



Report

Changing social norms around age of marriage in Afghanistan

Data on repression and resistance under the Taliban

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Cover photo: Three young women cross a field to their home in a Ghor Province, Central Afghanistan. © Jono Photography | Shutterstock ID: 1484245919.

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Key messages

- Before the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, there had slowly been a growing acceptance of girls not marrying until they were over 18. Our data suggests that this norms shift was gaining traction, particularly among younger women with at least secondary education.
- The lack of opportunities for education and employment that enabled women and girls to convince their families to delay their marriage, and grant them more autonomy around decisions regarding marriage, is impacting social norms.
- The regime's edicts are reinforcing structural drivers of early and forced marriage. In reaction to Taliban restrictions, there has been an increase in marriages that occur below the age preferred by women, with 69% of respondents knowing a girl married at an inappropriate age.
- Families face a real dilemma: without economic or educational prospects, a climate of insecurity is compounded by fears that unmarried daughters will be forcibly married to Taliban members. This is leading families to marry off their daughters below a preferred age as a way to protect them from this fate.
- Afghan women continue to resist repression in their everyday lives. They warn against both the normalisation of Taliban ideology among the population if gender persecution is allowed to persist, and against international acceptance of the regime.

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Acronyms

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CEFMU	Child, early and forced marriages and unions
DROPS	Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies
FGD	focus group discussion
GoIRA	Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey
NGO	non-governmental organisation
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

Glossary

mullah	local religious leader
imam	mosque leader
nikah	Muslim marriage contract
mujahideen	holy warriors
Shariah	Islamic law
fiqh	Islamic jurisprudence
baad	practice of giving girls or women in marriage as blood price to settle a conflict over murder or an affront to honour
badal	exchange of girls in marriage to strengthen bonds between families
mahram	male relative
madrassa	religious school

Executive summary

‘As the previous government collapsed, the situation changed to become like a cancer that has destroyed everything. I cannot imagine a situation worse than this for women and girls in Afghanistan.’ (Participant in focus group discussion, Herat province)

This ODI report examines current norms around the age of marriage in Afghanistan under today’s Taliban regime. It explores the lived experiences of women and girls as they contend with a new political order after the end of the Republic period (2001-2021); one that has derailed the limited progress that had been made towards the fulfilment of their rights over the past two decades. To do so, it draws on data collected by BISHNAW (meaning ‘listen’ in Dari), an initiative of the Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies (DROPS).

Background

Afghanistan’s history of political turmoil and social upheaval has been marked by contestation over the rights of women. During the Republic, new laws and policies provided significant new opportunities for women and girls. Since the Taliban takeover, however, a series of edicts have reversed these hard-won gains and severely curtailed the access of women and girls to education, employment, health services, justice and public spaces.

Age at marriage is a core and ongoing concern that is crucial for the rights of women and girls – a concern that is far more difficult to address in the current political environment. Child, early and forced marriage is underpinned by patriarchal norms and gender inequality. It is also exacerbated by crises as it becomes a coping mechanism to reduce a household’s economic burden and to protect its girls.

Under the Afghan civil code, marriage is illegal for girls under 16 and boys under 18. However, the Taliban have issued an edict stating that marriage is now governed under Shariah law – an edict that is widely understood to prohibit forced marriages but to permit the marriage of girls after they reach puberty.

Data on marriage patterns drawn from the Afghanistan Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys shows that the overall prevalence rate for Afghan women married before the age of 18 fell from 46.3% to 38.9% over the past decade (UNICEF and Afghan Reconstruction Trust Fund, 2023). Older generations of women are more likely to have been married when they were teenagers, and rural women, poor women, and those with education levels below upper secondary are more likely to marry before age 18.

This research finds that the Taliban takeover is reinforcing the drivers of early and forced marriages for girls by deepening gender inequality, potentially reversing the shift in preferences towards marriage at age 18 or above seen over the past 20 years.

Methodology

We have used both quantitative and qualitative research tools, building on the methodology already in use by the DROPS BISHNAW initiative. The data for this survey on child marriage is drawn from 11 provinces: Baghlan, Balkh, Bamyan, Daykundi, Farah, Faryab, Herat, Jawzjan, Kandahar,

Nangarhar and Paktia. A representative survey was administered to 2,799 women using both online and in-person tools. We asked our respondents about the age most people in their communities think it is appropriate for girls to marry, what the likely response would be if a girl is not married at that age. We also asked our respondents what their individual views were about the appropriate age at marriage, and if they knew of marriages in their community in the past year below that age. We held 11 online focus group discussions (FGDs) with women to explore the survey findings.

Findings

The quantitative data show that most respondents see the appropriate age for marriage as being between 18 and 25 years. This is true for both their individual normative standards and for what they perceive to be community norms. Older respondents, however, were more likely to perceive a lower age range for girls' marriages as being appropriate. Almost 63% of the youngest cohort (aged 18 to 25) saw the appropriate age as being above the age of 18, compared to only 37% of the oldest cohort (aged 60+). Preferences for a higher age at marriage may stem from the relatively higher education level of our respondents as compared to national figures.

The results suggest that a girl who is not married by the appropriate age may be seen as a burden to the family, with a potentially negative impact on the family's standing in the community. Of most concern is that the majority of respondents (69%) know of specific instances of girls married below what they believe is an appropriate age.

The qualitative FGDs explored the current age at which girls are getting married in respondents' communities, and how current conditions have shaped attitudes towards age at marriage. We

asked if participants had observed cases of women resisting Taliban restrictions, and whether a girl, or her family, can take action to delay an underage marriage.

Participants explained that girls are often deemed ready for marriage upon reaching puberty, which tends to be below the legal age or marriage of 16. They said child, early and forced marriages were always more common in rural areas than in cities, although the sharpest rise in early marriages is now occurring in urban areas as a result of Taliban restrictions on other opportunities for women and girls.

Families balance multiple considerations when it comes to girls' marriages, including the impact of Taliban restrictions on education, employment and mobility; the security conditions in their province; and the level of community awareness on this issue. Communities may be aware of the formal legal age for marriage, even if they do not necessarily comply with it.

The FGD data, based on the views of participants who were predominantly aged 20 to 35, support the quantitative survey results, indicating a norms shift among younger people around the age of marriage. Some believe that this shift is the result of the reconstruction and development efforts that took place during the Republic period. Our participants believe the economic, political and security crises that unfolded with the re-emergence of the Taliban have increased the pressure on families to choose early and forced marriages for their daughters.

The ban on education is the dominant factor leading to child, early and forced marriage, alongside the removal of work opportunities. Underage and forced marriage has become one response to a crisis that has had a heavy impact

on already vulnerable communities in rural areas. Local attitudes in cities also became more inclined towards an earlier age of marriage once girls were banned from school, universities and work, and became unable to leave their homes without a *mahram* (male relative).

Fear of forced marriage to the Taliban is pushing families across the country to deploy marriage as a strategy to protect their young daughters. Families are increasingly influenced by their communities when it comes to decisions about girls' marriages as a result of growing Taliban influence.

Respondents also worry that rural–urban norms may blend in the future in a way that is detrimental to progress. They say the silence on the part of the international community and local and international organisations in response to Taliban restrictions has allowed this situation to worsen.

Resistance to early marriage is largely conceptualised as needing to convince fathers, male family members, and the family more broadly not to marry their daughters off at a young age. Girls are not seen to have much voice and agency within marriage decision-making. And the Taliban is perceived to have removed the external sources of support that used to exist; there are now no non-governmental organisations (NGOs), women's organisations, or government support for girls who try to resist early marriage. However, our data shows that attitudes among women, particularly younger women, remain positive towards a higher age of marriage.

Respondents also identify many small but meaningful acts of everyday resistance to the Taliban's gender persecution. They report a mosaic of low-level, clandestine activities that bring hope and resist oppression, centred on education, income generation, and solidarity

networks. Girls attend secret or online schools, for example. Women continue to earn incomes through small businesses, such as making handicrafts that male family members sell at market. On occasion, some women have not obeyed Taliban edicts. Everyday activities and practices are framed in terms of resistance, such as participating in our research or talking to friends. Respondents warn against the risks of ongoing oppression, concerned that it may wear down families and communities until the reduction of age at marriage becomes normalised.

Recommendations

- International actors must act now to resist early and forced marriages, and this means keeping the interests of women and girls central to negotiation processes with the Taliban.
- Afghan women's rights activists in the diaspora must continue their advocacy to address the root causes of violence and discrimination against women and girls.
- Assistance to support economic security may mitigate the drivers of early marriage in families and communities.
- Continuing support to girls' education is key to resisting early marriage because education building daughters' agency and voice in the decision-making around their own futures.
- Community-based groups can and should facilitate dialogue and discussion within families to support the alignment of marriage practices with positive changes in individual beliefs about marriage norms.

1 Introduction

This report examines current norms around the age of marriage inside Afghanistan under today's Taliban regime. It explores the lived experiences of women and girls as they contend with a new political order, one that has usurped the limited and hard-won progress made towards the fulfilment of their rights over the past two decades.

This introduction provides historical background to the rights of women in Afghanistan. Next, we provide a brief overview of the age at marriage in Afghanistan (Section 2), followed by a description of the mixed-methods research that gathered data on age-at-marriage norms from women in 11 provinces (Section 3). Section 4 presents the findings of the online survey with respondents, followed by an analysis of our focus group discussions (FGDs). We end the report with a discussion of the implications of our findings and suggested recommendations (Section 5).

1.1 Background

Afghanistan's history of political turmoil and social upheaval has been marked by contestation over the rights of women. In the 1980s, the Soviet-backed governments imposed gender-related policy reforms to increase women's access to employment and education – a move resented by the *mujahideen*-led resistance.

The resistance became dominated by Islamist groups during that decade, whose imposition of restrictive gender norms within refugee camps in Pakistan heralded their vision of women's role in a post-Soviet Afghanistan (Khan, 2002). However, refugee Afghan families whose daughters experienced greater access to education and

other opportunities, within camps or in urban centres in Iran or Pakistan, sought to retain these opportunities upon their return. Some even delayed their return, concerned that education might not be as accessible in Afghanistan (Collective for Social Science Research, 2005; Kabeer et al., 2011).

Following the Soviet withdrawal in 1988 and a period of civil war during which *mujahideen* factions fought for control of Afghanistan, the Taliban movement came to power in 1996. Their brief rule was characterised by severe restrictions on women's freedoms, harsh punitive measures for violations of their edicts, and bans on women's education and employment (Moghadam, 2002). The United States and its allies instrumentalised these violations of women's rights to build its case for the international coalition intervention to overthrow the Taliban after the events of 11 September 2001 (Pacwa, 2019).

The Republic period (2001–2021) in Afghanistan saw the government adopt strong policy initiatives for women in response to advocacy by Afghan women activists and politicians, and with support from the international donor community. The Government ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 2003 (Raj et al., 2014) and a new gender quota led to 27% of parliamentary seats being filled by women in the following year (Fleschenberg and Bari, 2015). However, the landmark law for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, passed by presidential decree in 2009, never achieved parliamentary approval, despite being viewed, alongside the new Constitution, as a major achievement of the

Republic Government, supported by donors and advocated for by Afghan women's rights activists (Wimpelmann, 2017b).

The Republic set out a new National Action Plan for Women of Afghanistan in 2015 and established key institutions to build accountability for the state's role in improving the rights of women as citizens. International donors funded non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to set up shelters and services for women escaping violence and abuse. A new human rights commission in the capital, Kabul, monitored cases of violations and a Ministry of Women's Affairs was created to implement ambitious new reforms. These government bodies had provincial offices that were essential for supporting women who sought to escape abuse, including forced or unwanted marriages (Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, 2011, 2017; Ministry of Women's Affairs, n.d.).

Girls' education improved during the Republic period with increased support from the Government, international donor agencies, the United Nations (UN) and Afghan civil society organisations. Literacy rates among women and girls grew from 17% to 30% between 2011 and 2018. The number of girls enrolled in primary school soared from almost none in 2001 to 2.5 million in 2018. While gender gaps persisted, the number of girls in higher education also increased dramatically, from an estimated 5,000 in 2001 to 90,000 in 2018 (UNESCO and Education 2030, 2021: 34). While these measures were only the first steps towards the recuperation of women's political and social position in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the turmoil of the 1980s and 1990s, they showed the potential for state-supported social change to bolster the rights of women and girls.

There were tangible outcomes in political and economic inclusion for women. By 2020, 21% of civil servants were women, over half of them in senior management positions (Allen and Felbab-Brown, 2020). Across the country, over 54,000 informal businesses were owned and run by women. These had created over 130,000 jobs and supported another 100,000 women artisans in rural areas to sell their work in the cities (Wafeq, 2022).

