I4 explained on that note:

⁹ In his review, Emran Feroz noted in this regard: "It's still not so easy. You can find cultural and even religious reasons for this, partly. It's not overwhelming but it exists" (Feroz, 21 January 2025).

“This also depends on the mentality of the DFA people who are in charge for certain things in certain regions. Because some of them, they are in favour of everyone having access to education, for example. They have some education themselves and have a bright mind. So, they have some flexibility in terms of the restrictions. But others are very strict, and they just say ‘no, we received the order from our supreme leader [based in Kandahar] that should be implemented.’ And that is why there are these differences.” (I4, 21 August 2024)

Thomas Ruttig noted that while madrassas for girls existed prior to December 2023, the DFA explicitly allowed girls access to madrassa education beyond sixth grade in December 2023 (Ruttig, 23 October 2024). According to I6, private religious schools or Darul-Ouloum (house of science), also called madrassas among the community, offering education for girls beyond sixth grade, existed in Kabul and some other provinces. I6 explained on that note:

“They are very expensive and there are only a few such schools in Kabul. Girls can study until 12th grade there, but it is not clear if they will receive a certificate at the end of grade 12 and if this certificate will be accepted by universities even within Kabul. These schools are – according to one principal I talked to – approved by the DFA. However, most people cannot afford such schools and there are only very, very limited seats.” (I6, 27 August 2024)

Regarding access to private education or madrassas, the UN Secretary-General reported in June 2024 that representatives of the DFA had “asserted in the media that madrassas offered opportunities for girls beyond the age of 12 to continue their studies.” However, according to the report, these institutions were decentralized and non-standardized and the DFA was reluctant to share information regarding them, due to which “precise information on the number of girls availing themselves of these opportunities, or the curriculum offered, remained scarce” (UNSG, 13 June 2024, pp. 2-3). According to Thomas Ruttig, the overall number of madrassas in Afghanistan has increased significantly since the Taliban came to power according to the DFA, and a number of state schools (maktabas) have been repurposed to madrassas. He explained that in rural areas in particular, the distinction between madrassas and maktabas was often blurred, with the term madrassa often also used in the vernacular in Afghanistan to refer to maktabas. Ruttig explained that the political purpose behind enabling madrassa access for girls from the Taliban’s perspective certainly was the strengthening of religious instruction – which in the Taliban’s eyes was insufficient during the 20 years preceding their takeover – compared to “modern” education, and so keeping alive and strengthening what they called the “jihadist spirit”. Ruttig noted that according to sources from inside the country, there were religious schools in Afghanistan, where secular subjects were taught to a reasonable standard, but that this was certainly not true of all madrassas and could not be quantified. Overall, Ruttig said, there was a wide range of madrassas, many of which have emerged in recent decades as a result of initiatives of the local, often the rural, population. Ruttig noted that this development continued, either due to interest in religious education among parts of the population and/or because existing madrassas were considered to be of insufficient quality (Ruttig, 23 October 2024). According to Zahra Hashimi, religious madrassas in Afghanistan were not comparable to regular schools:

“A school is a place where you really get education and not only religious teaching. [...] When you only have Quran lessons, can you become a physician? [...] Madrassas are also

important, but they are not comparable to a [regular] school, and they are not supposed to replace [regular] schools. Yes, they are okay for girls, who are in a difficult situation and spend all their time at home and whose mental health is endangered. In that case, it [attending a madrassa] can be regarded as an occupation or a course. It is also nice that they are accessible [for girls] beyond the sixth grade, but I have no idea what their curriculum looks like. I can only imagine that only religious subjects are taught there, while a private school also offers access to education in all the main subjects.” (Hashimi, 17 October 2024 [original in German])

Zahra Hashimi, who runs the Omid Online School, which provides online education to girls in Afghanistan from grades seven to twelve, noted that in 2024, she tried for the second time to have the Omid Online School accredited by the DFA’s education ministry, but was unsuccessful. She explained that this meant that the DFA knew of the existence of the Omid Online School, as well as of hundreds of other online schools (Hashimi, 17 October 2024). On the note of madrassa education and education via online courses for girls, I17 explained:

“Some people say, education in madrassas is a loophole and [...] do we have to question whether they go to school or whether they go to madrassas, as long as they get educated? [...] that there’s education happening at home, [...] via the internet etcetera. So, right now, I think, [...] it’s about maintaining space. [Regarding education from home] [...] it’s probably the privileged ones that can afford it. You need internet. You need power to run the internet, and power is a problem. You need the space to do so. So, it’s probably happening, [...] with some [...] middle class elites, but it’s probably not happening widespread.” (I17, 7 November 2024)

According to I4, families who “know the value of education try to find workarounds, such as online courses. I found online English classes for my two daughters” (I4, 21 August 2024). I6 explained regarding online education and other alternative education opportunities for girls:

“Some families still have the capacities to be able to afford the costs of for example online courses or some form of education for their daughters. Some manage to send their daughters outside of Afghanistan to pursue education, especially to Pakistan and other countries providing scholarships. However, these are only maybe 5 or 3% of the whole Afghan population. The other 95% cannot afford such education options for their daughters. These girls are just at home. I know that some of the girls, instead of continuing their education, try to engage themselves in vocational training, to learn tailoring or embroidery or to become beauticians. So, they are just trying to adapt or engage themselves in other activities, as they cannot continue their education.” (I6, 27 August 2024)

Meanwhile, I2 pointed out regional differences regarding alternative education paths for girls and women:

“I think access to education is a general issue in the entire country [...]. But in the southern region, they don’t even allow girls and women in coaching centres, where one could learn for example English or computer skills or other subjects. So, it’s really a problem in in the

southern region. Girls and women are generally not allowed to attend different kind of education institutions or schools or colleges.” (I2, 13 August 2024)

According to I5, “most of the literacy programme[s] for women or for girls in Afghanistan” have been stopped since the DFA takeover and there was “no education programme for Afghan woman, except for some programmes in regard to health” (I5, 22 August 2024). In mid-October 2024, I11 reported that I11’s organization ran several health projects in Afghanistan, which offered both in-person and online classes for women and girls, who were trained by female teachers only (I11, 16 October 2024). At the end of October 2024, I16 noted that I16’s organization was managing women-only community centres in three provinces, where, among other things, livelihood courses, such as sewing courses, were being offered to women (I16, 31 October 2024). While before mid-August 2024, some English language courses for women existed according to I5, the DFA had stopped these courses too by mid-August 2024 (I5, 22 August 2024). Regarding education or training opportunities for women, I9 explained:

“There were some NGOs, Civil Societies led by women working to support vulnerable women in Afghanistan to empower their skill learning and income generation activities [which] are banned now. There are no capacity building opportunities available anymore, no livelihood opportunities, no vocational training opportunities. [...] Previously there were some women who were trained in livelihood skills, self-reliance activities through women support NGOs, but now these opportunities are no longer available.” (I9, 2 September 2024)

Interviewed late-September 2024, I10 highlighted a critical issue in the healthcare sector, emphasizing that I10 regarded the availability of female health staff as more crucial than the health infrastructure itself. According to I10’s knowledge, the Ministry of Public Health and the Ghazanfar Institute of Health Sciences, “sort of a semi-independent health authority”, have acknowledged the need for improved training opportunities in various health professions, including midwifery, for men and women. However, a conflicting, rather ideological, stance from the Ministry of Education, which restricts girls’ education beyond sixth grade, undermined these efforts. I10 noted that this ideological stance in the education sector posed a significant barrier to the development of a qualified healthcare workforce in Afghanistan (I10, 25 September 2024). I11, interviewed on 16 October 2024, explained that midwifery training¹⁰ existed at the time in Afghanistan for high school graduate girls, who wanted to become midwives, based on the standard curriculum for training midwives. I11 also mentioned that online training for senior level midwives, who wanted to gain more advanced skills, was available in Afghanistan at the time (I11, 16 October 2024).

I5 noted that women working as teachers in schools were “facing a lot of restrictions by the DFA for example in regard to their salary” (I5, 22 August 2024). In his review, Emran Feroz noted, that they were also “obviously” facing a lot of other restrictions, including regarding

¹⁰ Please note that in early December 2024, women were banned from medical education and training (OHCHR, 5 December 2024; HRW, 3 December 2024; BBC News, 3 December 2024).

what they teach or what they wear (Feroz, 21 January 2025). With regard to teachers of online education courses, Zahra Hashimi noted that the Taliban, aware of the existence of online schools, tried to find the directors and teachers of these schools in Afghanistan. According to Hashimi, this was problematic for both male and female teachers, as working with women was problematic for men (Hashimi, 17 October 2024 [original in German]). I4, who had found online English classes for I4's two daughters, noted in that regard:

“[E]ven the teacher of the online course is feeling a bit under pressure, as he said that his number should not be shared with anyone outside the class. [...] The teacher is afraid of consequences due to the strong restriction in the south and because of the DFA's ban on education for women and girls. That is why he is afraid and that is why he is only teaching online. The Taliban say that women should not talk with a male without their Mahram. But he is attending the course, he is doing a class for them, and that is why he has some fear during teaching. But this situation can be different in different areas, in Kabul for example. (I4, 21 August 2024)

Hashimi recalled two cases, where staff of the Omid Online School was sought out by the Taliban:

“I also had a friend, whose name I can't reveal, who co-founded the [Omid Online] school with me and hasn't worked with us for a long time. She was very courageous and openly communicated to everyone that she was the founder of this school, which later turned out to be a bit problematic. We were in the midst of conducting an [online] interview together, when the Taliban visited her. [...] They searched the entire house, her laptop, and everything. She had all the information on her laptop at the time, and she also had dollars at home because I had sent money to Afghanistan. That was our warning sign, although they didn't find anything. After that we were overly cautious, we didn't send any more dollars or euros [...] That was a case [in 2022], but luckily, they didn't find anything, otherwise they would have tracked down this co-founder and then they would have found all the teachers.” (Hashimi, 17 October 2024 [original in German])

The second case described by Hashimi took place in 2023 and involved two sisters who were teachers at the Omid Online School. Hashimi said that the two sisters had suddenly gone offline and contacted the school from a different number to say that their father had been detained by the Taliban. They asked to be removed from all virtual groups associated with the school and said that their phone numbers were being tracked. They fled to Pakistan and later said that their father had been politically active himself and that they did not know the reason for his detention. According to Hashimi, the sisters noted that the Taliban had questioned the father about his own political activities and had also inquired about what his two daughters were doing. Hashimi therefore did not know whether what happened to the father and the sisters was because of their engagement with the school or not and whether the sisters were too afraid to talk about it. Hashimi further noted that she had very often heard of cases where women directors of online schools were detained. She recalled one instance of an English teacher, who was threatened with rape and marriage to a Talib, if she did not stop teaching (Hashimi, 17 October 2024 [original in German]).

Four interviewees reported on the negative effects of the Taliban restrictions on women, including the ban on education, on the mental health of women and girls in Afghanistan (I1, 26 June 2024; I6, 27 August 2024; I16, 31 October 2024; I11, 16 October 2024). I1 shared the anecdote of a girl she talked to, who purposefully failed the exams in 6th grade just to make sure she can continue to go to school. Moreover, I1 mentioned that the number of suicides, especially among women and young girls, and also among returnees from Pakistan was increasing. According to I1, this was also due to the fact that in Pakistan women and girls could go to school, they could lead a relatively normal life compared to when they come back to Afghanistan (I1, 26 June 2024). I16 noted that it was “very difficult” for I16’s organization “to have a targeted programme or engage with” adolescent girls “because of the obvious reasons, such as the ban on schools and then [...] not engaging in livelihood activities or vocational training etc. So, really [there is] the risk of child marriage, early marriage [...], which also translates massively into mental health concerns” (I16, 31 October 2024). I6 related the following personal note:

“My youngest sister, she became very aggressive, in each and every small matter. She became very frustrated and very aggressive, sometimes she was crying and during the night she was facing insomnia. So, we noticed that all of this was happening, because she was at home doing nothing all of the time. She is now 13 years old, and she always wanted to become a doctor, but now she has to wonder what her future will be like.” (I6, 27 August 2024)

4.4 Access to employment

Interviewees reported that women in Afghanistan under the current DFA lacked access to employment (I2, 13 August 2024), were restricted regarding employment (I2, 13 August 2024; I4, 21 August 2024; Ruttig, 23 October 2024) or had “no job opportunities” (I11, 16 October 2024). Interviewees noted that the DFA wanted women to stay at home (I11, 16 October 2024) and did not think of them as possible contributors to the community or a motor of the economy (I1, 26 June 2024). Regarding the latter, I1 gave an example by stating that in July 2023 there was a conference in Kabul on job creation and the labour market which had been planned with support by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and other UN agencies. However, in the morning of the conference, UN agencies received a message that women were not allowed to attend, so therefore, the UN boycotted the conference (I1, 26 June 2024).