Nonetheless, the strong gender equality outcomes sought by activists, women politicians and development actors remained elusive (Wimpelmann, 2017a). The impact of this increase in resources and choices for Afghan women was stymied by the deeper and entrenched opposition of conservative forces in government and public life that resisted progress towards women's empowerment (Rivas and Safi, 2022: 88).

The Taliban seized power immediately when the United States and coalition forces withdrew from Afghanistan in August 2021. Over the past two years, the country's fragile policy gains for women have been dramatically reversed. The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission has been dissolved (Yawar, 2022), and the women's ministry replaced with a Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (Pal, 2021). These, and many other policy decisions, have become yet more examples of the cycle of gender being instrumentalised for political reasons (Akbari and True, 2022).

Afghanistan's new gender politics emerged through a series of edicts issued by Taliban leaders (see Table 1). These have severely curtailed the rights of women and girls to access education and employment, health services and justice, and public space. (For a comprehensive list of edicts see Appendix 1.)

The flood of edicts issued since 2021 has expanded to limit access for girls and women to public spaces and services outside the home. Anecdotal information suggests that these edicts are not enforced with uniformity across the country or even within different provinces, yet their increasing severity and scope may signal

the consolidation of the Taliban's broad gender politics. The regime has suspended the previous Constitution and laws, pending a complete review that is still underway. In cases of criminal and civil disputes, the Taliban have ordered judges to enforce their own interpretations of Islamic Law, resulting in ad hoc and inconsistent rulings.

Table 1 Taliban edicts that restrict women's rights

Taliban edicts	Current status
Education	Co-education is banned, university education closed to women, secondary schools closed to girls.
Employment	Women cannot: teach in secondary or higher education; work in offices, for NGOs or for the UN; run bakeries or beauty salons. They may work in hospitals and treat women and girls only. They have limited options to teach in primary schools.
Health	Unaccompanied women and girls may not access health centres.
Public space	Women to be fully veiled outside the house and discouraged from leaving home. Women will not be served in restaurants without a male family member; women banned from parks, cemeteries, shrines, gyms and public baths, and sports. Women may not use public transport, purchase tickets to travel abroad or travel any distances or outside the country without a male family member.
Media	Women may not appear in radio and TV shows with male presenters and must be veiled if they appear on TV. They are banned from TV dramas.
Access to justice	Thousands of court-mandated divorces invalidated; re-examination of other cases to check for Shariah compliance; laws to punish sex outside of marriage with death; dismantling of family and violence against women courts; women lawyers and judges banned from working; existing laws abolished.

Many women who have strived to achieve gender equality reforms over recent decades are now forceful in advocating that the international community refuse to recognise the Taliban Government until it reverses all of its restrictions on women and girls. Some legal authorities argue that its policies should be considered gender apartheid and recognised as a crime against humanity (Bennoune, 2022). Afghan women activists have approached the International Criminal Court to seek the prosecution of the Taliban for violating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and CEDAW (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2023). The perception amongst communities is that the Taliban have not changed

their views on gender since the first time they came to power during the 1990s, and that the human rights of women and girls will be further violated during the foreseeable future (Akbari and True, 2022).

1.2 DROPS and the BISHNAW project

The Organization for Policy Research and Development (DROPS), founded in 2014 in Kabul, is an interdisciplinary and independent research-oriented NGO operating from Canada. Committed to strengthening the values of pluralism and inclusivity in Afghanistan, DROPS produces indigenous and locally rooted research, and strives

to represent a broad cross-section of voices, with women and girls at the centre of all its research, training and peace-building efforts.

In early 2020, DROPS developed the idea for its BISHNAW (meaning ‘listen’ in Dari) initiative, to increase the number and diversity of women’s voices feeding into Afghanistan’s peace process. The project has used a community-based approach, led by BISHNAW staff, in collaboration with women leaders from all sectors, to regularly capture the views of women in the provinces and outside of the capital Kabul. It has relied on mixed methods research tools, including surveys and focus groups.

BISHNAW had previously conducted nine rounds of data-gathering from August 2020 to July 2021 to ensure that the process of listening to Afghan women was not seen as a one-off event, but rather

as an integral part of the ongoing peace dialogue and negotiations. By 2021, BISHNAW had evolved into a partially tech-based platform for the regular collection, analysis and dissemination of the views of Afghan women across 16 provinces.

In August 2021, after the Taliban takeover, DROPS was forced to cease operations in Afghanistan. The focus had to shift to the full digitalisation of BISHNAW’s interface, solutions for the safe storage of its data, and the creation of a dedicated website to showcase findings. This digitalisation enabled BISHNAW to resume its activities in spring 2022. It reoriented its monthly research questions to focus on new issues that were having an impact on conditions for women and girls as a result of the changing political landscape, namely the collapse of the peace process and the rise of the Taliban.

2 Age at marriage in Afghanistan

The age at marriage is a core and ongoing concern for the rights of women and girls, which is likely to be more difficult to address in Afghanistan's current political environment. Child, early and forced marriage is a direct violation of children's human rights and has a disproportionate impact on girls (Malhotra and Elnakib, 2021). It is the result of patriarchal structures that enforce women's primarily domestic and child-bearing roles (Greene and Stiefvater, 2019; Malhotra and Elnakib, 2021).

Marriage is an important social institution in Afghanistan, forging kinship relations that families often rely on for survival. Marriage maintains family honour and binds communities together. It is also a way to control women's sexuality, through patriarchal systems that only allow sex within marriage.

Afghanistan's patriarchal norms around marriage mean that girls are often married at a young age, to 'protect' their honour and strengthen kinship ties. There is a transactional, sometimes economic, element to the cultural practices of exchanging women between families, and the offering of a bride price. These gendered norms maintain the subordinate position of women (Smith, 2009).

While there were some signs of a decrease in the prevalence of child marriage during the Republic era (GoIRA, 2018), this decrease was not

significant. We know from other humanitarian contexts that early marriage can be a response to crisis, as families face economic stresses, fear for their daughters' safety, and feel pressure to have them marry immediately in case there is no opportunity later (Greene and Stiefvater, 2019). These burdens, coupled with the increasing restrictions on women's rights under the Taliban, prompted us to explore how Afghan age-at-marriage norms are changing to cope with today's extreme circumstances.

This section provides an overview of the legal and regulatory framework in Afghanistan prior to the 2021 Taliban takeover, followed by data on the country's child, early and forced marriage and unions. It concludes with a review of existing research that offers insight into the drivers that shape norms and practices around the age of marriage in the country.

2.1 Laws on marriage

Table 2 outlines the policy commitments of the Afghan Government up to 2021 related to child, early and forced marriages and unions (CEFMU), organised by date. Under its international obligations Afghanistan must set the minimum age of marriage at 18 and ensure free and full consent to marriage. In 2005, Afghanistan also endorsed the UN Human Rights Council Annual Report on Preventing and Eliminating Child Early and Forced Marriage.

Table 2 Afghanistan's policy commitments to end child, early and forced marriages and unions

Legislation	Status
International	
Sustainable Development Goal 5.3 to eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation, by 2030	In 2015, Afghanistan committed to the Sustainable Development Goals.
UN Protocol for the Elimination of Child Marriage	Signed in 2005, aiming to eliminate child and forced marriage by 2008.
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women	Signed in 2003, with states obligated to ensure free and full consent to marriage.
Convention on the Rights of the Child	Ratified in 1994, setting a minimum age of marriage of 18.
Regional	
South Asian Initiative to End Violence Against Children (SAIEVAC)	Afghanistan is a member of SAIEVAC, which adopted a regional plan to end child marriage, raise minimum legal age to 18 for all South Asian countries by 2018.
South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation	2014: Afghanistan committed to the Kathmandu Call to Action to End Child Marriage in Asia.
National	
National Action Plan to Eliminate Early and Child Marriage	Launched in April 2017 by the Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Ministry of Information and Culture.
Marriage legislation	Legal age for marriage, requirements for consent, and the registration of all marriages was in progress under the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GoIRA).
Elimination of Violence Against Women legislation	2009 Law on the Elimination of Violence Against Women criminalises child marriage and other harmful practices. Passed by presidential decree but not approved by Parliament.
Child protection	2019 Law on Protection of Child Rights. 2006 National Strategy for Children at Risk.
Juvenile Justice Code	Enacted in 2005, the Code considers Afghans under the age of 18 to be juveniles. It focuses on protecting children in conflict with the law and protecting children at risk. It may be applicable to child brides or grooms who encounter the justice system because of opposing or escaping from child marriage.
Labour legislation	Article 13 of the Afghan Labour Law (1999) protects children and youth against exploitation and harmful or forced labour, including the labour exploitation of child brides or grooms.
Human trafficking and smuggling legislation	The 2017 Law to Combat Crimes of Trafficking in Persons and Smuggling of Migrants supports victims of trafficking and smuggling for labour, marriage or other purposes, including children.
Afghan Civil Code	In force since 1977, the Code stipulates the legal age at marriage for boys at 18 and girls at 16. It disallowed marriage of girls under age 15.

Adapted from Raj et al. (2014); GoIRA (2018); Girls Not Brides (n.d.); Afghanistan Legal Education Project (2014).

Procedures to enforce national laws were weak during the Islamic Republic era, and a lack of public knowledge of these laws was reported. The Civil Code, for example, stated that marriage for girls under 16 and boys under 18 was illegal, yet one study found that less than half of respondents in five provinces, including adults and girls under 18, could provide the legal age of marriage, and were unsure about what was permitted under religious law (GoIRA, 2018: 31). To enforce the legal age at marriage, the Government would need all families to register births correctly to provide proof of age and to formally register all marriages, as well as effective sanctions for non-compliance. None of these measures operated effectively.

A qualitative research study in four provinces in 2006–2007 found that while widely held norms and marriage practices had an influence on marriage decision-making in families, individuals often had opinions based on their personal desires that did not comply with these norms. This suggests that there was some room for negotiated decision-making within families and communities (Smith, 2009).

Some interpretations of Shariah law and customary practices allow marriage when girls are deemed ready, which is usually based on an assessment of their physical development and puberty (Raj et al., 2014). Sunni communities tend to follow Hanafi and Maliki *fiqh*, or jurisprudence, while the minority Shia community adheres to Jafari *fiqh* (Wimpelmann, 2017b). Marriages are overwhelmingly performed by *mullahs* (local mosque leaders) and community elders. *Nikahs* (the marriage contract in Islam) are rarely registered with government authorities. Before the Taliban takeover, family elders often preferred to adhere to *fiqh* rather than the Civil Code, arguing that setting a minimum age for marriage violates Shariah (Wimpelmann, 2017b).

Implementation of the legal age at marriage was challenging even during the Republic period. Although enforcement by the state was weak, and traditional religious and cultural practices remained prevalent, families exhibited some flexibility in negotiating more inclusive marriage decision-making with couples (Smith, 2009). Under today's Taliban regime, however, the prior legal system no longer functions and the laws governing age at marriage have been reformed by edict based on the current leaders' highly restrictive interpretation of Shariah law.

The Taliban's 2021 edict prohibited forced marriage, although its language referred specifically to women, not girls. It outlawed the customary practice of *baad*, in which girls or women are given as compensation for the resolution of disputes, and the forcible remarriage of widows. A 2022 edict forbade polygamy, although this was permitted for members of the Taliban under certain circumstances (Musawah, 2022).

The Taliban say that the source of law now is Hanafi *fiqh*, and that laws enacted prior to their 2021 takeover remain in force if they do not violate Shariah. In practice, however, the Taliban impose edicts and regulations that are based on their leaders' own interpretation of religious law and cultural norms (Office of International Religious Freedom, 2022). This preference is evidenced by an edict nullifying women's divorces (see Appendix 1) and rumours of Taliban requesting lists of unmarried women and girls above age 12 for their fighters to marry (Times of India, 2021).

2.2 Data on child marriage in Afghanistan

The overall prevalence rate of Afghan women married before age 18 in 2010–2011 was 46.3% (Central Statistics Organisation and UNICEF (2013)).

There was a slight fall over the next decade to an overall rate of 38.9% in 2022–2023 (UNICEF and Afghan Reconstruction Trust Fund, 2023), as shown in Table 3. Nevertheless, the high prevalence of child marriage as compared to global rates remained a concern throughout the Republic period.

Table 3 Changes in marriage patterns in Afghanistan: 2010–2023

Indicator	2010–2011	2022–2023
Women married before 18 years	46.3%	38.9%
Women aged 20–24 married before 15	15%	9.6%
Women aged 20–24 married before 18	40.4%	28.7%
Women married before 15 years	15.2%	11.8%
Young women aged 15–19 currently married	19.8%	16.4%

Source: Afghanistan Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys 2010–2011 and 2022–2023 (Central Statistics Organisation and UNICEF, 2013; UNICEF and Afghanistan National Statistics and Information Authority, 2023).