Simultaneously, interviewees reported that women in Afghanistan were still allowed to work (I5, 22 August 2024) within limitations (Ruttig, 23 October 2024; I13, 22 October 2024), including for certain INGOs/NGOs and humanitarian organizations¹¹ (I6, 27 August 2024; I9, 2 September 2024; I2, 13 August 2024; I3, 15 August 2024; I5, 22 August 2024), in schools/the education sector (I2, 13 August 2024; I5, 22 August 2024; I11, 16 October 2024) and in the

¹¹ In mid-January 2025, the Inter Press Service News Agency (IPS) reported that the DFA’s Minister of Economy in late December 2024 reportedly ordered all NGOs to “strictly consider the decree banning women from working in NGOs and take the necessary actions accordingly” (IPS, 21 January 2025).

health sector¹² (I2, 13 August 2024; I13, 22 October 2024), including as “nurses, midwives, and doctors [...] in hospitals, providing patient care” or as midwives in mobile clinics (I11, 16 October 2024), and in the private sector (I17, 7 November 2024), such as in the textile industry (Ruttig, 23 October 2024; I16, 31 October 2024), in the banking sector or providing security at the airport (I13, 22 October 2024). As for women working as teachers in schools, I5 noted that they were “facing a lot of restrictions by the DFA for example in regard to their salary” (I5, 22 August 2024). I2 explained that in the humanitarian sector, there was always the intention to “ensure that there are 50% male and 50% female staff” (I2, 13 August 2024). Ruttig noted that women were allowed to work in fields or workplaces, where gender segregation was implemented (Ruttig, 23 October 2024). On the other hand, jobs with the government (I2, 13 August 2024), beauty parlours, education, the judiciary or police were examples of jobs or sectors given by interviewees, where women were not allowed to work or had no job opportunities (I13, 22 October 2024). Regarding policewomen, Human Rights Watch noted in a November 2024 report that after the DFA takeover, “the Taliban ordered some policewomen to return to work in selected areas, including searching women at checkpoints and guarding female prisoners” (HRW, 25 November 2024). In his review, Emran Feroz noted regarding women working for the DFA: “As far as I know, the Taliban need much more female personnel than previously existed to expand their gender segregation/apartheid system. Thus, they started to recruit women, and many of them are Hazara. For them, it's one of the last opportunities to earn some money” (Feroz, 28 January 2025). According to figures provided by the ILO, female employment in Afghanistan had dropped by 25 percent in the fourth quarter of 2022 compared to the second quarter of 2021 before the DFA takeover¹³ (ILO, 7 March 2023).

Regarding the transformed daily work routine for women, I5 noted in August 2024 that nothing was “like before, like three years ago” and that everything had changed not only for all women, but for all Afghans. I5 further elaborated that for women it was not easy to work and to be women and that women were “facing challenges and consequences for everything” they did, and that it was getting harder day by day: “It is risky. Even participating in some meetings is risky, it could have consequences” (I5, 22 August 2024). Interviewed in November 2024, I17 elaborated:

“Women can work again, but it’s harder. But if you follow the rules, you have a mahram, you dress accordingly, it’s easier. I’m not saying it’s easy. It’s easier. It’s just a grade, [...] it’s a scale. [...] but it also depends on what your family will let you do. And I think the Taliban are quite smart, because they put these laws down, [and] they put fear into men. Then, men may make a decision on behalf of the state. Some restrictions, the state makes [...] but some of the provisions are loose enough that then, men may say, OK, I can’t send my wife out anymore to work. I can’t send my sister; I can’t send my daughter. So, there is a self-regulation happening as well, as people look at the law and then assess the risk. [...] Every woman that goes to work is courageous right now. Because you don’t know whether

¹² Please note that in early December 2024, women in Afghanistan were banned from medical education and training (OHCHR, 5 December 2024; HRW, 3 December 2024; BBC News, 3 December 2024).

¹³ Male employment had dropped by seven percent in the same period (ILO, 7 March 2023).

they're going to be stopped on the road, whether they're going to be questioned, [...] There has been a constant struggle in Afghanistan over traditionalist and modernist. And right now, it's a very traditionalist regime in power. But it doesn't mean that society doesn't support [any of] it. There are elements in society that support that very traditional view of women in society. And I'm pretty sure, there's a lot of men in Afghanistan that thought that women working was never a good idea [...]. Even under the Republic, I'm pretty sure there were men who looked at working women as very close to prostitutes." (I17, 7 November 2024)

Regarding female medical staff, I13 explained in October 2024 that the health sector was one of the sectors exempted from the working ban for women¹⁴:

"[F]emale healthcare workers are allowed to work. As an example, one UN agency had services and shelters with women-led organizations and with one of the first bans, those women-led organizations were shut down, [...] shelters were shut down. Workers in shelters were not allowed to work anymore. Female NGO workers: not allowed. So, you can imagine how, [...] many organizations became extremely stuck because the Taliban [...] tried to remove all the women from the humanitarian response. Essentially, the Taliban wanted no female workers except for medical staff. [...] They cannot remove medical staff. [...] Because women cannot be seen by men. It's against their culture. [...] A woman should be seen by a female healthcare provider, preferably, rather than by a male. [...] it's not that all women can't work. [...] I think, the nuances are important, and the severity is also important. And by no means I'm trying to say that because some women can work in the health sector that everything is OK in Afghanistan. Not at all." (I13, 22 October 2024)

Regarding women working for NGOs, I3 explained that in April 2023, the DFA announced that no female staff was allowed anymore. I3 recalled that one organization, which "does not compromise the engagement of female staff", advocated and highlighted the importance of female engagement in humanitarian and protection activities, with the result that the organization's female staff was able to "to report to the offices and also to go in the field and conduct similar activities". I3 noted that in the absence of any written confirmation by the DFA this agreement was based on a "verbal confirmation", explaining that "it is always a verbal confirmation by the DFA that is achieved in these high-level discussions and advocacy efforts" (I3, 15 August 2024). I5 related that in I5's organization, the staff in most of the positions should be female, but according to I5, the DFA did not allow the organization to hire a woman for some position, such as the position of a receptionist. The organization had to argue that most of its services were provided to women and that it was therefore necessary to have a female receptionist, since "it is easier for a woman to speak with a woman. So, this way, it worked, but it only worked with a lot of restrictions. They are even checking the clothes of the staff and how they are coming to work. This is the situation (I5, 22 August 2024)." Regarding the ban on female staff in NGOs, I5 explained:

¹⁴ Please note that in early December 2024, women in Afghanistan were banned from medical education and training (OHCHR, 5 December 2024; HRW, 3 December 2024; BBC News, 3 December 2024).

“Since the Taliban takeover, there ha[s] been a big change in regard to the work of NGOs, in the implementation and all the phases of the programme, especially when it comes to female staff. Before women were able to work in the private sector, the government and for NGOs. Then, after the regime change, the first big change was that women were no longer allowed to work for NGOs. This really had an effect. It has a big effect on the humanitarian service provision and services in Afghanistan. [...] So, there is a need for women to be aid workers. But unfortunately, the Taliban stopped that, and women were not able to work as aid workers. [...] For example, after the earthquake, they allowed some women to go and to provide services. But this is not generally applied to everyone. Some organization, some agency, just with much communication, much discussion with the DFA, managed to be allowed a limited number of female staff to work in the context of e.g. the earthquake. But this is not generally the case, not overall in Afghanistan.” (I5, 22 August 2024)

Regarding the DFA’s attitude towards women working for NGOs, I17 explained: “I think, they don’t like INGOs to work in ideological spaces. And they see NGOs, unfortunately, as somewhat of an ideological space because they see NGOs very much as the Western project [...] and because of the projects that we used to implement in Afghanistan” (I17, 7 November 2024). Ruttig elaborated that the DFA wanted NGOs to generally implement gender segregation in their work, that Afghan women and individuals who resided outside of Afghanistan cannot be directors of NGOs, that women should not sign in the names of NGOs and that bank accounts of NGOs should not be administered by women (Ruttig, 23 October 2024). Regarding the engagement of female staff with the DFA, I6 explained that “[m]ost of them will not accept to meet with a woman, even if she is a senior staff member who manages everything. Even if the DFA members are in a very low position, they will not talk to [...] [a woman].” According to I6, “maybe two or three percent of the DFA staff” would be willing to talk to a woman by meeting her face-to-face or by calling her, while the majority would not sit with female staff in a room “even if there are others, even if the room is full of other people [...] when they hear that there is a woman in the meeting, they will just ignore [...] [her]” (I6, 27 August 2024). I5 explained that the situation of female senior officials of organizations was “quite challenging”: “There is this notion, that women cannot be the lead of an organization, cannot be the director or deputy director, only men can be in such positions after the ban was announced by the DFA”. I5 described the case of a woman who oversaw all the management decisions and management tasks in an organization. However, when it came to contact with the relevant ministries or to signing an MoU etc., her male colleagues had to sign and visit the ministries etc. (I5, 22 August 2024). According to I1, there were also “quite random things”, such as restrictions for women attending the workplace or training sessions not allowed to be attended by female and male NGO staff at the same time. These restrictions oftentimes seemed very arbitrary, because, for example, there were offices where female and male staff worked together in one office but were not allowed to attend a training together (I1, 26 June 2024). I9 explained that the female staff of most humanitarian organizations, local NGOs and international NGOs working on the ground in Kandahar was not able to report to the offices, and that they were working remotely from home for the past year and a half. I9 knew of only one organization whose female staff was allowed to go to the office (I9, 2 September 2024). I4 explained in that regard:

“Access is a big issue here. Especially for female humanitarian workers: with the exception of health activities, women are not allowed to go to the field. In some cases, women are told that they should have a mahram with them during the activities, from some activities they are totally banned and in some other cases, they are told that they should work from home which directly affects humanitarian actors’ access to the female population.” (I4, 21 August 2024)

Regarding the August 2024 PVPV law and changes it has brought for humanitarian actors, I16 explained that there were “some measures”, where people started implementing the law, giving the example of taxi drivers who started to not take female staff without mahram to the office. I16 further elaborated that already before the PVPV law, the General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI) was visiting certain NGOs and asking questions and “would be following home female staff, for example, [...] back to their homes. So, it’s really that level of additional scrutiny and [...] constant monitoring and observation.” According to I16, the PVPV law also “created a lot of pre-emptive measures from organizations to avoid that staff is put at risk or clients are put at risk”, while the “immediate impact” was not yet fully tangible, “but also having said that from a very bad situation already before” (I16, 31 October 2024). According to I17, visits to NGO offices by inspectors of the PVPV ministry but also by the GDI had already been carried out before the PVPV law came out. I17 described the visits by the PVPV inspectors as “largely amicable”, while not all GDI visits were such. I17 stated that the GDI had been “visiting and checking whether women are working really in health and educational sectors” and highlighted that the PVPV ministry inspections had largely “only been looking at compliance with the law but haven’t been telling women not to work”, while “indeed some Taliban do keep women from working. In the NGO/UN world, it’s all negotiated, and all based on exemptions” (I17, 7 November 2024). Regarding the PVPV law, I17 further noted:

“There’s actually one silver lining in that law, that could be used in a positive way. [...] [There have] been debates about that. The new law doesn’t say anything about women not being able to work, and the inspectors that do come, don’t look whether women are working. What they check is, whether you have the proper hijab, [...] whether there’s segregation in the offices, [...] et cetera. [...] Basically, the way most women see it is, you don’t resist. There’s no purpose anyways to resist anything. I mean, it’s a police state. So, resistance in many ways just endangers you. You want to do no harm. It’s best probably to invite the inspectors in proactively, build a relationship with the ministry, just to show that you are complying with the law. Though not everybody agrees on this.” (I17, 7 November 2024)

Regarding article 22(20) of the PVPV law, which bans “befriending of non-Muslims and assisting them” (PVPV law, August 2021), I16 said that I16’s organization was wondering what it meant for the organization’s female Afghan staff “to engage” with the foreign staff, noting: “Currently, we do not see it [...] taking an effect for our organization as much [...]. But again, we do not know until now, [...] what the full enforcement of the law will look like” (I16, 31 October 2024).

Regarding the mahram requirement and women’s employment, Ruttig noted that the scope of movement and contact opportunities for female employees were restricted (Ruttig, 23 October 2024). I13 explained that (prospective) female employees who had to attend training in a city

other than the city of residence and healthcare workers who had to travel distances had to be accompanied by a mahram for the journey. However, for example, a female doctor, who went to work “to the hospital in her city or to the clinic in her city [...] doesn't need the mahram” according to I13, who, however, highlighted regional differences in that matter: “Now again, you'll go to some provinces, where they always accompany their women (wives, daughters, sisters), because [...] they are more conservative. They did it before the Taliban takeover and they continue to do it now” (I13, 22 October 2024). As for the mahram requirement for women using transportation, I13 explained:

“[...] we have transportation for our female staff [...] and the driver is kind of the mahram. In provinces, where this is stricter, we put one mahram in the car with them [a male relative of one of the women] and that's good enough, because they are health workers and they're going to work.” (I13, 22 October 2024)

On that matter, I6 elaborated that before the DFA takeover, female staff members of humanitarian organizations did not need to have male family members present while on a mission or travelling somewhere, which had changed. Female staff members who were engaged on a mission now had to be accompanied by a male family member “in order to not breach the norm and to not be stopped by the DFA”. I6 continued to describe the case of a woman who had not been stopped by anyone when “coming and going to and from the office” (I6, 27 August 2024). I11 explained that female health workers who were working inside a hospital did not require a mahram (I11, 16 October 2024). In contrast, I16 explained that “[...] female colleagues, any female in the community has to be accompanied by a male chaperone to be able to go to work”, noting that this created a lot of dependency on the women's household members and “a lot of power dynamics inside families” (I16, 31 October 2024). I16 went on to elaborate:

“Although we have very highly qualified and educated female staff, they also depend on the mahram, if they want to go on mission, which sometimes is not in place. You would assume that it is, but sometimes, they don't find anybody who supports them in that sense [...] It's very shocking. [...] Even when you reach that level of education and support, you're still reduced at this very fundamental level to being dependent on a male chaperone for these basic elements of life, which I think is a very sobering experience, because you cannot educate yourself out of this [...]. So, there's also these cultural aspects to it.” (I16, 31 October 2024)

For further information on the mahram requirement, please refer to [chapter 4.1](#). Regarding women's work in the private sector, Ruttig explained that the DFA even tried to support women-owned businesses, but that the businesses must be accessible only to women. He also referred to the existence of a women's chamber of commerce, which, according to Ruttig, also existed in some provinces. According to the expert, such initiatives were repeatedly presented in the DFA's official media. However, Ruttig explained that it was also repeatedly reported how difficult the conditions were and that some women became discouraged and gave up because of the harsh restrictions. Ruttig further noted that working from home was becoming more popular among women because many families were afraid of attacks, and that the textile industry was, and probably always has been, the largest employment sector for women.

However, he elaborated that the social and working conditions and pay have not exactly improved as a result of this, which was also interlinked with the overall economic crisis (Ruttig, 23 October 2024). I9 reflected on the PVPV law's possible effects on female work in Afghanistan as follows: "According to [the] new PVPV law, women might not be allowed to work from home either, since the new law states that the voice of women should not be heard even through phone or through any other source of communication" (I9, 2 September 2024; see also PVPV Law, August 2024).

Two interviewees highlighted the consequences of unemployment for female-headed households in particular (I2, 13 August 2024; I4, 21 August 2024). I2 explained:

"The lack of access to employment and education is really affecting the overall situation, especially of female-headed households. [...] there are a lot of female-headed households who are supporting their families. There are wives who have disabled husbands who are having physically challenged family members within the family. There are women who are supporting entire families. There are women who really need jobs to support their families. And these families are big, extended families, because in Afghanistan, you know, we are not a family of 3 or 4 people. Our average is 7 or 7 plus. So, supporting a very large family is a very big, big problem in Afghanistan in general. So yes, of course, it is affecting the lives of women, especially of those who are heading the families, who are supporting their whole family, who have big responsibilities on their shoulders." (I2, 13 August 2024)

On that note, I4 elaborated:

"[...] the restrictions in regard to female employment are also quite challenging, as many women are widowed. Many women are the heads of their households. They need to support their families. This is disturbing to many women and also a psycho-social issue. The low economic situation in the country moreover worsens the situation. Women heading their households are not allowed to work and therefore don't know how to feed their families. There are big differences when comparing before and after the Taliban takeover." (I4, 21 August 2024)

4.5 Provision of healthcare (including mental health services)

It must be noted that in early December 2024, women were banned from medical education and training (OHCHR, 5 December 2024; HRW, 3 December 2024, BBC News, 3 December 2024). For more detailed information on access to education, please see [chapter 4.3](#). All interviews that serve as the basis for this chapter were conducted before December 2024, i.e. before the above-mentioned decision, and should be read accordingly.

I11 pointed in October 2024 to a shift in the DFA's attitude, in particular with regard to health projects, compared to the previous Taliban rule. The interviewee noted that the Taliban were allowing I11's organization to continue such projects "without issues" and that communication and cooperation had improved:

"The current Taliban employees have shown a noticeable shift in their approach, especially regarding communication and cooperation. They are now more open to talking with us and assisting in health-related projects, which they view as valuable for the country." (I11, 16 October 2024)

Another interviewee, I13, noted that humanitarian organizations were not as severely affected by the bans and prohibitions introduced by the DFA, compared to other NGOs (I13, 22 October 2024). As examples, I13 pointed to women-led organizations and NGOs operating shelters for women that had been closed, together with referral and support systems for GBV victims (I13, 22 October 2024). For more detailed information on GBV and Taliban restrictions regarding support services for GBV victims, please see [chapter 4.7](#).

According to I11, female medical staff continued to work in health facilities, including nurses, midwives and doctors (I11, 16 October 2024). I13 stated that the working ban for women did not apply to the health sector as female health workers were needed for cultural reasons:

“As a healthcare provider, we were not as severely affected by the various bans that came compared to other sectors. [...] The health sector is one of the sectors exempted of the working ban for women: female healthcare workers are allowed to work. [...]

Essentially, the Taliban wanted no female workers except for medical staff. [...] They cannot remove medical staff. [...] Because women cannot be seen by men. It’s against their culture. That’s their culture, the Sharia law etcetera. A woman should be seen by a female healthcare provider, preferably, rather than by a male.” (I13, 22 October 2024)

I10 similarly emphasized the necessity for female health staff in the context of rising numbers of maternal and newborn mortality:

“It doesn’t matter if you have 500 new clinics, if you have no female health staff who can support girls and women to access the service. That’s the critical part, the human resource, not the infrastructure resource. Because a midwife or a nurse can see patients in their home, they can see them on the side of the road, they can see them under a tree. It doesn’t matter.” (I10, 25 September 2024)

With regard to the requirement for women to be accompanied by a male guardian or mahram when travelling, I11 explained that this did not apply to female health workers if they were working inside a hospital (I11, 16 October 2024).

I13 explained that the health institutions operated by I13’s organization not only had an exclusively female staff but were also open only to female patients with men being banned from entering the premises. According to I13, this was one of the reasons why the organization was able to continue working (I13, 22 October 2024).

However, I13 noted that the Taliban’s monitoring of compliance with their policies might also affect women’s access to health care:

“It also means that the Taliban are not all enforcing in the same way, but they come and check. For example, they’ll stand at the entrance of the hospital, and they’ll pick spots to reinforce the hijab wearing [...] So, again, it puts that pressure, it puts that fear on the women [...].” (I13, 22 October 2024)

Interviewees pointed to the health-related services that their organizations were able to offer under the given circumstances, including mobile midwifery services for women living in remote areas (I11, 16 October 2024) as well as medical care and psychosocial support for vulnerable women and girls in need (I13, 22 October 2024).

Another source observed that not only the question of access to services but also their quality mattered and that “access to quality of services” was lacking, particularly in health and education (I3, 15 August 2024).

I10 described several cases of women who had suffered from accidental poisoning or mismedication in 2023 after men had been going to pharmacies to get the medicines on their behalf. In this context, I10 emphasized the importance of women having direct access to instructions and pointed to the potential health risks for women in case they lack access to that kind of information. I10 described that a deputy minister of public health was confronted with the issue, but took the position that women should not have direct access to information (I10, 25 September 2024):

“And that means that forever, as long as this is the stance, we’ll have women and girls who are inappropriately either not getting medicine or getting the wrong medicine or getting the right medicine in the wrong way because they themselves are not the ones receiving the instructions. High risk pregnancy, diabetes, kidney disease, high blood pressure, cancer, ... every health condition in the world – patient-provider-communication is key to the patient getting the best result. If the provider cannot do that, because they have to rely on a 15-year-old boy or a sort of weak-minded uncle, or a senile old man who’s 70 years old getting instructions for his 65-year-old wife, can you imagine how wrong it’s going to go?” (I10, 25 September 2024)

4.5.1 Mental health and the provision of mental health services

Several interviewees noted that the current situation confined women and girls largely to their homes and how this affected their mental health (I11, 16 October 2024; Hashimi, 17 October 2024), leading to feelings of distress and despair (I13, 22 October 2024), hopelessness (I11, 16 October 2024) and depression (Rafiey, 28 October 2024; I11, 16 October 2024; I1, 26 June 2024). Abdul Ghafoor Rafiey mentioned that women were “living under fear” (Rafiey, 28 October 2024).

I10 explained that especially women and girls, but also men and boys were affected by a mental health crisis (I10, 25 September 2024). I9 similarly noted that while women and girls were particularly affected, the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of the entire Afghan population had been “badly affected” by four decades of war in the country (I9, 2 September 2024). Another interviewee, I3, observed that people were “not mentally safe” and “frustrated” but feared to express it, exhausted by “almost half of a century [...] of suffering” (I3, 15 August 2024).

In some cases, feelings of major distress might lead to thoughts of suicide (I13, 22 October 2024), suicide and other forms of violence:

“Mental health issues can then often turn into domestic violence inside the family or even lead to suicide. When two people in the family, for example husband and wife, cannot understand each other, when they cannot understand what’s the mental situation of the wife or the husband, this can lead to domestic violence.” (I6, 27 August 2024)

One interviewee pointed to a rising number of suicides, especially among women and young girls, and also among returnees from Pakistan (I1, 26 June 2024), while another had not personally heard about higher than usual suicide numbers among women in the south but

acknowledged that this might be the case in other parts of the country (I2, 13 August 2024). Zahra Hashimi mentioned the suicide of a girl of about 16 years of age and described the impact of years of violence on the girls' state of mind, saying that many of the dead girl's fellow students at school had come to ignore such events and remain indifferent in the face of their powerlessness to change the situation (Hashimi, 17 October 2024).