Tracking the age of marriage among women aged 20–24 at the time of the sample offers more detailed insight into who is getting married and when. It provides a closer estimate of the current rates of prevalence, because this cohort has recently passed the relevant age. Table 3 also shows that Afghanistan’s rate of 28.7% in 2022 was well above the global average (21% in 2020) (Dadras et al., 2022).

Older generations of women are more likely to have been married when they were teenagers. The numbers in Table 3 suggest a slight decrease in child marriage among younger women in Afghanistan, which could indicate generational change and wider norm change in recent years.

Some studies also break down the socioeconomic characteristics of women in early marriages. The Afghanistan Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) 2022–2023, a large-scale, globally comparable national survey run by the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), shows that rural women, poor women, and those with lower education are more likely to marry before age 18 (UNICEF and Afghan Reconstruction Trust Fund 2023: 61).

The protective effects of education seem to be greatest at the upper secondary level – only 18% of girls who had been educated at this level were married before 18, compared to 36.2% of girls with a lower secondary education. These trends reflect those seen globally, as well as common structural drivers of CEFMU: poverty, low levels of education, and lack of opportunities for women (Greene and Stiefvater, 2019).

2.3 Drivers of early and forced marriages

Child marriage is underpinned by deep gender inequality (Raj et al., 2014; Blum et al., 2019). A key feature of this inequality in Afghan communities is that the institution of marriage serves to regulate men’s and women’s sexuality. A family’s honour is upheld through marriage, and its status in the wider kinship network and community is secured (Smith, 2009). Girls are often believed to be of marriageable age upon reaching puberty because they are seen to be physically capable of bearing children (Raj et al., 2014). The risks of early marriages are higher in families where the gendered social norms that support such marriages interact with structural drivers such as poverty, limited education, or a humanitarian crisis (Greene and Stiefvater, 2019).

Afghanistan has, historically, remained near the bottom of the UN Gender Inequality Index and the

Human Development Index (Blum et al., 2019). Where no jobs are available for adult men or women, marrying daughters off is seen as a strategy to relieve pressure on the household. Indeed, economic precarity is one main reason Afghans give for marrying their daughters early (Raj et al., 2014; GoIRA, 2018; Dadras et al., 2022).

Marriage in Afghanistan can display highly transactional dimensions in some situations (GoIRA, 2018: 37). Girls and women bring a bride-price to their birth families when they are married, and can be seen as economic assets. Families look ahead to their future economic situation, preferring children's marriages to be settled early to ensure a secure future for their daughters, or at least as soon as a good-value proposal is offered.

From the husband's perspective, girls are valued as wives, mothers, and providers of domestic labour (Smith, 2009). Disputes between families about a marriage, for example if one side wants the marriage and the other does not, can sometimes be settled with a financial agreement (Wimpelmann et al., 2020).

Harmful traditional practices related to daughter exchange persist, often involving girls who are underage. Girls can be given in marriage to older men from opposing sides to settle a blood feud between families or tribes (*baad*). In *badal* marriages, girls are exchanged between two families to strengthen ties between them. Both are types of forced marriage that have a strong economic component. *Baad* is sometimes used to settle a debt as well as a conflict, and *badal* circumvents the need for a bride-price (Raj et al., 2014; GoIRA, 2018).

Girls are expected to be virgins when they marry; families fear that if they are even perceived to have spent time unsupervised with strangers,

their virginity may be called into question (Wimpelmann et al., 2020). Their reputations suffer if they are not married at what is seen as an appropriate age, leaving them unable to marry at all. Marriage is, therefore, regarded as a way to protect a girl from 'vice' (Raj et al., 2014) or as preserving her reputation and that of her family. In times of conflict, marriage is also seen as a way to protect a girl from rape (Smith, 2009).

The other factors that drive child marriage are similar to those seen in the rest of the world: rural and poor Afghan girls who are illiterate or have only a limited education are more likely than other adolescents to be married in childhood (Blum et al., 2019; see Figure 1).

One study found no significant difference between rural and urban areas, possibly because poverty and illiteracy are so widespread that rural-urban disparities do not make much difference (Dadras et al., 2022). Nonetheless, qualitative data shows a strong perception among Afghans that early marriage is a greater problem in the villages, with respondents sometimes linking it to a lack of education and awareness (Raj et al., 2014).

Afghan men and women are clearly aware of the negative consequences of child marriage (Smith, 2009; Raj et al., 2014; GoIRA, 2018). There is a high level of awareness about the potential complications for pregnancy and childbirth, and some awareness of the possibility of an increased risk of domestic violence, as well as the limitations such marriage places on girls' education and careers (Raj et al., 2014; Blum et al., 2019). Some families also assert that some cultural norms are un-Islamic, such as not including children in decisions about marriage (Smith, 2009).

Smith's qualitative research in four provinces found growing understanding of the negative

impact of some marriage practices, such as *badal*, polygyny, the giving of a bride price, and the failure to include children in decisions about their marriage, yet acting upon this understanding was rare (Smith, 2009). Underage girls have limited ability to speak up within their families or resist early or forced marriage, and if the family has made that decision, there is little that outsiders can do to change their minds (Raj et al., 2014).

While there is individual opposition from both men and women to child and early marriage practices, family and community support for these practices has remained considerable (Smith, 2009; GoIRA, 2018: 37). Social and cultural norms may continue to outweigh individual attitudes and preferences because of the real and perceived benefits to early marriage, and because decisions are taken at the household, rather than individual,

level (GoIRA, 2018, p. 35). Women may even be more supportive of these practices than their husbands, with women-headed households in Afghanistan more likely to marry their daughters off early than male-headed households, indicating how severely this problem is exacerbated by extreme economic circumstances (UNDP Afghanistan, 2023).

Research to date suggests some changes in individual attitudes may indicate the beginnings of a norms shift around age at marriage, even though the drivers of early and forced marriage in Afghanistan remained broadly in place during the Republic period. We now turn to the methodology for our survey data, which aimed to gain further insight into how gender norms around age at marriage are perceived in the current context of the Taliban's gender politics.

3 Methodology

Our survey used both quantitative and qualitative research tools, building on the methodology already in use by the DROPS BISHNAW project. A structured questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data, while FGDs were used to gather qualitative data.

BISHNAW has a large database of women who respond to its monthly surveys and FGDs. The data for the surveys on child marriage were drawn from 11 provinces, selected because we could

produce both qualitative and quantitative data to a high quality from these areas: Baghlan, Balkh, Bamyan, Daykundi, Farah, Faryab, Herat, Jawzjan, Kandahar, Nangarhar and Paktia (see Figure 1).

BISHNAW used a snowballing technique and purposive sampling to select the participants for the survey and FGDs, building on its strong connections within Afghanistan to interview women and reach the desired sample size. Table 4 describes the research tools.

Figure 1 Map of provinces included in research

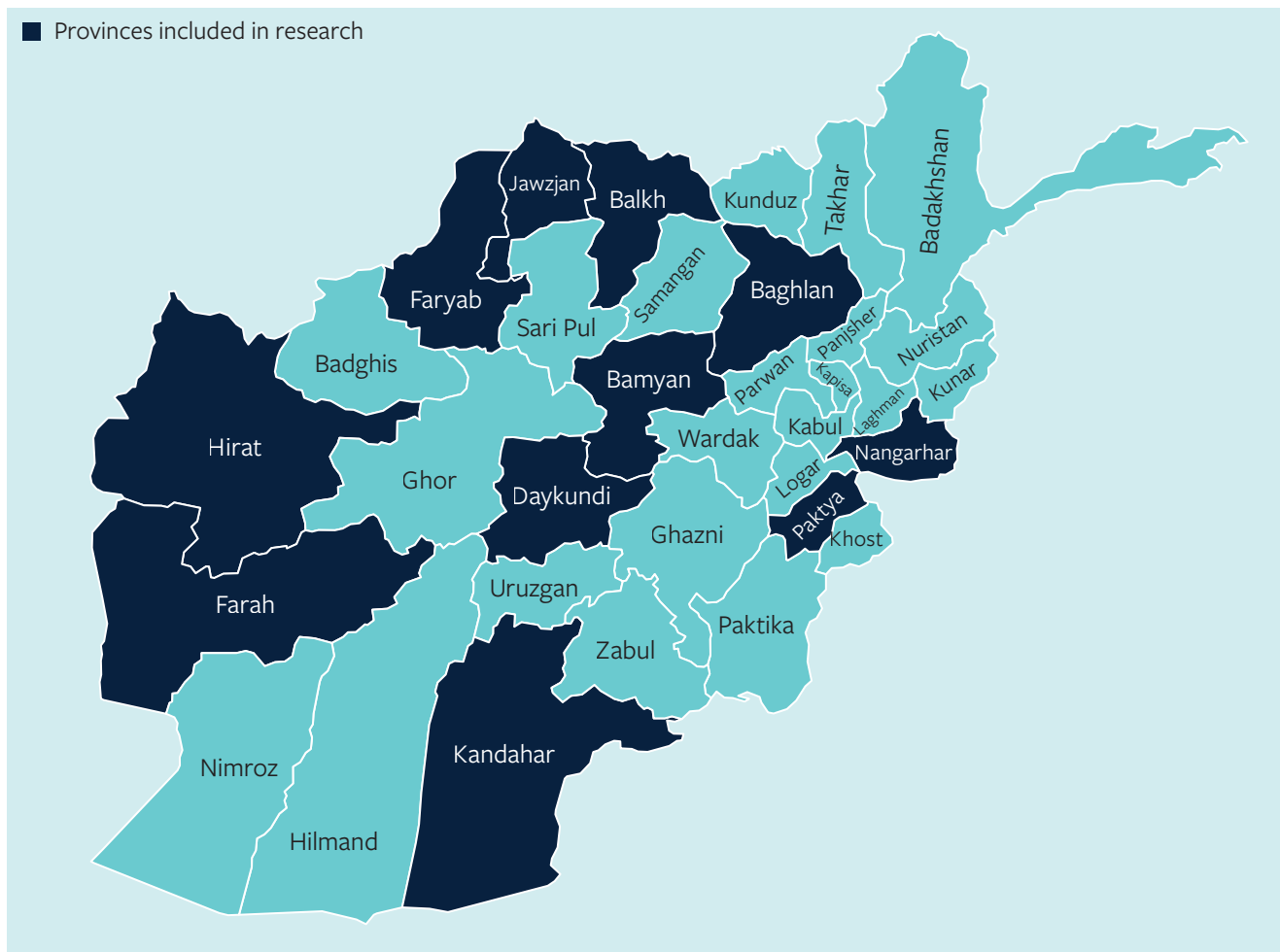


Table 4 Research tools

Research tool	Respondents	Sample size	Details
Online survey administered through WhatsApp Four multiple choice questions	Women above age 18	1,435	11 provinces Snowball sampling
In-person survey Four multiple choice questions	Women above age 18	1,364	11 provinces Purposive sampling
Total		2,799	
Online FGDs administered through WhatsApp	8–10 women per FGD, ages 18–49	11	1 FGD x 11 provinces Participants were members of existing Women’s Peace Circles

3.1 Survey

ODI adapted a survey-based instrument originally designed to monitor and evaluate the impact of norm-shifting interventions (Dhar et al., 2019). It asked four questions to probe norms related to age at marriage for girls:

- **Normative expectations:**
At what age do most people in your community think girls should be married?
- **Perceived sanctions for not meeting these expectations:**
If a girl is not married by this age, what would the community’s likely response be to her and her family?
- **Individual beliefs:**
At what age do you think girls should be married?
- **Recent norm changes:**
In the past year, do you know of any family in your community who married their daughters at an age that you believe was inappropriate?

A proportional sampling strategy was used. Data on the population of women aged 18 and above in each of the 11 provinces were collected from the Government Statistics Office and the national census to create representative sample sizes in each of the provinces.¹

Although the sample size was representative of the population of women in each province, the women interviewed in the survey were not randomly selected. Therefore, the interpretation of their views should be considered with an awareness of the limitations of a snowballing research design. We triangulated the responses with child marriage data in the Demographic and Health Surveys and the MICS to enhance our interpretation of results.

The mixed-methods approach facilitated a triangulation of the data, as the feedback from the FGDs allowed BISHNAW’s research team to measure the accuracy of the quantitative survey

¹ A standard sample size calculator assumed a 95% confidence level, 5% margin of error and 50% proportion, and a standard Z-score of 1.96. The sample sizes calculated from each of the provinces were large enough and representative enough to make a statistical inference from each province’s sample to the corresponding province population.

data and add texture to the survey findings to paint a more comprehensive picture of women's everyday realities.