I6 noted that there was generally little understanding of mental health issues in Afghan society:

"In regard to mental health, I think here in Afghanistan people only see physical stuff, injuries, the health of the body as an issue, but not the mental health, the things someone is facing inside their head. If you have pain in your head, in your belly or stomach, it is OK. But if you talk to anyone about being depressed or feeling upset or your mental health, it is totally ignored." (I6, 27 August 2024)

According to I1, families often covered a suicide in the family by saying that a person died of a sudden illness, because suicide was perceived as a shame for the family (I1, 26 June 2024).

I13 explained that the DFA considered psychosocial support or "helping in distress" a "soft component" and that their focus was rather on medical treatment only (I13, 22 October 2024). I4 similarly noted that the DFA did not see the importance of "soft activities" such as mental health and psychosocial support (I4, 21 August 2024). I4 and I9 observed that these services were therefore temporarily halted in some regions, especially in the south (I4, 21 August 2024; I9, 2 September 2024). Awareness projects were reportedly also affected by the Taliban-imposed restrictions (I11, 16 October 2024; I5, 22 August 2024). I9 noted that during the previous Taliban rule, psychosocial support programmes were considered part of the health sector and "running smoothly" (I9, 2 September 2024). Another interviewee stated that mental health & psycho-social support (MHPSS) could still be offered, however, only within health facilities:

"It is difficult to implement soft activities, like psycho-social support, in the field, but mental health services are in general covered within the basic health services structure; psycho-social support is always or MHPSS [mental health & psycho-social support] is always included. So the DFA are recommending that mental health and psychosocial support activities should be implemented within the health facilities. However, the services/support within the clinics is not sufficient. Since a big part of the population is at home, these kinds of services should not be limited to clinics. Field level support is also very essential and really needed." (I2, 13 August 2024)

I1 pointed out that the Taliban's rejection of MHPSS projects was partly also due to the group's understanding of MHPSS as a Western concept aimed at manipulating the population or maintaining influence. Moreover, in their view, such projects were not necessary as Afghan culture and social networks provided sufficient support for the Afghan people. Nevertheless, I1 mentioned an organization that, after long discussions, was able to reach an agreement with the DFA regarding the provision of MHPSS services (I1, 26 June 2024).

4.6 Access to basic services and humanitarian aid

I5 and I6 pointed to restrictions that women were facing regarding their access to basic services – such as, for example, buying food without a male guardian (I6, 27 August 2024) – and humanitarian assistance (I5, 22 August 2024).

Moreover, I5 described how not only access to but also the provision of humanitarian aid and services was affected by the Taliban DFA's imposed restrictions on women, in particular, their ban on women from working for NGOs:

“It has a big effect on the humanitarian service provision and services in Afghanistan. At the beginning, in the first month, it was even difficult to reach women beneficiaries or to provide service[s] for women because it was not allowed for women to reach service provision, even when they needed assessment or surgery. Afghanistan is a traditional country, which is why there are some aid services a woman cannot receive from a man. So, there is a need for women to be aid workers. But unfortunately, the Taliban stopped that, and women were not able to work as aid workers.” (I5, 22 August 2024)

However, I5 noted that following communication with the DFA, the provision of aid to women had become easier in some cases. For example, some female aid workers had been allowed to work and provide services in an area struck by an earthquake. Nevertheless, these cases were exceptions and organizations could not rely on being able to implement their programmes. In addition, there was a general ban of certain kinds of humanitarian services, including awareness raising, psychosocial support or literacy programmes for women and girls – services that could no longer be provided and accessed (I5, 22 August 2024).

I3 stressed the importance of the UN's presence in Afghanistan and their support in terms of protection, food and health, given the country's difficult humanitarian situation. At the same time, I3 acknowledged the challenging work environment and its impact on the psychological situation of humanitarian staff (I3, 15 August 2024).

On the other hand, I5 explained that while there was humanitarian support, it was not enough and therefore was, in addition to “gender discrimination and restrictions against women”, difficult to access for everyone – men and women (I5, 22 August 2024). Moreover, humanitarian support was expected to decrease as some donors reconsidered giving funds from which in their view only men would benefit, while excluding the other half of the population:

“It is a problem, that some of the donors say they cannot support Afghanistan, because they cannot only support half of the population, because the other half of the population is female. They argue, ‘When women are not allowed to work, they are not allowed to pursue education, they are not allowed to participate, why should we give funds only considering half of the population?’ But I think this argument is not right. When the male population suffers under the economic conditions, and fathers, brothers, husbands do not have jobs, the first individuals that will suffer within the households are women. Even if women or children are not the direct beneficiaries of humanitarian aid programmes, it nevertheless will affect them.” (I5, 22 August 2024)

4.7 Gender-based violence

Interviewees reported that activities related to gender-based violence (GBV) were allowed before the DFA takeover (I11, 16 October 2024; I13, 22 October 2024; I4, 21 August 2024) and “very common” (I6, 27 August 2024). However, since the DFA takeover, GBV activities according to interviewees cannot be spoken about openly (I6, 27 August 2024) and they cannot be implemented “openly in the field” (I9, 2 September 2024) or their implementation was described as “quite challenging” (I2, 13 August 2024). I4 stated that there were no “services on the ground that could directly help” GBV survivors (I4, 21 August 2024). I11 noted that activities related to “protection against violence are now completely banned, and NGOs aren’t allowed to run them” (I11, 16 October 2024). I17 elaborated that it was “increasingly difficult” to do protection-related projects, “anything to do with GBV” (I17, 7 November 2024). According to I16, “[g]enerally speaking, [...] anything related to GBV would not be considered as something that is amenable easily” (I16, 31 October 2024). I3 explained in that regard: “GBV interventions are a very sensitive topic. This was even a sensitive topic before the arrival of the DFA, but after their arrival it is very difficult to implement” (I3, 15 August 2024). I17 explained in that regard:

“So, the project focus has shifted. [...] There’s a constant relabelling, of how you label your projects, [...] to make them work within what the Taliban views as OK [...]. So, you probably could do protection, if you labelled it within the ideology, because in a way, [...] if you look at the Taliban ideology, it’s their version of protecting women. Ultimately you can protect a woman best when she stays home [in their mind].” (I17, 7 November 2024)

Several interviewees noted that the topic of GBV was a culturally sensitive issue in Afghanistan (I1, 26 June 2024; I2, 13 August 2024; I4, 21 August 2024; I9, 2 September 2024). Some interviewees called to attention that certain terminology, including terms such as gender-based violence/GBV (I9, 2 September 2024; I13, 22 October 2024), “women protection” (I9, 2 September 2024) or “‘sexual’ as in sexual reproductive health”, could not be used by organizations in the field anymore since the DFA takeover and was regarded as sensitive (I13, 22 October 2024).

I1 pointed out that the fact that the former ministry focusing on women issues was closed by the Taliban and has now become the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (PVPV ministry) “perfectly illustrated” the situation of women in the country at the moment: the governmental structures protecting women, according to I1, were completely dismantled, there were no governmental structures focusing on women anymore. Moreover, the Taliban basically closed all the safehouses, which oftentimes had represented a life-saving measure. A woman that faces GBV, I1 explained, had “absolutely no place to go” anymore in Afghanistan, stating: “I don’t see what’s the way out of this” (I1, 26 June 2024). Regarding the targeting of GBV service providers by the DFA after the takeover, I16 elaborated:

“After the DFA took over, what happened, is that the DFA directly targeted GBV service providers. They closed down all shelters [...] before that, there were several safe shelters around. There was [...] GBV programming, including case management. And one of the first actions that the DFA also took was to sort of specifically target those service providers [...]. They searched offices and took case files, [...] closing the safe houses, because they were deemed [...] to be centres of prostitution. So, it was a targeted approach towards that programming.” (I16, 31 October 2024)

I13 explained how under the DFA, GBV survivors would be put into prison “for their protection”:

“Let's say there is a case, that has somehow made its way also to the de facto authorities. For example, a woman who was beaten so severely [...] that the family really intervened and took her out or [...], that if she goes back, [...] they [the DFA] themselves even realize, she's at risk. For their protection, they put those women in prison. [...] In their eyes, a shelter is not the answer for a woman who needs protection. To them, the prison is the best safe place for women. [...] this is how they deal with it. So, in the case of adultery, they might not kill the woman, but then they will put the woman in prison. [...] The majority of the women in prison are there because of adultery, of being raped by someone or for their protection, because they were almost beaten to death. [...] There is not a huge number of other kinds of reasons and crimes for women to be put in prison. [...] And that's why women [...] will not talk about these things, because it's actually to their detriment. [...] You can be thrown in there for your protection or because in their mind, you are not a real victim, [...] or you can be thrown in there for of an accusation of adultery, forced or not, that, I know, is also happening.” (I13, 22 October 2024)

I9 called attention to the situation of women who were detained under the current DFA for various crimes, such as theft or murder, and later released. “Culturally, they are not accepted by the families and relatives, and they [are] in life threatening situations”, I9 explained. However, there were no places to go to for these women after their release from prison. “Previously, there were safe houses in some regions but currently they are closed down”, I9 shared (I9, 2 September 2024).

Prior to the Taliban takeover, GBV had already been a difficult topic due to cultural aspects, I1 noted, however, now there were in fact no options for women confronted with such situations, while GBV and its prevalence remained a big issue in Afghanistan. According to I1, there was currently a high level of GBV, but there were no options to provide sensitizing sessions neither for women nor for men. I1 identified several strands to the problem: Afghans could not talk about GBV because there were no longer any response systems, no services. But they also could not talk about it because it remained a stigmatized topic (I1, 26 June 2024). I13 explained in that regard that a comprehensive GBV case management for survivors “like it used to exist”, was not possible under the DFA, “because it is not possible to refer to shelters, because they don't exist, and women cannot be referred to the police and the police doesn't take complaints. Women cannot be referred to family law for divorce et cetera because that system is also gone” (I13, 22 October 2024).

According to I9, there were “several GBV service providers on the ground” in Afghanistan, but DFA restrictions on GBV and Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Service (MHPSS) activities prevented them from “provid[ing] the services appropriately”. However, I9 explained that “sometimes personal relations and local arrangements in place with DFA can play a greater role for smooth implementation of such activities” (I9, 2 September 2024). Regarding the GBV programmes I16's organization offered, I16 explained that “the programmes often look a bit different in every province, also depending on the individual relationship of the partner with the local authorities and how they can negotiate access” (I16, 31 October 2024). Regarding regional differences, particularly on the note of safehouses, I9 explained that Kandahar was a

more conservative region in regard to females already during the Islamic Republic era and that there had been protection issues back then already, explaining:

“In 2004/2005, for example, we really struggled to make shelter houses, safe houses for women in Kandahar. During that time the local government of Kandahar due to the community[’s] conservativeness and sensitivities couldn’t get [to] agree with us on having safe houses for women in Kandahar. Humanitarian/protection actors struggling yet to have [a] single unit safe house which is not even difficult but impossible in the current regime not only in Kandahar, in all over Afghanistan.” (I9, 2 September 2024)

I16 further noted that there was also a lot of coordination happening with the GBV subcluster, which in Afghanistan, “unlike other locations, where the GBV subcluster would be very active and actively campaigning” was “a very closed group”. I16 explained that I16’s organization had established a GBV programme after the DFA takeover, which is “designed in a way that is not [...] comparable to other GBV programmes in other operations” I16’s organization usually works with. This was due to the fact that “everything is attached to a lot of sensitivities and the programmes need to be designed in a very careful manner” because “that aspect of violence against women and girls [...], it’s not a concept that is widely accepted. It is something [...] that is frowned upon [...] It’s not something that the DFA as such would consider to be a problem” and “everything we do would be usually considered westernized ideas or wrongly empowering women” (I16, 31 October 2024).

Another issue addressed by I13 in regard to the implementation of GBV activities in Afghanistan was the loss of female staff working in the GBV field due to the DFA takeover: “We have lost a lot of female staff [...] In the GBV programming, there was a major exodus from the start. A brain drain, you cannot find them here. [...] They were all working in GBV. They all were high risk. They all were out from the beginning” (I13, 22 October 2024).

Regarding GBV prevention activities, I13 explained that they were “not really existing at the moment”, because a lot of prevention strategies had been banned by the DFA, noting: “Outreach activities, for example, door-to-door activities, are all banned. [...] Anyway, in the community, you can’t go around and do GBV awareness, you can’t talk about GBV” (I13, 22 October 2024). I9 explained on the matter of outreach that “[v]arious modalities are used to approach [...] GBV survivors in the field. Such as phone contact, complain and feedback mechanism, anonymous contact [and] call centre approach” (I9, 2 September 2024). I16 explained on the note of outreach and awareness raising that there were specific decrees which banned organizations from doing awareness raising and were all limiting the “operational space” of I16’s organization (I16, 31 October 2024), elaborating:

“Then, there is the ban on women, [...] that impacts especially our national female stuff. And then, we negotiate out of it. We are [...] actually very successful in some of the locations, less so in others. [...] I have the feeling, it’s also still a lot about community perception. [...] There’s the one side about [...] the DFA and the legal restrictions, that we are well aware about and [which is] well documented. But also [...], the fear in the community of engaging in such topics or even the reluctance to accept that this is something, [...] that, for example, violence against women is something that is not considered acceptable.” (I16, 31 October 2024)

On the note of outreach, I16 further explained regarding I16's organization:

"And we will focus very much on awareness raising, on outreach, on [...] creating that communication or the dialogue with the community to say that there are certain behaviours that don't need to be accepted [...]. And we try to convey that in a manner that is also embedded in Islamic messaging, [...]. Not to water down the messages, but to make it more amenable to the wider population, because of course we need to assume that there are also certain segments of the population that we work with, that would be rather in favour [...] of, for example, a new PVPV law et cetera. So, we need to find this right balance and then to provide entry points for women, who would like to disclose cases to us or who would like to disclose [...] issues, that they're facing and then provide individualized support where needed." (I16, 31 October 2024)

I16 also pointed to another challenge GBV service providers were facing, related to the fact that Afghanistan was "a vast area and especially in the rural communities, it is very, very difficult to reach people, both in terms of access, but also [...] sometimes, even if cases are disclosed or if support is needed, there's just nobody there to provide any support" (I16, 31 October 2024).

The lack of access to justice under the DFA for GBV survivors was highlighted by several interviewees in particular (I1, 26 June 2024; I5, 22 August 2024; I4, 21 August 2024; I9, 2 September 2024; I16, 31 October 2024). I1 noted that due to the fact that there was no formal justice system in Afghanistan under the DFA, survivors of GBV could not go and complain and get justice (I1, 26 June 2024). I9 explained that while GBV survivors who had health or MHPSS issues could receive services, legal issues were "currently impossible to deal with" (I9, 2 September 2024). I4 noted that while in Afghanistan it had always been "hard to report cases of GBV" and there "always was stigma connected to GBV", before the DFA takeover, "there were at least some places, where women could complain and where at least some complaints were registered. But now they don't exist anymore" (I4, 21 August 2024). I4 stated on that matter: "Previously, before the Taliban takeover, humanitarian organizations could hire lawyers for women in such situations. But now there are no services, where a woman in such a situation could turn to for help" (I4, 21 August 2024). I5 explained in that regard:

"There is no justice especially for women and girls. If things like under-age marriage or domestic violence or any other form of violence against women happen, there are no doors to knock and to complain. If a woman complains, they turn against the woman. They think that women have to accept what their husband or father does and that they should be silent. Male family members should be in charge and make decisions for women. The government does not respect the rights of women, so within the family it is also not the case." (I5, 22 August 2024)

For further information on women's and girl's access to justice, please refer to [chapter Fehler! Verweisquelle konnte nicht gefunden werden.4.8](#). Some interviewees noted that female GBV survivors were reluctant to come forward (I2, 13 August 2024), including due to the sensitivity of the matter (I9, 2 September 2024) or because it could be held against them (I16, 31 October 2024) or because they knew there were no services to help them (I4, 21 August 2024). I1 shared that there were reports on female GBV survivors being accused of having provoked the

violence. According to I1, these women were sidelined in the Afghan culture, they had no community support, no legal support, no medical or psycho-social support. “So, in Afghanistan GBV survivors are completely at mercy”, I1 explained (I1, 26 June 2024). I16 elaborated on that note:

“And we have women who are being very brave and are coming forward, [...]. Especially, when it comes to maybe economic violence or inheritance, but then there might be of course issues such as sexual violence, where it would be nearly impossible to bring this in front of someone who would listen to such a case. [...] Because even if the structure is in place, of course, it could actually have a retaliatory effect on the woman who is actually disclosing these sorts of things. [...] you might have read, that they often make them left [...] to mediation, and as GBV service providers, we usually do not promote mediation, because it doesn’t yield good outcomes. But then, even legal service providers sometimes start resorting to these sorts of mechanisms, simply because there isn’t a formal legal avenue in place to support individuals in raising concerns. [...] We do encourage individuals to come forward, but then of course, there’s limited trust in the reporting system or in the investigation system. If it is being brought forward that they have been subjected to sexual violence, it might be held against them [...] in terms of stigma et cetera.” (I16, 31 October 2024)

Regarding the possibility to approach Shura Councils in matters of GBV, I9 explained that women could not approach these councils on their own: “They would need help from male relatives to approach the shura. The majority of the females do not disclose information on family violence, they do not bring it in front of the Shura or the court due to sensitivity of the community and cultural [sensitivities]” (I9, 2 September 2024).

While the topic of GBV “had already been underreported” before the DFA takeover according to I2 (I2, 13 August 2024), I13 explained that in Afghanistan there was no centralized GBV data collection “based on a GBV subcluster, the way it exists in many other countries via GBVIMS [Gender-Based Violence Information Management System]”. While in other countries, with a subcluster, “you would have a picture, which shows for example, in this province, there’s more IPV [intimate partner violence] and demonstrates the spread of the types of violence, because you have a lot of organizations providing data in the centralized system”, this was not the case for Afghanistan, I13 explained. Centralized GBV data in Afghanistan “doesn’t exist, and for the beneficiary, it is too dangerous to collect. We also don’t have beneficiary lists and names in order to ensure the safety and security of our beneficiaries”. At the same time, the DFA, according to I13 “has become more and more interested in the details of the programming and more and more request[s] information such as: lists of staff, lists of beneficiaries, things like this”, which I13’s organization refused to provide: “We are not collecting the names of beneficiaries because even if we put the list in a locked cabinet [...], the de facto authorities can come at any time and request all documents to be handed over. They can also detain and/or arrest staff [...]. So, you have no protection” (I13, 22 October 2024). With reference to UN sources, Ruttig noted that domestic violence was increasing in Afghanistan, “although it is difficult to document”. Referring to anecdotal evidence, Ruttig said it appeared that the “religiously legitimized values of the Taliban are influencing parts of the male population. In many households, male family members who disliked the progress made before 2021 feel

emboldened to push women back in their ‘traditional’ place” while some were taking out “their frustrations about poverty and restrictions on ‘their’ women”. He explained that certain barriers to this development that had existed under the Islamic Republic government had now been removed. However, as in other areas, the expert also saw “opposing trends” in this area, indicating that “there surely was a large part of families in Afghanistan which regarded the 20 years before 2021 as positive and tried to protect their women and girls and their rights” (Ruttig, 23 October 2024 [original in German]). According to I5, violence against women as well as underage marriages were increasing in Afghanistan (I5, 22 August 2024). I6 explained that there was a correlation between mental health issues of family members, such as the husband or the wife, and domestic violence, because when two people “cannot understand each other, when they cannot understand what’s the mental situation of the wife or the husband, this can lead to domestic violence” (I6, 27 August 2024). For further information on women’s and girl’s access to mental health services, please refer to [chapter Fehler! Verweisquelle konnte nicht gefunden werden.4.5](#). I4 saw a correlation between unemployment and a higher risk of domestic violence, noting:

“Because the males are under pressure. They do not have a job and whenever they are at home, the family will ask them to bring something home. But they have nothing to bring home. Then they fight and this raises the chance of violence. In these cases, again, women are on the forefront – facing the consequences. Women are suffering, because the males do not have jobs, and this makes the environment at home tense. This then directly affects the children as well.” (I4, 21 August 2024)

Regarding article 22(1) of the Vice and Virtue Law, which, among others, states: “Adultery, whether forced or consensual, whether hidden or in public [...] is also not allowed” (PVPV Law, August 2024, article 22) and the question whether the explicit mention of the notion “whether forced or consensual” would have an effect on cases, I13 explained:

“My thoughts are that that doesn’t change anything. [...] Because, I’ll tell you the reality, the way it goes: the woman is raped by her brother-in-law in the house. If you bring that case to the police, they accuse the woman of adultery, automatically. A survivor of sexual violence, it’s her fault. It was always like that. And what they say is that, well, you must have wanted it, and it was all your fault [...]. So, then, they punish both. Normally, they flog both or kill both or whatever [...]. But now, some cases maybe have poked a bit higher to say that a woman was forced. So, it might have come into their consciousness and they’re making the difference, that some cases are really forced. Maybe they have an example where they admit that a woman was really forced. Then they say, well, regardless, it’s illegal. When they say, it’s illegal, what does that mean? It means that they kill both. That both are culpable. [...] If it’s illegal in this country, you’re culpable, no matter what.” (I13, 22 October 2024)

As mentioned further above, I13 noted that women who were accused of adultery, whether “forced or not”, could be imprisoned” (I13, 22 October 2024). Regarding the 3-step-process of “information-influence-intervention” laid out in the PVPV law, I10 explained that it completely changed “within households – the empowerment of enforcement” and that no father wanted to find out that he himself or other household members were going to be lashed in public,

which was “very shameful”, noting: “What they [the DFA] have done is basically tell heads of household, ‘you will be held responsible’”. I10 went on to explain how this affected the occurrence of honour killings, which in the past “didn’t happen so often in Afghanistan” and if they did, “there would be an eruption of outrage in the media, the Pakistan media, the Iranian media, occasionally in the Afghanistan media”. However, I10 shared that honour killings were now “happening regularly. And there is no outrage, no outcry in the Afghan media because the Taliban, of course, want this to be encouraged and enforced. This is part of their [the DFA’s] control system” (I10, 25 September 2024). For further information on enforcement of compliance by non-state actors, please refer to [chapter 5.4](#).

On the note of underage marriages, I16 explained: “It is just a known fact that child marriage is something, that of course not everybody is engaging in voluntarily, because sometimes there are also harmful coping mechanisms. But I think, there is still a lot of acceptance out there in the community [...] that it’s fine to marry off their children” (I16, 31 October 2024). Hashimi recalled the case of one of the students at the Omid Online School, who committed suicide in 2022. The 16-year-old girl had taken her life in 2022, because she “had had problems in her family”, but also due to the situation in the country, including the fact that “her family wanted her to get married” (Hashimi, 17 October 2024 [original in German]).