3.2 Focus group discussions

In all, 11 FGDs were held (one per province) through WhatsApp group voice calls. These aimed to triangulate the survey findings, identify reasons for regressive norm change around girls' age at marriage suggested by the quantitative data, and discover if and how women are resisting these changes.

The respondents in the FGDs were regular participants in BISHNAW surveys and FGDs who were recruited through snowballing techniques. Their 'Women's Peace Circles' meet bi-monthly in a virtual group to discuss selected topics that are important in the evolving gender landscape. Each FGD was run by a local facilitator who enjoys a relationship of trust with participants.

3.3 Ethics

Enumerators conducted online surveys for BISHNAW from the safety of their homes, while community peace facilitators conducted in-person surveys and online FGDs with members of BISHNAW's Women's Peace Circles. Informed consent procedures were followed, and data for all respondents was fully anonymised. In addition, BISHNAW's database is protected by encryption and a firewall. No payment or incentive was provided to respondents in the telesurvey or face-to-face surveys, but small top-up support was provided for smartphone data costs. The tablets and smartphones used in data collection were protected through the use of a Mobile Security Guideline developed specifically for BISHNAW.

3.4 Data analysis

The data from the online survey informed the questions for the FGDs, which were recorded and translated into English, and thematically coded for analysis using MAXQDA software.

4 Survey Findings

This section presents results from the quantitative data collected from 2,799 women across 11 provinces. A descriptive data analysis is presented to indicate a variation of responses to each of the research questions outlined in Section 3.1 above.

4.1 Basic demographic characteristics of respondents

As noted, data was collected from 11 provinces, with the largest number of respondents from Herat province (430 respondents, 15% of the total

sample). The province with fewest respondents was Paktia (160 respondents, 6% of the sample; see Figure 2).

The respondents were asked to indicate their age. The majority (53%) were aged between 18 and 25 years, followed by women between ages 26–35 (27%) (see Figure 3). Only 3% of the total were aged 60 or above and 5% did not reveal their age. A combined total of 92% were aged between 18 and 59 years.

Figure 2 Distribution of participants by province

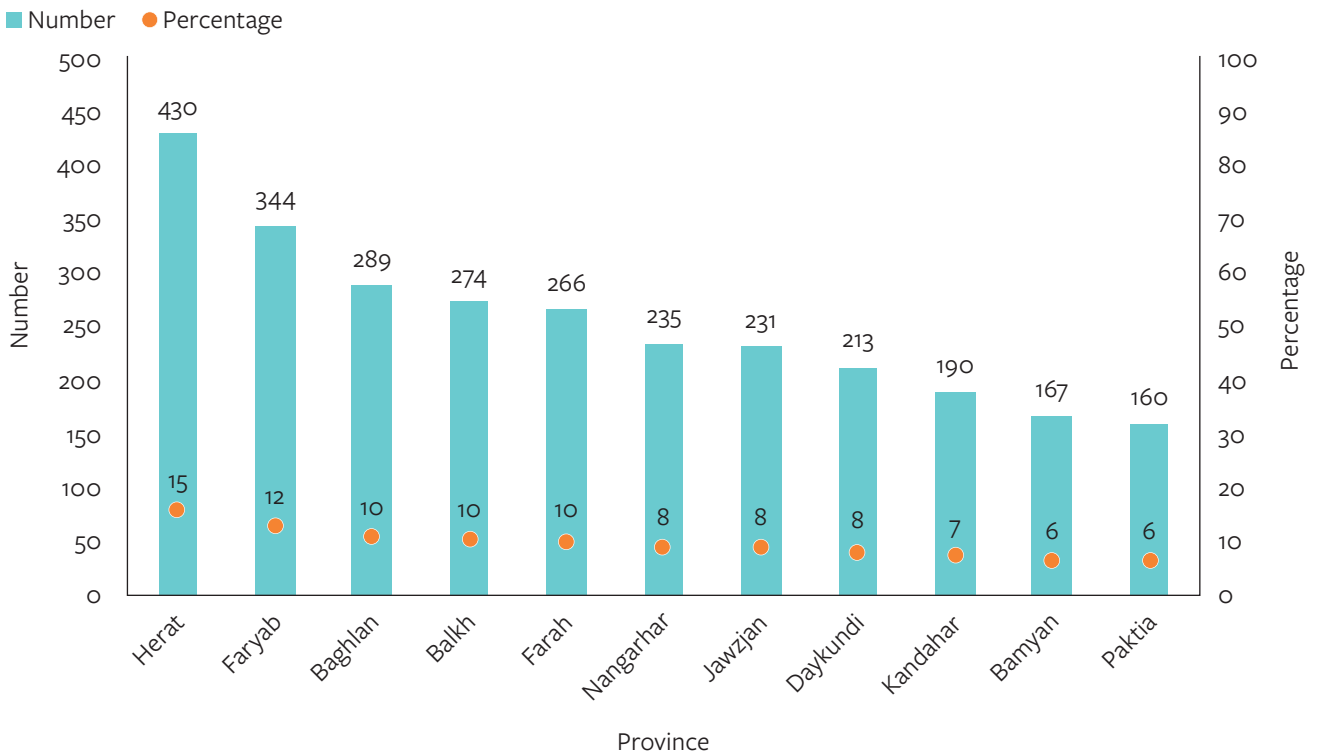


Figure 3 Percentage of respondents by age range

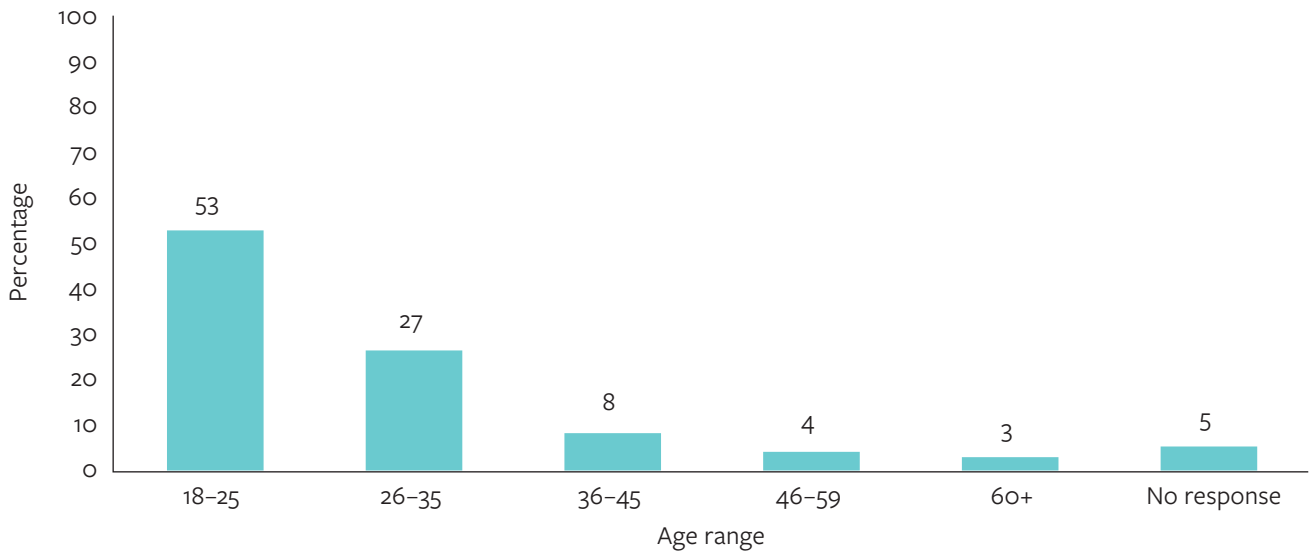
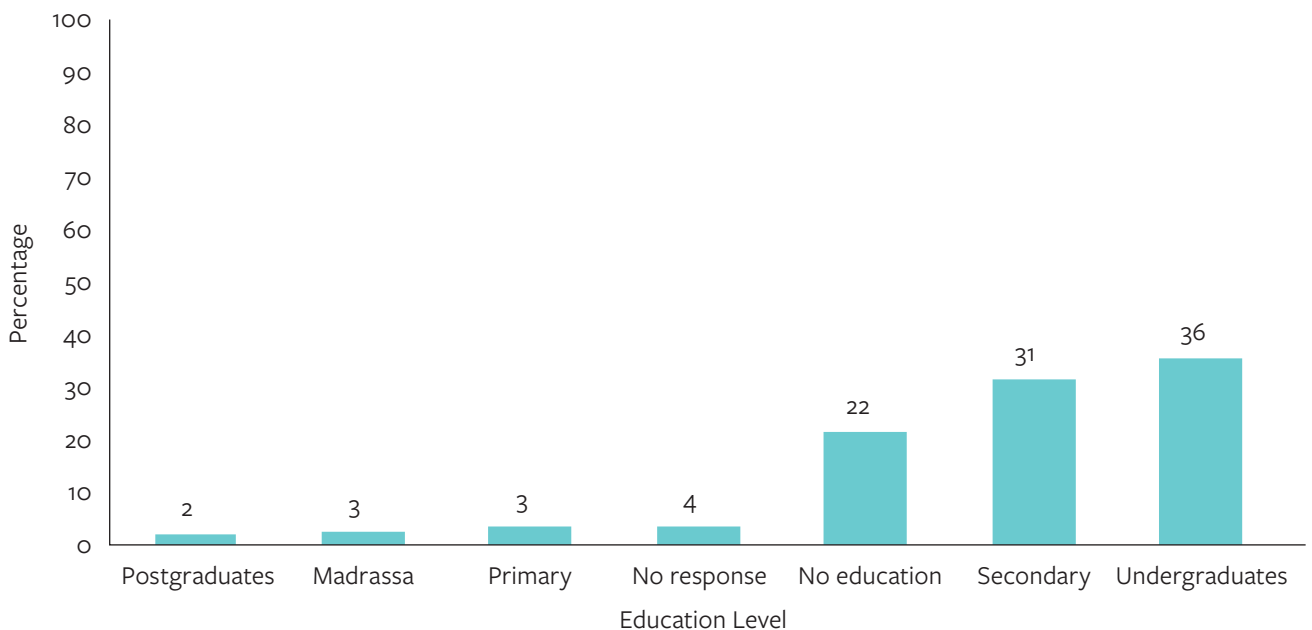


Figure 4 provides respondents' self-reported levels of education. These do not reflect national attainment statistics, which show a 40% attendance rate for girls at primary schools, and only 11.5% attendance at the upper secondary level (UNICEF and Afghan Reconstruction Trust Fund, 2023). A high percentage of our

respondents reported having reached secondary or higher education levels. This reflects the snowballing sampling technique, with a greater likelihood that an educated young woman participant would identify another participant with similar characteristics.

Figure 4 Participants' level of education



Most respondents reported having no income (see Figure 5). This was most likely due to the restrictions on their employment under the current Government.

Most were currently unemployed or homemakers (see Figure 6). Where women did cite their professions, they often referred to their work before the ban, signalling the continued importance of employment to their identities.