One “aspect that is certainly [...] overlooked” in the matter of GBV and particularly vulnerable groups, according to I16, were “increased vulnerabilities” of women and girls with disabilities, “who are already highly vulnerable”. I16 explained that “for a person with disabilities in general, there are numerous human rights issues. And then, if there is the added dimension of disability, it creates more [...] possible exposure to rights violations, GBV, but also other issues (I16, 31 October 2024). I16 further elaborated:

“And then of course, for us, looking on it also from the GBV side, [...] if we already know that women and girls are basically kept at home, it’s even worse then, if you have a disability, and you’re not even able to [...] voice that concern, [...] and have a channel to reach out to us or to make sure that your concerns are heard. Because of course, a lot of the violence is also happening in the family environment and through the families. [...] Already imagining being a woman and a girl not being able to go outside your home, but then having a disability and not even be able to reach out through other channels is [...] a really heightened risk and vulnerability. So, we usually also would assume that the GBV rates are much higher among those girls and then it’s more difficult for us also to reach women and girls with disabilities.” (I16, 31 October 2024)

4.8 Access to justice

Regarding women’s access to justice under the current Taliban rule, Thomas Ruttig noted that, “in theory”, there are complaints offices, complaint helplines and even complaint letterboxes that women can approach or use (Ruttig, 23 October 2024). Similarly, I2 mentioned that some women are accessing courts and filing petitions without being stopped. However, according to I2, this mainly concerns less sensitive issues such as inheritance (I2, 13 August 2024). On the other hand, I4 noted that while some laws address “male issues” like land issues, there are no mechanisms for “female issues”: “women, especially in the south, have no options to complain”

(I4, 21 August 2024). According to I5, in cases of underage marriage, domestic violence, or other forms of violence against women, there are no avenues for lodging complaints (I5, 22 August 2024). Additionally, I13 stated that in regard to gender-based violence “women cannot be referred to the police” as they do not take complaints (I13, 21 October 2024).

In his review, Emran Feroz noted that there are instances where the Taliban rule in favour of the woman addressing the court, acknowledging that it is crucial for the woman to have the support of her father in such cases:

“I know of a case of a man who divorced his wife by force in order to remarry. He also defamed her and called her a ‘whore’. She complained to the Taliban in Kabul and they took her back home and fined her husband (who had already remarried).” (Feroz, 21 January 2025)

In multiple interviews, three main challenges were identified that were cited as substantially impeding women’s access to justice. Firstly, the requirement that women be accompanied by a mahram when leaving the house and when approaching authorities (I6, 27 August 2024; Ruttig, 23 October 2024) as well as the belief that women should not speak on their own behalf (Ruttig, 23 October 2024):

“Now, when you approach any authority or any organization, the first thing you’ll be asked is, ‘where is the male member of your family?’ I saw a video, in which a woman from, I think it was, Jalalabad tried to approach the court several times. The woman was separated from her husband. When she approached the court, she was insulted by them. They asked her, why she is coming again and again and told her that she should send her brother or father. However, separating oneself from the husband is a difficult situation, it is somehow a breach of norms of the community and has also involves the honour of the family. So, when the father or brother come to court in such a case, it is very likely that they just accept that the woman has to continue living with her husband, no matter what her situation is. So, for a woman it is difficult, because no one will listen to you. Either they will ask the male member of the family, or they will issue an order stating what they think that is best for you. But they will not listen to you.” (I6, 27 August 2024)

“But anecdotally, when women do have the courage to complain, they are often reprimanded for things they (allegedly) did not do right. They are often told that men should deal with the issues and that women should not speak for themselves.” (Ruttig, 23 October 2024)

Secondly, the lack of female representatives within the legal system was cited as severely limiting women’s access (Ruttig, 23 October 2024; I2, 13 August 2024):

“Lack of access to justice is a general issue, this lack of a framework. But yes, access to justice for women is really challenging in this region. Because if you don't have women lawyers, if you don't have women judges, it's difficult for a woman to disclose information, because they might not want to disclose it to a man. The lack of a legal framework is one issue, but when there are no females in the justice system then it is another big issue. [...] Now, for example, if you want to complain about domestic violence, I am sure that women will not come to the court and file a petition against their in-laws or husband or whoever

she is facing problems with. So, access to justice for women is really, really a challenge under the current administration, that's for sure. The main point here is, that if there is no representation of females in the system, it automatically deprives half of the population from their access to justice." (I2, 13 August 2024)

Thirdly, interviewees indicated that Afghan women face the risk of being blamed, accused, or punished for the violence and abuse they have experienced when they report it to the authorities (I5, 22 August 2024; I13, 21 October 2024; Ruttig, 23 October 2024):

"Based on experience, even under the previous government, it has been observed that women who seek assistance from the police or other authorities often find themselves being accused instead. There have also been recurrent incidents of assaults, including sexual assaults. Consequently, it is unlikely that women will or will be able to utilize complaint mechanisms more extensively in the present day." (Ruttig, 23 October 2024 [original in German])

"If a woman complains, they turn against the woman. [The Taliban] think that women have to accept what their husband or father does and that they should be silent. Male family members should be in charge and make decisions for women. The government does not respect the rights of women, so within the family it is also not the case." (I5, 22 August 2024)

"I'll tell you the reality, the way it goes: the woman is raped by her brother-in-law in the house. If you bring that case to the police, they accuse the woman of adultery, automatically – a survivor of sexual violence, it's her fault. It was always like that. And what they say is that, well, you must have wanted it, and it was all your fault [...]. So, then, they punish both. Normally, they flog both or kill both or whatever." (I13, 21 October 2024)

Furthermore, I13 added that even if the authorities acknowledge that a woman was coerced, both parties involved are still deemed culpable (as both have taken part in an illegal activity) and face severe punishments, as the law does not differentiate based on circumstances. Women who are beaten so severely that even the Taliban authorities realize that the women are at risk, are sometimes placed in prison for their own protection:

"To them, the prison is the best safe place for women. [...] The majority of the women in prison are there because of adultery, of being raped by someone or for their protection, because they were almost beaten to death. [...] There is not a huge number of other kinds of reasons and crimes for women to be put in prison." (I13, 21 October 2024)

As a result, women are often reluctant to discuss such issues, fearing imprisonment either for protection or accusation of adultery, regardless of coercion (I13, 21 October 2024).

According to I9, under the current Taliban regime, women who are imprisoned for crimes receive no support or safe housing upon release, leading to life-threatening situations as they are culturally rejected by their families and have no safe places to go (I9, 2 September 2024).

When it comes to informal, traditional justice institutions like Shuras, both I2 and I9 noted that women need male relatives to approach the Shura on their behalf. Women cannot directly

approach the Shura themselves (I2, 13 August 2024; I9, 2 September 2024). (More general information on informal institutions of justice can be found in chapter 3.3.) According to I4 and I9, women often refrain from disclosing issues of domestic violence in front of Shuras due to the nature of these traditional justice settings and cultural taboos:

“Due to the nature of these Shuras, there may be some information or issues that women would prefer not to bring up in these settings.” (I4, 21 August 2024)

“The majority of the females do not disclose information on family violence, they do not bring it in front of the Shura or the court due to sensitivity of the community and culture.” (I9 2 September 2024)

I6 additionally mentioned that a woman’s chance of getting justice through a Shura or Jirga depends on the community and its level of awareness regarding women’s rights (I6, 27 August 2024). I2 added the following concerning the likelihood of women having the same chances as men to obtain justice through informal systems:

“It’s hard to say, whether women have equal access to justice within the informal systems. Informal systems are somehow unpredictable. If you choose the informal system for something, it might be to your advantage, but it might as well not. You are giving [these councils] all the rights, so whatever they decide, you will have to agree because you have no other choice. I can say with confidence that in most cases, men don’t get what they deserve. When it comes to women, favouritism is always an issue. From my experience, I can say that women don’t get what they deserve or what is rightfully theirs.” (I2, 13 August 2024)

Several interviewees raised the particular challenges faced by women seeking justice in cases of gender-based violence, given the absence of legal support systems for cases of GBV under the new Taliban rule (see, e.g. I9, 2 September 2024). More detailed information on the issue of GBV can be found in [chapter 4.7](#).

5 Consequences of non-compliance

5.1 Various types of consequences

Several interviewees noted that the Afghan population, especially women, are concerned about facing consequences from the Taliban DFA for certain actions and as a response for non-compliance with DFA rules and regulations:

“If you do not comply with some rules, then they might stop you and you have to justify yourself.” (I4, 21 August 2024)

“If [women] don’t comply, they will face consequences.” (I2, 13 August 2024)

“[Women] are facing challenges and consequences for everything [they] do. It is risky.” (I5, 22 August 2024)

I2 and I4 noted that there are “always” (I2, 13 August 2024) or “normally” (I4, 21 August 2024) initial warnings from the DFA. I2 explained that women who do not comply with the mahram

rule, for example, are first asked why they are travelling alone. I4 stated that “there might be warnings, a second warning, a third one, but then [the DFA] say, someone should face consequences” (I4, 21 August 2024). In more detail, I17 explained the following:

“I think, [for] the first non-compliance, you get a warning [...] I think the first time, it’s a visit and then, it’s a warning. And then, I think recommendations on what to do better, or you get stopped on the street. Let’s say that happens more than once. I think, at least three times [warnings], and then you can get detained [...] I don’t know whether it is three times, [...] that’s the arbitrary, because you’d have to get the same person, and they have to do record keeping on it. So, I’m pretty sure the first or second time, they may just issue a warning. [...] They can always still arrest you for a couple of hours and then send you home. That’s probably the fear for every woman that walks out the house, that she can get arrested.” (I17, 7 November 2024)

In reference to the example of a woman not adhering to the mahram rule, I2 elaborated that the DFA would not permit the woman to travel alone, but I2 has “never heard that a woman was put in prison for not being accompanied by a mahram.” While I2 argued not having observed any “strict measures in reaction to non-compliance” for either males or females, particularly in Kandahar (I2, 13 August 2024), I2 and several other interviewees also mentioned that many Afghans do not even dare to not comply with the established rules or to raise their voices against the DFA for fear of harsh consequences:

“To be honest with you, people are careful. They don’t want to do something which is announced as banned. So they comply, because people don’t want to get in trouble. [...] Sometimes it’s not the harsh consequences that hinder people on accessing their rights, sometimes it is the fear of such consequences.” (I2, 13 August 2024)

“So, a context of fear has been established that actually does not motivate you to even think about expressing yourself.” (I3, 15 August 2024)

“There is a lot of fear. People, who were openly against the DFA, disappeared.” (I1, 26 July 2024)

“No one complains, no one expresses their ideas. Not even, for example, an activist, because if someone complains or shouts ‘This is not allowed! This is against the law, against humanity, against human rights’, they will put them in jail. So there is no way to express our frustrations. [...] This not only applies for women, also for men. Mostly it’s fear because we saw with our own eyes what they did with activists, what they did with those who asked for their rights; not only with women, also with men. Even with those who only advocated for education, not for other very political things, just for education. They were put in jail, they did very criminal [things to] them, and this created fear for the whole community. So mostly because of the fear they do not raise their voice, because if they raise their voice, they have to fear that maybe the same things will happen to them. What we see in the community is fear. When it is not even allowed to ask for the basic right of education without being put into prison, how should one try to speak about other things, more political issues? So, fear is the reason why people are not complaining.” (I5, 22 August 2024)

Abdul Ghafoor Rafiey and I10 described in quite drastic terms the range of various consequences faced by those who dare to not comply with the DFA rules:

“[Regarding non-compliance with DFA restrictions] Well, what I assume the consequences can be, is imprisonment, it can be torture. It can be anything that they wish to do to you.” (Rafiey, 28 October 2024)

“So, they have disappeared thousands of people. They have dumped, tortured and killed victims everywhere in the country to warn everyone else. [...] the consequences are that you might be disappeared or disciplined in such a way that you’ll never be heard from again.” (I10, 25 September 2024)

Moreover, in the context of the range of consequences for non-compliance, interviewees mentioned:

- house searches, such as one that involved the founder of an online school for girls (Hashimi, 17 October 2024),
- beatings, including of a taxi driver in Mazar-i Sharif who had transported a woman alone (I6, 27 August 2024), and floggings as a potential consequence for violating DFA rules (I10, 25 September 2024) and in alleged cases of adultery (I13, 21 October 2024),
- arrests and imprisonment (I17, 7 November 2024), for example, of individuals such as journalists and women advocating for education, including women reportedly being kept in custody without explanations (I3, 15 August 2024), school directors (Hashimi, 17 October 2024), and human rights activists (I5, 22 August 2024),
- kidnappings, as reported for girls “walking down the street,” who were taken to police stations without knowing why they are being held (Rafiey, 28 October 2024) and enforced disappearances of critics (I1, 26 July 2024; I3, 15 August 2024; I10, 25 September 2024)
- ill-treatment, for example, of women kept in custody (Rafiey, 28 October 2024) or critics (I10, 25 September 2024), harassment and sexual violence against, for example, women raising their voices (I3, 15 August 2024) including threats of rape or enforced marriage as reported in the case of a female English teacher (Hashimi, 17 October 2024),
- and killings, for example, of critics (I10, 25 September 2024) or capital punishment as a potential consequence in alleged cases of adultery (I13, 21 October 2024).