Figure 5 Income levels of respondents

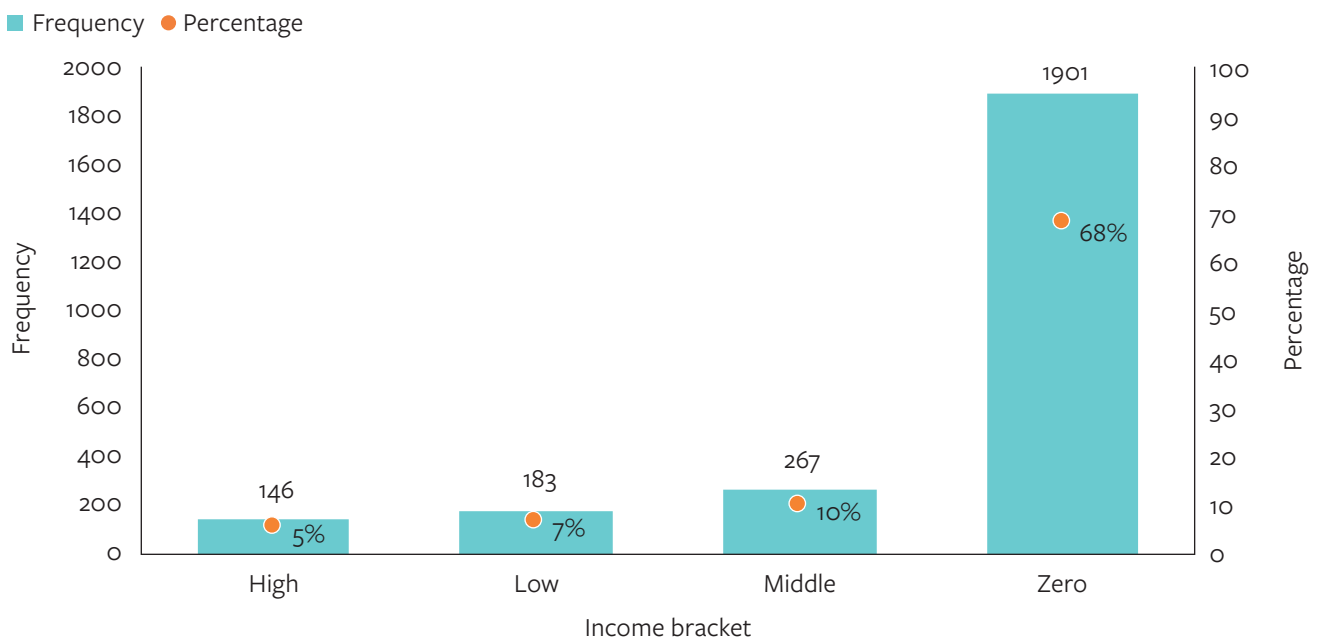
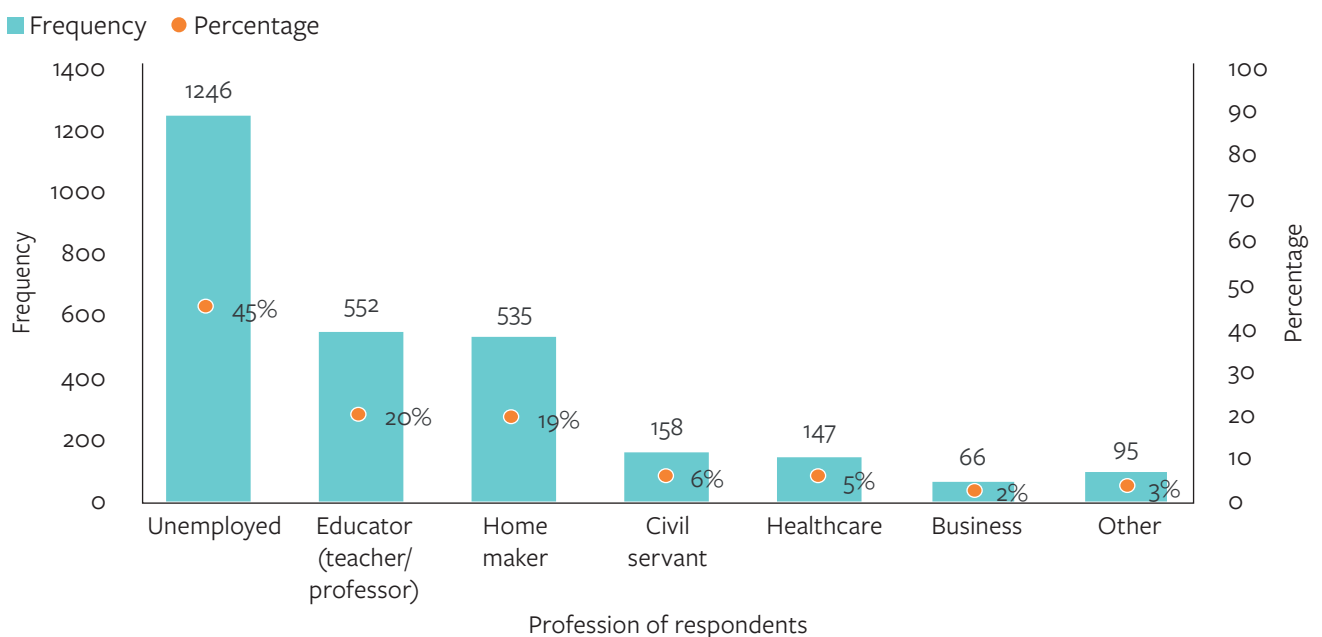


Figure 6 Profession of respondents



4.2 Age at marriage

We asked four questions to probe norms related to age at marriage for girls. This section presents the responses to each of the following questions.

Normative expectations:

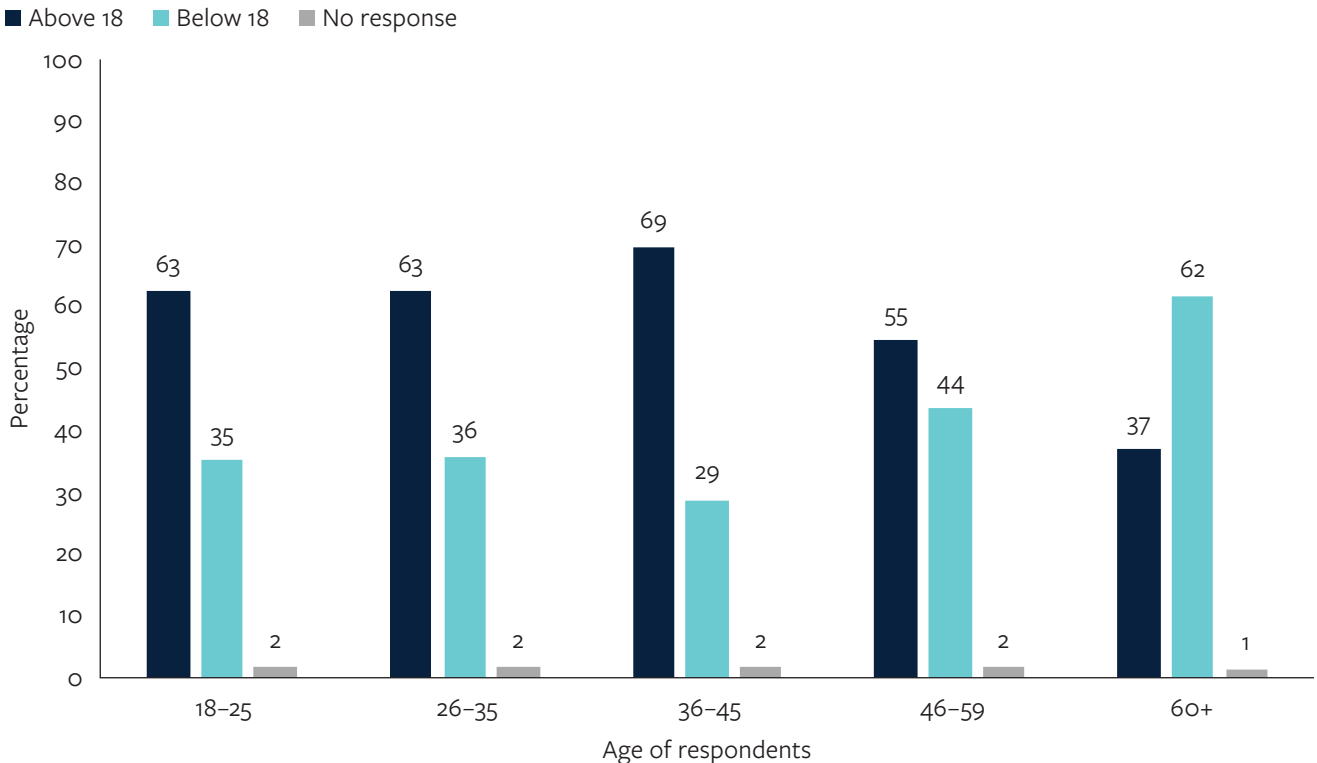
At what age do most people in your community think girls should be married?

The data captures respondents' perceptions of the appropriate age at marriage held by their communities, with the proportion of women

believing that their communities favour age at marriage above the age of 18 decreasing as the age group ascended (see Figure 7). Almost 63% of the youngest cohort (aged 18 to 25) said that their community saw the preferred age of marriage as being above 18, compared to only 37% of the oldest cohort (aged 60+).

The perceptions of respondents vary by province. Figure 8 shows that the majority of respondents in 8 of the 11 provinces (ranging from 62% to 93%) said that their communities believe that the appropriate age at marriage is between 18 and 25.

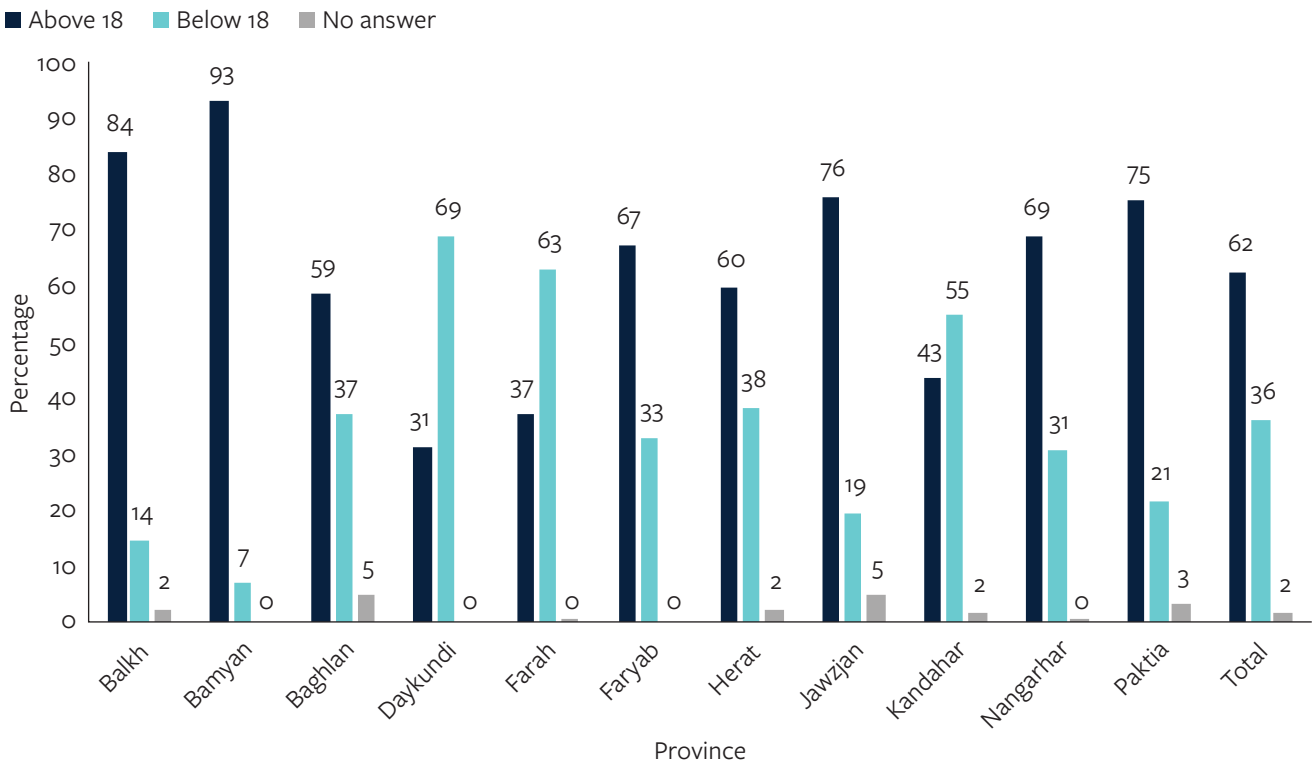
Figure 7 Respondents' views of community norms regarding appropriate age at marriage for girls (by age)



More respondents reported norms that favour marriage below the age of 18 than above it in Daykundi (69%), Farah (63%) and Kandahar (55%). In Daykundi province, the majority of respondents said that their communities perceived the appropriate age as

being between 12 and 15. This may be explained, in part, by the fact that in Daykundi the largest share (63%) of respondents were aged 60 and above, because respondents in that age group tend to report the community's perceived appropriate age as being below 18 (see Figure 8).

Figure 8 Respondents' views of community norms regarding appropriate age at marriage for girls (by province)



Many participants in Farah and Kandahar provinces also believe that their community's norms consider the appropriate age at marriage to be below 18 years. However, the proportion of respondents aged 60+ was not significant in those provinces, suggesting that the age of respondents is not the only explanation for this perceived norm (see section 4.2 for more).