According to a source quoted by Thomas Ruttig, members of the Taliban are also among those who are held in Afghan prisons, suggesting that they too are not immune from consequences, most likely for corruption or abuse (Ruttig, 23 October 2024). In addition, the Taliban reportedly sometimes detain women for their own protection, such as those threatened with severe domestic violence. According to I13, these women make up the majority of women in Afghan prisons, along with women imprisoned for adultery or for being raped. (I13, 21 October 2024).

5.2 Continued arbitrariness under the PVPV law

When discussing the potential consequences of non-compliance with the DFA rules, several interviewees highlighted the impact of the PVPV law on the enforcement: I10 and Abdul Ghafoor Rafiey both noted that the new PVPV law provides “codified” rules (I10, 25 September

2024) or a “kind of legal backup” (Rafiey, 28 October 2024), which establishes clear boundaries (I10, 25 September 2024) and facilitates the DFA’s ability to enforce consequences (Rafiey, 28 October 2024). However, Thomas Ruttig explained that

“the law allows enforcers to administer immediate punishments without a formal procedure, with possible escalation steps ranging from immediate fines to reporting to superiors and even arrest. During detention, it is decided whether the accused will be brought to court.” (Ruttig, 23 October 2024 [original in German])

Ruttig explained that even with the new law, the situation remains contradictory, in that the Taliban authorities can still act arbitrarily within an undefined framework, and that the law mainly seems to serve as a deterrent, creating uncertainty about whether individuals will be punished for specific violations (Ruttig, 23 October 2024). I10 further noted that Afghanistan’s diverse regions and provinces exhibit varying levels of control and enforcement. According to I10, in some areas, authorities immediately resort to harsh measures, while in others, there is resistance and low enforcement within local communities (I10, 25 September 2024). In this regard, Emran Feroz added that in remote areas of Bamiyan province people have told him that not even the Taliban are able to come here in large numbers (Feroz, 22 January 2025).

Before the enactment of the PVPV law, regarding the foreseeable consequences, I6 noted that “there was some kind of flexibility” with the DFA by just “verbally advising people” (I6, 27 August 2024) while I2 noted that there was always a “degree of uncertainty”, and individuals could never be certain of the type of reaction they would encounter from the DFA (I2, 13 August 2024).

5.3 Consequences for family members

According to I1, the Taliban DFA do not necessarily target only those who do not comply with their rules but also their family members: “So, if someone speaks up against the Taliban, the Taliban will, e.g., target the person’s mother” (I1, 26 July 2024). In this context, several interviewees stressed that in many cases male family members are affected if women do not adhere to the Taliban’s rules and regulations (I2, 13 August 2024; I3, 15 August 2024; I4, 21 August 2024; I6, 27 August 2024; I9, 2 September 2024; I10, 25 September 2024; Ruttig, 23 October 2024; I17, 7 November 2024). In his review, Emran Feroz described this form of “collective punishment” as “very widespread” (Feroz, 22 January 2025).

“I think there was [...] an earlier edict or something that made very clear that men are responsible for women to comply [with regulations], and that the Taliban will not refrain from arresting men and punishing men, if their women are not complying with the law.” (I17, 7 November 2024)

I2 – focusing on the Kandahar region – noted that while the DFA announced this measure, there are no known reports of its actual implementation (I2, 13 August 2024). On the other hand, I6 mentioned that it has already been implemented in several instances, particularly when women participated in demonstrations against the DFA (I6, 27 August 2024). I3 added that the DFA also target male family members because they have to exercise caution when targeting women, recognizing that it can be a sensitive issue for families (I3, 15 August 2024). As noted by I6, it is usually a close male family member, such as the husband, brother or father, who is “advised”

by the DFA due to the non-compliance of a woman but sometimes also male relatives who are not very close to the woman, such as a cousin or a brother-in-law (I6, 27 August 2024). In regard to the ways in which male relatives are held responsible, Thomas Ruttig explained the following:

„Male family members are regularly held liable for their female relatives, sometimes even imprisoned. They have to declare or sign on behalf of their female relatives that they will no longer do certain things (disregard the ‘correct’ veiling; protest, etc.). It is common for them to have to provide ‘security’ (e.g. land, property titles) as a guarantee or deposit.” (Ruttig, 23 October 2024 [original in German])

According to I10, the PVPV law emphasizes that men will be held accountable and punished alongside with women for any perceived transgressions, which represents a shift from traditional practices where men were merely admonished to ensure their wives’ compliance (I10, 25 September 2024).

5.4 Enforcement of compliance by non-state actors

As a result of men having to bear the consequences of female family members’ actions, this “completely changes – within households – the empowerment of enforcement” (I10, 25 September 2024). In this context, I10 further argued that the Taliban openly ordering men to keep their wives indoors, and threatening punishment if women are seen outside, serves as a “direct threat to men and boys”.

“So, no father wants to find out that he himself or the other people in his household are going to be lashed in public, which is very shameful. What [the DFA have] done is basically tell heads of household, ‘you will be held responsible.’ [...] So I think there’s a dark era that’s more likely to evolve now where [there’s] distrust between men and women.” (I10, 25 September 2024)

Correspondingly, I17 stated the following:

“I think, men are clearly feeling the pressure on them as well. And you know, the Taliban make them responsible. The Taliban make men responsible. [...] I mean, but [that’s the case] under *Pashtunwali* anyways, right? [...] Men’s honour includes defending women’s honour, right? And that’s why the *purdah* is the best defence, right? – to lock women up. And I think that is the pressure on men. [...] then, they can start policing women [...] In any police state, when they’re starting to use the broader society to start policing each other and men policing women, you don’t know whether there might be a male colleague that [informs on] you in. [...] It could be a male family member who always [...] thought, you shouldn’t be working.” (I17, 7 November 2024)

Thomas Ruttig noted that anecdotal evidence suggests that holding men responsible for the actions of women may also have an impact on the prevalence of gender-based violence:

“It is also important to mention – and the UN has also reported this – although it is difficult to document, that domestic violence is increasing. This can also be confirmed anecdotally. It seems that the religiously legitimized values of the Taliban are influencing parts of the male population. In many households, male family members who disliked the progress

made before 2021 feel emboldened to push women back into their 'traditional' place. Some take out their frustrations about poverty and restrictions on 'their' women. However, it should not be forgotten that there is certainly a large proportion of families in Afghanistan who view the 20 years to 2021 positively and are trying to protect their women and girls and their rights. So, as in many other areas, there are conflicting trends." (Ruttig, 23 October 2024 [original in German])

Similarly, I10 mentioned that reactions to this measure may vary between provinces. In some areas, "there will be some resistance and low enforcement within localized households or communities", whereas in other regions, there might be instances "where a father will volunteer to lash his own daughter in public" (I10, 25 September 2024). I17 also agreed that there might be some Afghan men feeling happy to put women back into "their place" (I17, 7 November 2024).

I16 and I17 discussed the issue of compliance enforcement by non-state actors as being intertwined between the household and family level and the broader societal level:

"So, it's also this entrenched patriarchal system that makes it very difficult to speak up. So, even where the DFA is not enforcing things, the community itself might be enforcing certain values or norms or standards [...] What the Taliban are also very good at, is enforcing this [...] community policing [...]. We even see it in our own organizations that, for example, regarding the mahram requirements, [...] that our [...] female colleagues, any female in the community has to be accompanied by a male chaperone to be able to go to work, go to the market, engage with, et cetera. But it also means a lot of dependency on their own household members, [...] and a lot of power dynamics inside families that that creates. [...] Although we have very highly qualified and educated female staff, they also depend on the mahram, [...]. You would assume that [this is not an issue], but sometimes, they don't find anybody, who supports them in that sense [...] It's very shocking. [...] Even when you reach that level of education and support, you're still reduced at this very fundamental level to being dependent on a male chaperone for these basic elements of life, which I think is a very sobering experience, because [women] cannot educate [themselves] out of this [...]. So, there's also these cultural aspects to it. [...] For example, [...] the hijab decree, we already had in place before, but now [...] it has been reinstated by the new PVPV law. But the policing, for example, of the clothing et cetera will usually be enforced through the family, through the father, that the wife and the woman observe this. So, it's a lot of these layers, where the policing is often enough also left to male family members, which creates certain dynamics as well within families for women and girls to be observing. So, it's pressures from different sides, which really makes it a very restrictive space. I think, it's really hard to breathe in this space for women and girls." (I16, 31 October 2024)

"It's actually quite interesting that most of the complaints that the PVPV ministry has received – I've heard recently – they do not come from their own inspectors, they come from ordinary Afghans just calling up and reporting their neighbours, women, et cetera. So, [...] in a state that is [...] probably, I would just describe it as a police state, there is that policing of society. [...] Afghanistan always was a society of high social control. And now,

there's a law that gives people the ability on what they can control, [...] that they can feel now they can report, if they feel [...] the neighbour's woman doesn't wear a proper hijab or she goes out without a mahram, et cetera." (I17, 7 November 2024)

Emran Feroz agreed that there is "high social control" in the Afghan society, adding that:

"Unfortunately, many people like to talk about other people's women or use these tactics for 'revenge' because of past feuds, neighbourhood problems etc." (Feroz, 22 January 2025)

By pointing out the ambiguity of whether certain actions are state directives or individual actions exploiting existing laws, I17 further emphasized the impact on society in a police state system and the question of who it empowers:

"Once a woman said to me, there's Taliban in our homes, there's Taliban in the offices, there's Taliban on the streets. And I think, they meant that quite generally because I mean, that's the argument that everybody says, [that] nothing supports the ideology in society. [...] I'm pretty sure that part of the ideology of the Taliban is supported by (or resonates with) society or at least elements in society." (I17, 7 November 2024)

According to I17, the Taliban's methods are aligned with a society that has historically maintained a high degree of social control, which allows them to use men to police women and also women to report other women to the PVPV ministry. I17 moreover stated that the Taliban's laws instil fear in men, leading them to make decisions on behalf of the authorities. According to I17, some laws are phrased vaguely enough that men may decide not to allow their female family members to work, resulting in self-regulation (I17, 7 November 2024). In this regard, Abdul Ghafoor Rafiey explained that families also monitor the behaviour of female family members more strictly for their own protection. For fear that wives, sisters or daughters are at risk of being taken into custody, Afghan women are more restricted in their daily lives and are prevented from going outside by their own family members, for example (Rafiey, 28 October 2024). Zahra Hashimi noted that during the first year of the Omid Online School for Girls in 2022, students faced family pressure to marry and encountered resistance to their participation in the online school and their continued education (Hashimi, 17 October 2024). On a different note, Thomas Ruttig also mentioned that conservative mullahs among the Hazara are reportedly gaining influence in the villages and are now enforcing Taliban rules out of conviction, something they could not do during the time of the Islamic Republic because of the different social climate (Ruttig, 23 October 2024).

6 Other vulnerable groups

Thomas Ruttig stated that under the current Taliban DFA, different segments of society face heightened levels of vulnerability, for example religious and ethnic minorities, women, and people of diverse sexual orientations (Ruttig, 23 October 2024). According to Abdul Ghafoor Rafiey, besides the Hazara community, there are only a few ethnic minority groups left in the country, with, for example, only a few hundred Hindus (mainly Sikh) remaining in Afghanistan when the Taliban took power. Due to their small numbers and low visibility, there have been few reports of mistreatment against them (Rafiey, 28 October 2024). I10 added that several groups can be considered "vulnerable groups with heightened risk", for example, women with

disabilities, people associated with the previous Afghan government and returnees (I10, 25 September 2024).