Perceived sanctions for not meeting these expectations:

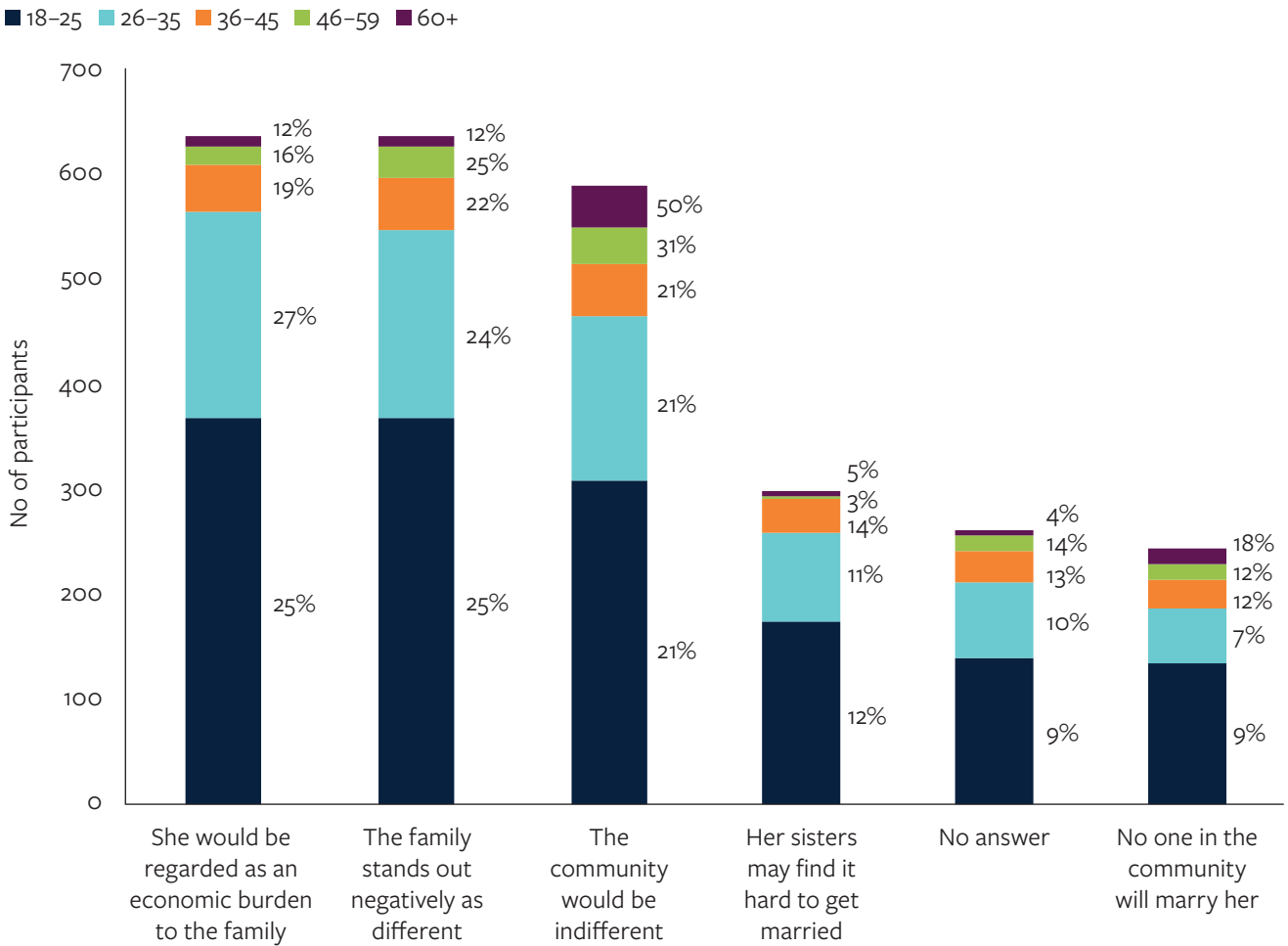
If a girl is not married by this age, what would the community's likely response be to her and her family?

A combined total of 48% of respondents said that if a girl does not marry by the socially approved age, it will have negative repercussions for the family (see Figure 9). Many respondents said that their

communities think that either the girl will be seen as an economic burden to the family, or the family will stand out in a negative way as being 'different'.

Among older women (aged 60+), 18% said that no one in the community will marry girls who are above the age seen as appropriate, while younger women (aged 18 to 35) said that not getting married is more likely to reflect badly on the family. However, a large share of respondents across age groups think that the community is indifferent or does not necessarily care at what age a girl gets married. Surprisingly, 50% of the oldest cohort hold this view and only 12% worry that the family will stand out as different while around 25% of younger women share this concern. The different age groups are, therefore, more concerned about different forms of social pressure as a result of not being married by the right age.

Figure 9 Respondents' views of community responses if a girl is not married by the appropriate age at marriage



We disaggregated these results to examine whether women with different levels of education had different views on this question but found no significant differences by education level. Similarly, we did not find strong or consistent provincial variation across our survey responses.

Individual beliefs:

At what age do you think girls should be married?

Respondents were also asked what they personally perceived as being the most appropriate age at

which a girl child should get married. Almost 70% reported that they considered 18 to 25 years as appropriate (see Figure 10). A combined total of 88% of individual respondents believe that the appropriate age at marriage is 18 years and above.

Disaggregated by age range, most respondents aged 18 through to 59 clearly think that the appropriate age for marriage is between the ages of 18 and 25 years (see Figure 11). However, most older respondents aged 60 and above think that the appropriate age at marriage is between 12 and 15 years.

Figure 10 Respondents' individual perceptions of appropriate age at marriage

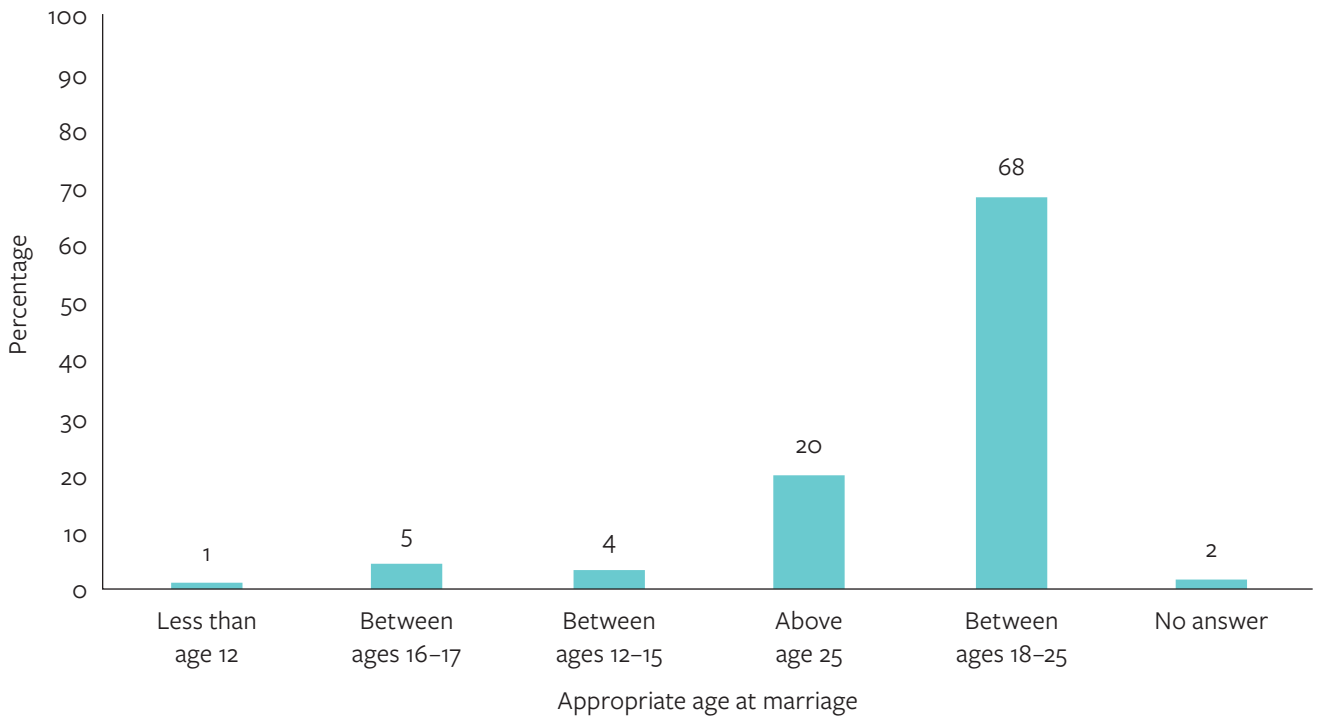


Figure 11 Appropriate age of marriage by age of respondents

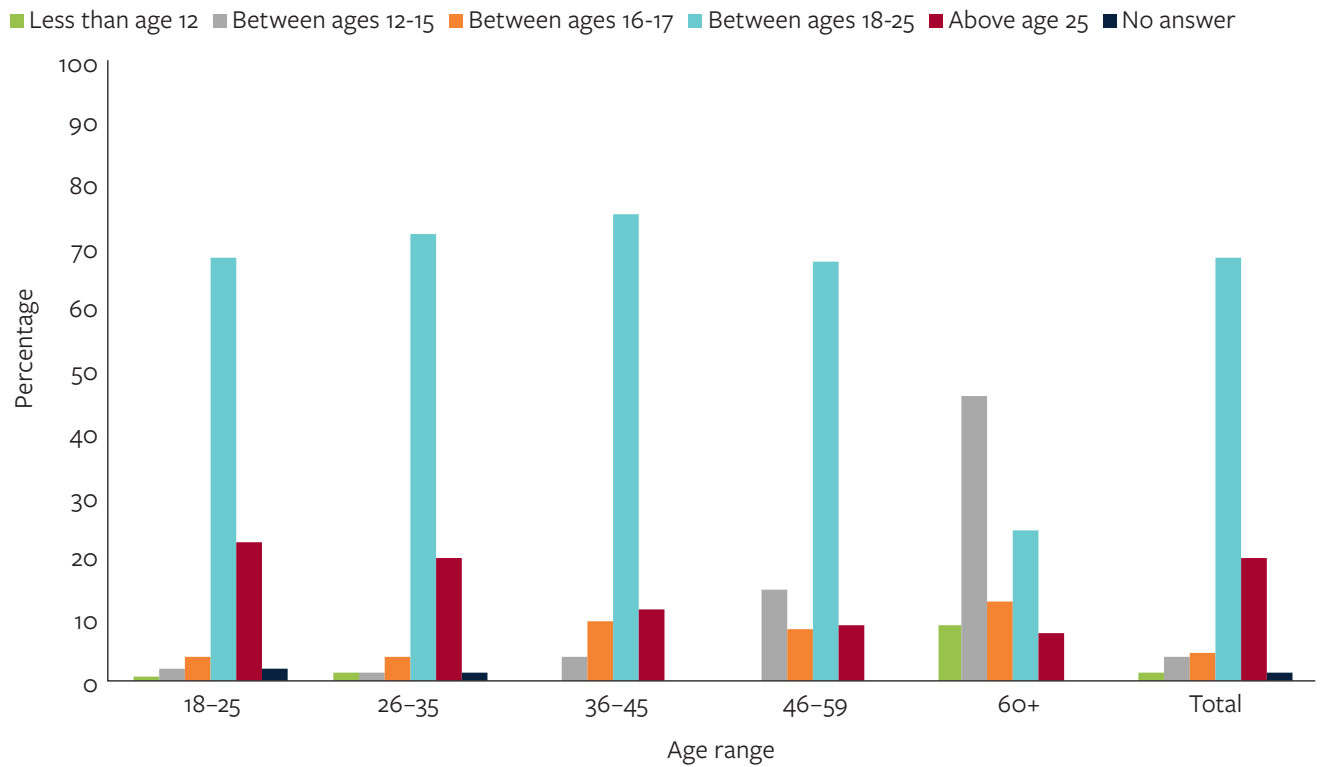
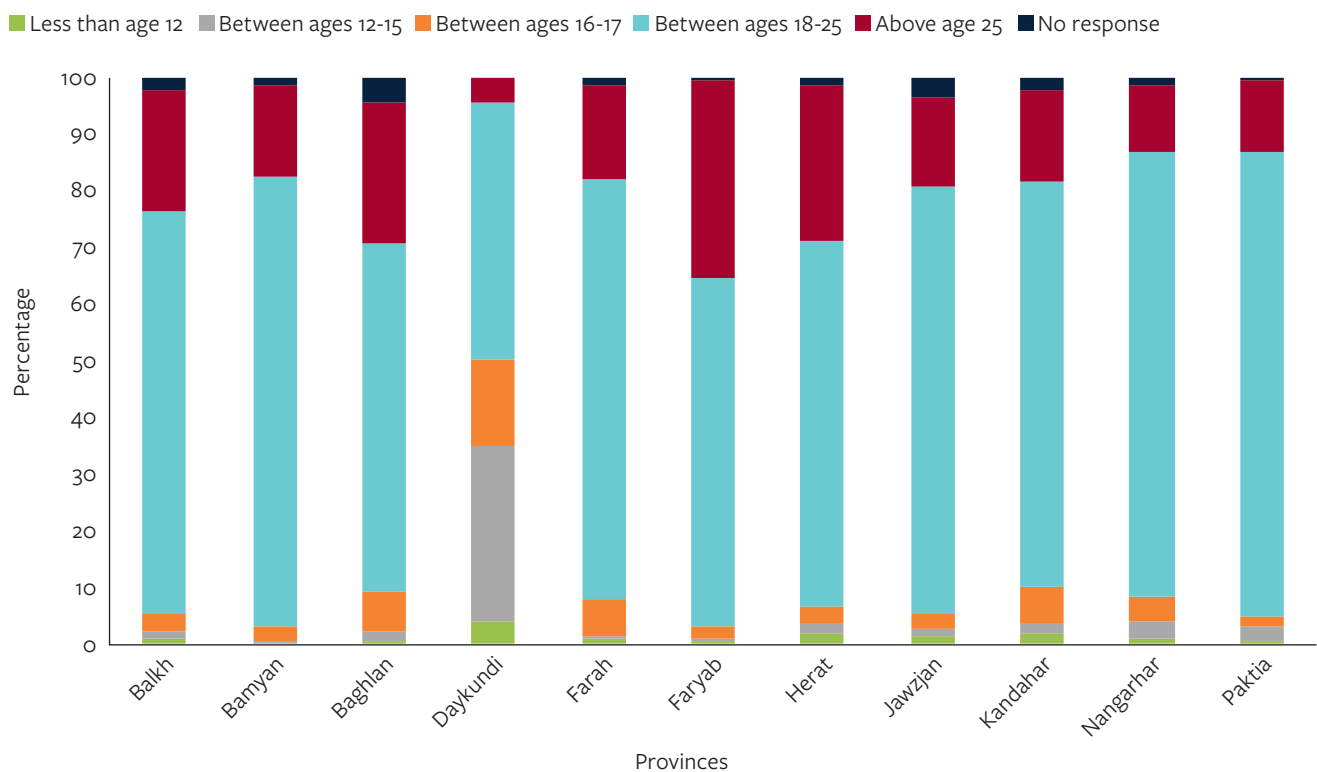