According to Ruttig, the protection of vulnerable groups has deteriorated under the Taliban DFA:

“The protection of particularly vulnerable groups has of course deteriorated since the takeover, simply because the general conditions have changed. Even under the old government, a lot of things were just on paper, but at least the opportunities – especially for women – to assert their rights were greater than they are now.” (Ruttig, 23 October 2024)

Abdul Ghafoor Rafiey stated, “The Taliban do whatever they want to do, especially, when you belong to a minority group.” (Rafiey, 28 October 2024)

Different interviewees named different groups as particularly vulnerable under the Taliban’s DFA. The following subsections do not claim to be exhaustive, but list those groups specifically mentioned in the interviews.

Westernization

Thomas Ruttig suggested that one group primarily targeted by the Taliban are individuals they perceive as “infected by the West”. This group mainly includes urban residents, individuals active in civil society, those who have received a “Western” education, or have adopted a lifestyle or experiences that deviate from local traditions and customs. The Taliban view these individuals with suspicion, believing they have internalized “false” values that could potentially spread within Afghan society. The Taliban see themselves as a kind of educational leadership, emphasizing “morality” and “virtue”. They aim to re-establish a value system in Afghanistan, initially through admonition, but also through punishment if people do not comply (Ruttig, 23 October 2024).

More information on the situation of individuals perceived as “Westernized” can be found in the following reports:

- EUAA – European Union Agency for Asylum: Afghanistan Country Focus, November 2024, section 1.2.4 (pp. 34-38)
https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2117560/2024_11_EUAA_COI_Report_Afghanistan_Country_Focus.pdf
- UK Home Office: Country Policy and Information Note Afghanistan: Fear of the Taliban [Version 4.0], August 2024, section 16.3 (pp. 63-65)
https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2113863/AFG_CPIN_Fear_of_the_Taliban.pdf

Religious groups: converts and Hazara/Shia Muslims

According to Abdul Ghafoor Rafiey, when it comes to minority groups and discrimination in Afghanistan “the biggest group that comes to mind are the Hazara” because other ethnic minorities are numerically quite small. Rafiey explained that the Hazara community in Afghanistan has experienced persecution under various rules, beginning in the late 19th century and continuing through the previous Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001, as well as the current Taliban DFA. The persecution is largely due to the Hazara’s ethnicity and their classification as

infidels by the Taliban. According to Rafiey, the governor of Herat labelled the Hazara as infidels because they supported foreign forces during the previous regime and because of their religious beliefs¹⁵, with over 90 percent of the Hazara belonging to the Shia sect of Islam. This religious affiliation makes them a particular target for terrorist organizations. Since the Taliban's return to power, more than 113 Hazara have been killed and 25 injured, with many incidents claimed by ISIS, while others remain unclaimed. Although there is no law explicitly targeting the Hazara, various statements, such as those from the governor of Herat, have incited violence against them by labelling them as infidels, which the Taliban interpret as justification for killing (Rafiey, 28 October 2024).

In his review, Emran Feroz challenged this perspective to some extent, adding that he doubted that "the Taliban consider all Hazaras as infidels" and noting the Taliban also recruited from the group of Hazara, for example in Bamiyan province (Feroz, 28 January 2025).

Rafiey stated that one of the issues the Hazara are faced with, is land grabbing due to disputes with the nomadic Kuchis. During the previous regime, these land disputes were taken to court, however, when the Taliban came to power, according to Rafiey, all decisions favoured the Kuchis, forcing the Hazara to pay fines, regardless of whether they were the victim or perpetrator (Rafiey, 28 October 2024).

Speaking more generally about the situation not only of the Hazara but of the Shia sect in Afghanistan, Abdul Ghafoor Rafiey mentioned that the Taliban had announced that books from the Shia school of thought would be removed from universities and would no longer be taught there. Similarly, Rafiey described the situation in Afghan schools:

"If we talk about the general school environment in Afghanistan, one of the subjects that used to be taught was Islamic studies, where you learn about the Koran and other issues and matters. But of course, because there are differences between the two sects, the Shia and the Sunni, in most parts of the Hazara-populated areas, they used to teach this subject according to the Shia school of thought. Now they are somehow forced to [...] take away all studies related to Shiism [...]. And all schools are now forced to teach only Sunni Islam. This is the case for primary and secondary education and for boys and girls alike." (Rafiey, 28 October 2024)

Regarding the somewhat ambiguous approach towards the Afghan Shia sect on the part of the Taliban and the Afghan Sunni majority, Emran Feroz added the following in his review:

"In 2022, they even escorted Shiite ceremonies in the middle of Kabul. In 2023, they pushed restrictions, but ceremonies were still allowed and took place as I witness[ed] myself. However, there is some general anti-Shia sentiment within the Sunni majority. Many also believe that Shias received 'too many rights' during the Republican era, rights that were not tied to their sect but to the status of certain warlords and politicians. It is

¹⁵ More information on this statement and the situation of the Hazara community under the current Taliban rule can be found in a January 2024 The Diplomat article: Diplomat (The): The Plight of Hazaras Under the Taliban Government, 24 January 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/01/the-plight-of-hazaras-under-the-taliban-government/>

also said that the mother of former president Hamid Karzai is a Shia Qizilbash¹⁶ (such marriages happened [...] in the Kandahar area between Sunnis Pashtuns and Shia Qizilbash) which, according to some, might be the reason why Shias gained such a position until 2021. It was reversed by the Taliban, but they still consider Shias as a part of Afghan society, most of them, to say at least.” (Feroz, 28 January 2025)

Another group mentioned by Rafiey are returnees who “were either forced to convert or by their own will converted their religion, for example, when they were in Europe”. These individuals were also described as particularly vulnerable:

“Personally, I don’t know if they were forced or if they did it voluntarily, but that’s another discussion. [...] Some of them were Christian converts, some of them were atheists. So these were the kind of [returnees] who were the most vulnerable.” (Rafiey, 28 October 2024)

More information on the situation of ethnic and religious groups can be found in the following reports:

- EUAA - European Union Agency for Asylum: Afghanistan Country Focus, November 2024, section 4.6 (pp. 117-127)
https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2117560/2024_11_EUAA_COI_Report_Afghanistan_Country_Focus.pdf
- BAMF - Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (Germany): Länderkurzinformation Afghanistan - Lage der Hazara [Country briefing Afghanistan - Situation of the Hazara], 28 November 2024
https://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Behoerde/Informationszentrum/Laenderkurzinformationen/2024/laenderkurzinfo-afghanistan-10-24-hazara.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=2
- ORF – Observer Research Foundation: Between a rock and a hard place: The Hazaras in Afghanistan, 4 March 2024
<https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/between-a-rock-and-a-hard-place-the-hazaras-in-afghanistan>

Returnees

Abdul Ghafoor Rafiey mentioned that in countries like Afghanistan, the idea of migration and return, and especially deportation, is associated with taboos:

“When someone is deported, it is normally assumed that the person has done something wrong, [that] he might have been deported because of a criminal act.” (Rafiey, 28 October 2024)

I4 noted that returnees, especially those from abroad, often face documentation issues that can impede access to education for them and their children (I4, 21 August 2024) (For more detailed information on access to civil documentation, please see [chapter 4.1](#)) I10 described Afghan returnees as a pawn between Afghanistan’s neighbours, Iran and Pakistan, and the

¹⁶ The Afghan Qizilbash are an ethnic group of Shia faith and Turkic tribal origin (Hanifi, 15 August 2022).

Taliban DFA. According to I10, “returnees become IDPs on the very first day they arrived back inside Afghanistan because there was no place for them to go.” The Taliban however completely deny this issue stating that there is no “IDP problem” and that “everyone should return to their home” – homes that I10 described as having been lived in by other families for generations, or the family’s land that had been confiscated or their property destroyed in an earthquake, for example. Next to returnees from Iran and Pakistan, I10 termed returnees from European countries or migration route target countries such as Turkey as the third group of returnees. As stated by I10, European countries were deporting Afghans back to Afghanistan even before the new Taliban DFA came to power, however, back then, the deportations were

“negotiated with the Republic so that a system could be in place to provide a landing for [these returnees], focusing on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS), housing, job training, injury prevention, addiction treatment, everything that was necessary. Now there’s nothing, and Pakistan and Iran are on either side of the border with the levers opening the floodgates or closing the gates to suit their own domestic issues that have nothing to do with what the Taliban need or want. So, I think the returnee problem is going to get worse over time, as it has been for the past two years. It’s continued to deteriorate. It will also continue. [...] The escalation risk is high because none of the neighbouring countries and EU states are in a cooperative stance like they were before about how to manage. [...] Now there’s nothing. So, it means that those populations of potential returnees are more vulnerable because there’s no systems designed or considered that would reduce the chance that they’re further traumatized. Now, no one on Pakistan’s side or Iran or Taliban really cares if people are traumatized from displacement.” (I10, 25 September 2024)

In addition, I9 mentioned that at the borders, especially women and children crossing the Afghan border to or from Afghanistan were subjected to ill-treatment by the Taliban DFA, including physical violence such as beatings (I9, 2 September 2024).

For more detailed information on the situation of individuals returning to Afghanistan from neighbouring countries, please see:

- ACAPS: ACAPS Thematic Report: Understanding the key human safety and security issues that returnees to Afghanistan are facing, 16 August 2024
[https://reliefweb.int/attachments/4bc79f20-a849-43fe-9ea9-4255d50f860a/20240815_ACAPS_AFGHANISTAN -
_Key_human_safety_and_security_issues.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/attachments/4bc79f20-a849-43fe-9ea9-4255d50f860a/20240815_ACAPS_AFGHANISTAN_-_Key_human_safety_and_security_issues.pdf)

Persons with disabilities

According to I9, the Taliban DFA fail to sufficiently support individuals with specific needs, leaving this group very much adversely affected by the country’s new rulers (I9, 2 September 2024). Both I9 and I10 argued that especially women or girls living with any kind of disability face major challenges, as they are particularly dependent on male family members to care for them:

“Persons with special needs are very much affected, particularly women and girls because due to Taliban restrictions, female beneficiary in the field have not been able to come to

get assistance, particularly women without a mahram. Women are not even allowed to talk to the social organizations and the field staff while they were going for the assessment, for the follow up and monitoring process.” (I9, 2 September 2024)

“If you’re a woman or a girl, you are triply then required to have a sensitive, caring, patient male advocate for you. That is just not going to happen under these conditions for most women and girls.” (I10, 25 September 2024)

For further information on the situation of persons with disabilities, please see the following articles:

- ZanTimes: Taliban’s cruel cut: women with disabilities left without support amid rising hardships, 20 August 2024
<https://zantimes.com/2024/08/20/i-begged-them-but-they-threw-me-out-of-the-office-women-with-disabilities-have-support-cut-off-by-the-taliban/>
- VOA – Voice of America: Afghans with disability urge Taliban to end ban on aid agency, 18 April 2024
<https://www.voanews.com/a/afghans-with-disability-urge-taliban-to-end-ban-on-aid-agency/7575795.html>
- USIP - Unites States Institute for Peace: The Challenges Facing Afghans with Disabilities, 29 February 2024
<https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/02/challenges-facing-afghans-disabilities>

LGBTIQ+ individuals

Abdul Ghafoor Rafiey explained that LGBTIQ+ individuals are also a particularly vulnerable group under the Taliban DFA. LGBTIQ+ individuals face significant challenges due to societal norms that prevent them from openly expressing their identity or appearing in public. In addition, there have been reportedly cases of abuse and punishment by the Taliban. According to Rafiey, the Taliban often identify these individuals based on their appearance, leading to cases of beatings and ill-treatment (Rafiey, 28 October 2024).

More information on the situation of LGBTIQ+ individuals can be found in the following articles and reports:

- Jurist.org: Hidden Atrocities: The Unseen Struggle of Afghanistan’s LGBTQ+ Community Under Taliban Rule – report and interview, 8 November 2024
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