Figure 12 shows the respondents’ perceptions by their provinces. In general, most individuals think that the appropriate age at marriage is between 18 and 25, followed by ages above 25 years. In Daykundi province, however, a combined total of

46% say that the appropriate age is between 12 and 17 years; 31% say that the age at which a girl child should get married is between 12 and 15; and 15% say it is between 16 and 17.

Figure 12 Appropriate age at marriage by provinces



Recent norm changes:

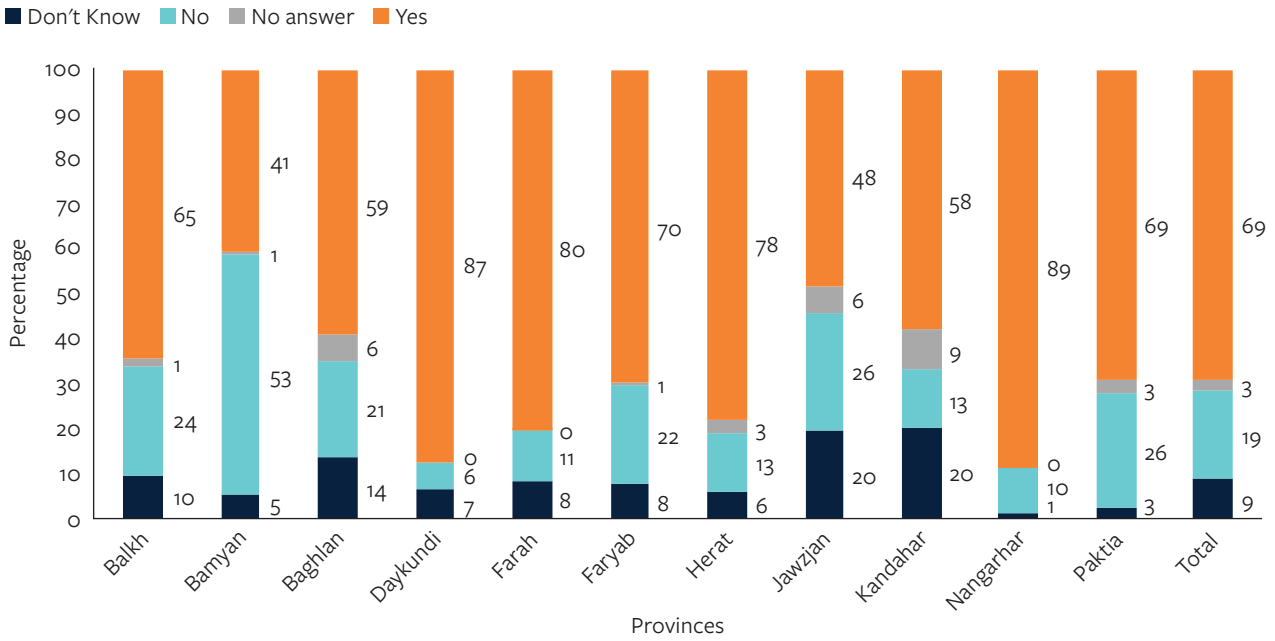
In the past year, do you know of any family in your community that married its daughters at an age that you believe was inappropriate?

The final question in the survey asked respondents if they knew of any family in their community that married its daughters ‘at an age that you believe was inappropriate’ (see Figure 13). About 69% of the total sample responded ‘Yes’. (What respondents deem to be underage may vary and

their responses may reflect the individual preference shown in Figure 10.)

In Daykundi, Farah and Nangarhar provinces, more than 80% of respondents said they knew at least one family that married a child at an inappropriate age. This could indicate that in these provinces, the practice of child marriages is more common. While the percentages are also high in most other provinces, more than half of the respondents in Bamyan (53%) said they did not know any families that married their underage daughters.

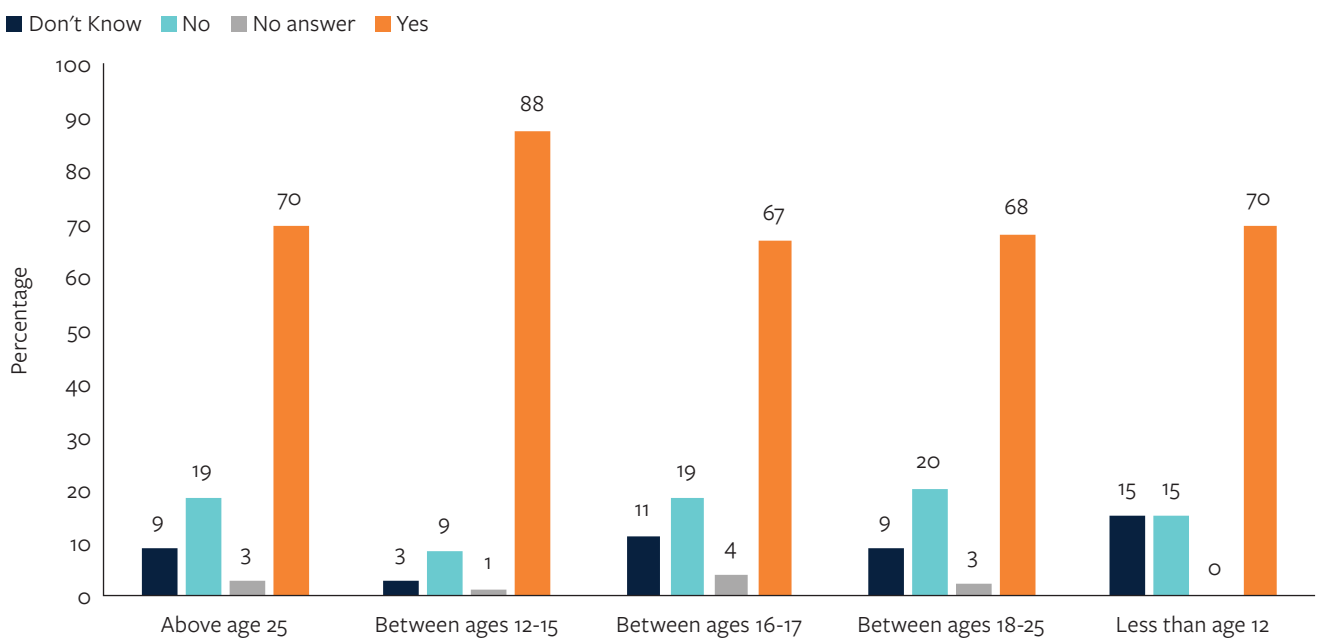
Figure 13 Knowledge of inappropriate age at marriage (by province)



Regardless of respondents' opinions on the appropriate age at marriage, the majority of them knew of someone who had been married at an inappropriate age. Figure 14 shows, for example,

that 70% of respondents who believe that the appropriate age at marriage is above 25 years knew someone who was married at an inappropriate age (at any time below the age of 25, in this case).

Figure 14 Knowledge of inappropriate age at marriage (by respondents' age)



Summary of quantitative results

The analysis of this quantitative data shows that the majority of respondents perceive the appropriate age at marriage to be between 18 and 25 years. This is true for respondents' individual normative standards as well as their perceptions of community norms. However, one key finding is the variation in responses by age, with older respondents more likely to perceive a lower appropriate age range

for girls' marriages. This suggests generational differences and changes in the perceptions between respondents of different age groups. The results also show that, if a girl child is not married at what is seen as appropriate time, she may be perceived as a burden to the family, and it may have a negative impact on the family's standing in the community. Of greatest concern is the fact that most respondents know of specific instances of girls being married below an appropriate age.

5 Focus group findings

We held 11 focus group discussions online with groups of women aged 18 to 49, about half of them married with children. They were mostly educated, with experience of working in NGOs, or as social activists, teachers, health workers, entrepreneurs, journalists or former government employees. Most were aged 20 to 35 (an accurate reflection of Afghanistan's youth bulge), and we note that our sample consisted mainly of younger women. Almost all had attained a bachelor's degree, but at the time of data collection many had little or no income, reflecting the lack of economic opportunities for women.

As the views expressed in our FGDs reflect the more educated and well-informed demographic cohort, their insights – while not fully representative – are based on a deep knowledge of their communities. Incorporating the perspectives of this cohort enriches the overall dataset, offering a more comprehensive and multi-dimensional understanding of the norms around age at marriage, and valuable insights into community dynamics.

Each FGD explored the current age at which girls in their communities are getting married, and how current conditions have had an impact on attitudes towards the age of marriage. We also asked our participants if they had observed cases of women resisting Taliban restrictions, and how a girl, or her family, may act to delay an underage marriage.

5.1 Marriage norms

We present our qualitative findings by discussing community attitudes, family decision-making, social change and the Taliban's impact on

marriage norms. We end the section with further observations about the impact of ongoing instability and insecurity on age at marriage.

5.1.1 Community attitudes

While our quantitative survey results show that most respondents think that the appropriate age at marriage is between 18 and 25, an analysis of the FGDs paints a more complex picture of the actual perceived age at marriage by families and communities and the factors that influence this decision.

Participants explained that a girl is often deemed ready for marriage upon reaching puberty, which tends to happen before the legal age of 16, which was in place before the Taliban takeover: 'Educated parents consider 10–25 years as age of marriage for their daughters' (FGD, Nangarhar). Yet despite this wide range, participants often said the age at which most families decide on marriage for their daughter is 14 to 18.

'In Farah province, people marry their daughters at different ages; for instance, it starts from the age of 13 years. I once witnessed a woman who was angry with her daughter saying that you should be ashamed of yourself that you haven't been married at this age while other girls in her family were already married at the age of 13.' (FGD, Farah)

A few participants said their communities believe that the acceptable age range for marriage is broader: between 16 and 25 years. Yet as one woman from Kandahar estimated, half of the girls in her community are married between the ages of 12 and 15 (which would correspond to the start of

puberty). The remaining 30% of girls are married at the ages of 15 or 16 and the rest between the ages of 19 and 25 (FGD, Kandahar).

FGD participants agreed that child, early and forced marriage was always more common in rural areas than in cities. Participants from Balkh, Bamyan, Farah, Faryab, Herat, Jawzjan and Kandahar were all of the view that while early marriage has increased in villages since the Taliban takeover, it was always a norm in rural areas.

‘The problem of forced and underage marriage is usually serious in the villages or remote areas due to lack of education and lack of awareness. In the villages, there have been cases when they married a newborn girl child to an old man, but in cities people are more educated and are aware of and respect the decision of their daughters.’ (FGD, Farah)

Factors such as the level of awareness in families, literacy, access to schools and universities, and employment opportunities were all regarded as contributing factors to the lower prevalence of early marriage in cities. However, participants also argued that the sharpest rise in early marriage can now be seen in cities, which they attribute to the effect of Taliban restrictions on other opportunities for women and girls.

5.1.2 How marriage decisions are made

Our participants reported that the decision around marriage is determined mainly by families, but not by the girls and boys concerned. However, family decisions are not uniform.

‘In the community where I live, the families have different mentalities and understandings. Some of them let the girls get married at their

legal age, but in some families, girls get married at young ages like at 13, 14 or 15 years old.’ (FGD, Jawzjan)

Families balance multiple considerations that include:

- their geographic location;
- the extent of the impact of Taliban restrictions on education, employment and mobility;
- the security conditions in their province;
- and the awareness level of communities.

Our data suggest that communities may be well aware of the formal legal age, even if they do not necessarily comply with it.

The influence of communities was not mentioned as a determining factor in deciding when a girl is to be married. Instead, FGD participants say that families decide the age of marriage for their daughters. They explained that fathers and close male relatives have the biggest influence on these decisions. As one respondent from Daykundi said:

‘In every family patriarchy is being promoted, no one listens to girls, sisters and mothers in those families. Only men decide everything, and no one can do anything.’ (FGD, Daykundi)

5.1.3 Social change and its impact on marriage norms

The FGD data, based on the views of participants who are aged predominantly 20 to 35, supports our survey results indicating that younger cohorts are shifting norms around age at marriage. Some believe this shift is a result of the reconstruction and development efforts that took place during the Republic period. As one FGD participant noted:

‘It took 20 years for people to change their minds and move towards positive changes. Laws were created and implemented and if anyone acted against the law, they would have been punished.’ (FGD, Herat)

FGD respondents across all 11 provinces believe that early and forced marriage decreased during the Republic period. They say that opportunities for education and employment enabled women and girls to convince their families to delay their marriage and gave them more autonomy to make decisions regarding marriage. Individual choice, a legitimate government and the existence of laws and institutions that promoted and protected women’s rights were underscored as key factors that shaped local decisions and attitudes towards marriage by the FGD participants.

Almost all FGDs cited an increase in awareness of the negative repercussions of early or forced marriage by families as a contributing factor to the progressive shift in local mindsets. In Herat, for example, awareness-raising programmes on women’s rights enhanced the knowledge of local communities. The FGDs also observed the complementary linkages between awareness and education that were critical to reducing early and forced marriage before the Taliban takeover.

‘In the past we had laws and regulations that defended the rights of women and girls, we had institutions that supported women and girls, and besides, the level of awareness and education of people had increased and all these together had contribution in respect to the rights of women and girls. The biggest contribution to the change in situation now is the economic crisis and ban on education.’ (FGD, Herat)

During the Republic, people felt that it was possible to approach the Government, women’s organisations and shelters to address conflicts around early or forced marriage. Government entities were seen as accessible, and as offering spaces where women and girls felt ‘their voice could be heard’, said one respondent from Kandahar.

In those years, in Farah, Faryab, Herat, Kandahar and Paktia provinces, girls were described as having autonomy to choose or reject a marriage proposal – an autonomy that was a result of a few key factors, two of them being able to study and work. A girl or young woman was able to negotiate with her family by sharing her intention to complete her education before marriage, or even ask for a delay until she was financially independent.

‘In the past, boys and girls of many families were working and they were thinking of going for higher education such as master’s or PhDs and they used to say: let us stand on our feet and become independent economically before we get married. But now most of the families think there are no opportunities.’ (FGD, Daykundi)

Girls’ autonomy was dependent on their ability to access education and employment. Those earning a salary also helped to ease the financial burden on their families. FGD participants mentioned that this made families more inclined to listen to, and consider, the decisions of their daughters.

The FGDs confirmed that the Republic era provided some of the conditions, such as education, employment and health care, that paved the way for shifting norms on the age of marriage. While there was no comprehensive change in norms during the Republic, and 16 remained the legal age of marriage, the start of a norm shift was evident – a shift that was halted by

the Taliban takeover. The slow shift that was made during the Republic is reflected over rounds of BISHNAW surveys, as women and girls in certain sectors of the population indicate that 18 should be the minimum age at marriage.

5.1.4 The Taliban and marriage norms

The Taliban takeover has broken the fragile institutions put in place to protect women and girls during the Republic.

‘As the previous government collapsed, the situation changed to become like a cancer that has destroyed everything. I cannot imagine a situation worse than this for women and girls in Afghanistan.’ (FGD, Herat)

Participants described the current Islamic Emirate as:

‘lawless, totally traditional and religious.’ (FGD, Herat)

They said that there was no place for women and girls to go when they need help and, in particular, no access to justice institutions (FGD, Kandahar).

As we know, child marriage can be both a social norm and a response to crisis. Our participants believe the economic, political and security crises that unfolded with the re-emergence of the Taliban have increased pressures on families to choose early and forced marriages for their daughters. Respondents argue, for example, that girls who were working or studying could not be forced as much by their families into marriage before the Taliban takeover (FGD, Kandahar).

‘But now girls do not have a choice. As soon as a family receives a proposal, they decide on marrying their daughters since they fear that

their daughters will remain uneducated, but they don’t want them to remain unmarried.’ (FGD, Farah)

‘I know families that had married their girls at the age of 14, since the parents think, what would the girl do – sitting at home and doing nothing? So better to be married off. Currently, families have set one goal for their girls and that is getting married, and they should achieve this goal as soon as possible.’ (FGD, Herat)

The ban on education has been identified as the predominant factor leading to child, early and forced marriage. FGD participants explained that as a result of the Taliban’s vague directives about when they will re-open education facilities for girls, families feel less hopeful about the future of their children. Without the opportunities for work and study, ‘the only option families see for their daughters is to get married and start their marital life’ (FGD, Balkh).

Being stripped of their right to education has also stripped girls of their right to speak up within their family and resist early and forced marriage. Discussing the recent marriage of a 14-year-old girl to a man aged 36, one participant reflected:

‘We know that when girls are not given their right to get education, their right to marriage falls into the hands of their parents, the right to divorce falls in the hand of husband and the girls have no rights.’ (FGD participant, aged 23, Kandahar)

When women and girls were able to work and earn a living, they shared the family’s financial burdens which allowed them more autonomy. A girl rendered jobless may lead to her marriage, ‘in exchange for money, since families cannot afford to have big families especially where there are more girls’ (FGD participant, aged 22, Nangarhar).

FGD participants from Herat provided a discerning description of why they believe child and forced marriages have increased under the Islamic Emirate. They explained that the issues of marriage in Afghanistan and its interpretation through Shariah were largely a matter of personal opinions prior to the Taliban takeover.

They recalled that the Republic had put in place laws and regulations to prevent child, early and forced marriage and protect the rights of women and girls. In contrast, by defining the age of marriage and consent solely based on their interpretation of Shariah, the Islamic Emirate is, in effect, endorsing child and early marriage of girls.

Our respondents found this ruling particularly damaging for rural communities because they are perceived to be less inclined to question the Taliban's interpretation of Shariah.

‘When the government of a country announces the age of marriage based on Shariah, and being Muslims, at least 80–90% of the people living in far districts or villages believe that what Shariah says is right and they must follow.’ (FGD, Herat)

Participants shared their perceptions of how the impact of the Taliban may have affected rural communities differently because of pre-existing norms and vulnerabilities. They described rural areas as more traditional, with greater restrictions on a girl's independent decision-making.

‘The marriage age is different in villages and cities, for example in villages the marriage age is 13, 14 or 16 and the family decides the girl should marry because there are no schools. So, the girls start their married life early.’ (FGD, Faryab)

Early marriage norms have only been reinforced by the lack of education and work opportunities.

Historically, there were fewer such opportunities in rural areas, and they are now being severely curtailed in urban areas as well.

The impact of the humanitarian crisis on already vulnerable communities in rural areas has made underage and forced marriage seem like a viable response. One participant describes the dilemma families face in making these difficult decisions.

‘A father that has four to five daughters says he was hopeful in the past that the girls will finish studies and will work and become independent, but with no opportunities now, how would I provide them food? I have to find a solution and the solution is to give them for marriage as soon as possible. In the districts and villages of Herat the situation is even worse, people actually sell their little girls.’ (FGD, Herat)

In addition to these observations about rural areas, participants also observed that local attitudes in cities also became more inclined towards an earlier age of marriage once girls were banned from school and universities, unable to leave homes without a *mahram* (male relative) and banned from work.

5.2 Instability and insecurity

The transformation of the political landscape in Afghanistan following the collapse of the Republic was cited as being significant for parents' decisions to marry their daughters quickly. The phrase ‘the situation is not good’ was often used by FGD participants to describe how communities view the current environment.

Fear of forced marriage to the Taliban is pushing families across the country to deploy marriage as a strategy to protect their young daughters.

‘In the beginning when Taliban took over Afghanistan, there was a rumour, if a girl was above 18 and single, then Taliban will marry them, people were afraid, and so they married their underage girls.’ (FGD participant, aged 28, Faryab)

‘Taliban has announced that girls should get married at the age of 18, and if they remain unmarried Taliban will get married to them. That’s why the girls get married in young age, because the families don’t want their daughter to get married to Taliban.’ (FGD participant, aged 28, Jawzjan)

Participants from Daykundi, Faryab, Jawzjan and Kandahar described families forced by the Taliban to accept their marriage proposals.

‘I know a girl who was a medical student, and she was also engaged, a Talib used to follow her on her way to home every day. One day he sent a marriage proposal for her. When her family refused saying, ‘she is already engaged’, then he started to threaten her family that he will kill the girl and her father. He forced the family to marry the girl.’ (FGD participant, aged 27, Faryab)

Families do try to resist proposals from the Taliban. Some outright reject proposals while others lie about the marital status of their daughters, fearing that rejection might provoke the Taliban to resort to violence. In the northern province of Balkh, one participant, aged 25, said ‘In my neighbourhood I know many families that have got many marriage proposals for their daughter from Taliban, but they have rejected it by saying their daughters are already engaged.’ Early marriage appears to be one of the safest forms of resistance to proposals from the Taliban.

In Baghlan, an FGD participant explained that local religious figures have become complicit in Taliban

efforts to solicit marriage proposals. She explained that local *imams* send marriage proposals to families with unmarried daughters. If the families reject these proposals, they must either flee the province or face repercussions from the Taliban. Since most families cannot afford to leave, they try to marry their daughters as soon as possible to keep them safe (FGD, Faryab).

In some cases, families accept Taliban proposals because of the bride price or the power and protection it grants them to be associated with a Talib. In Herat, for example, a FGD participant said:

‘In the past two years, there are thousands of cases where Taliban have married young girls in exchange for money, and families agree to marry their daughters to Taliban for being in power.’ (FGD, Herat)

Each new restriction, such as the recent closure of women’s beauty parlours, brings with it the risks that these discriminatory policies will become normalised over time. As long as Taliban restrictions are in place, the conditions for early and forced marriages will worsen.

‘If we see 50% of change in communities now, in a few years we will see a 90% change in their behaviour around girls age of marriage. Only 10% will be left who support their girls.’ (FGD, 25, Farah)

In Kandahar, for example,

‘The community has changed attitudes drastically and if the situation remains the same, the communities will change even more. A family may not be even thinking of marrying the girl but the community members interfere and tell them to marry their daughter, even at the age of 12.’ (FGD, Kandahar)

This finding suggests that families are becoming more influenced by their communities when it comes to decision-making around girls' marriages as a result of growing Taliban influence. Our respondents also observe that although the rural and urban divide still exists, with urban areas being relatively more open to the rights of women and girls, this divide is narrowing, and rural-urban norms may start to blend in a way that is detrimental to progress.

Respondents argue that the silence on the part of the international community and local and international organisations in the response to Taliban restrictions has allowed this situation to worsen:

'If the international community and other organisations remain silent, these restrictions will become normal for people, and its future will not be good.' (FGD participant, aged 30, married, Daykundi)

5.3 Resistance to early marriage

Our women participants reported feeling hopeless and without a future since the Taliban takeover, leaving marriage at a young age as one of the only available life paths. But within this narrative, they observe everyday resistances and attempts to exercise different choices, which show glimmers of alternative possibilities for girls.

They suggested that girls who don't want to marry should talk to their family members, noting that early marriages can be stopped if parents choose to do so. Although fathers hold the ultimate decision-making power over children's marriages, mothers have a role to play.

'Women and mothers can save their daughters from underage and forced marriages, they can talk to the man of the family and to the father, and can convince them not to sacrifice their daughter for the current situation.' (FGD, Daykundi)

Mothers are visible in the discussions as sources of solidarity and support, with the implicit assumption that women do not support early marriages for their daughters. Our respondents perceive mothers as supportive and available to their daughters, and as having some influence over their husbands.

Other family members, particularly those who command respect, are seen as being able to intervene on behalf of girls. One respondent said:

'In my family we have an elder who is my uncle. When our family do not support me on an issue, I go to my uncle, and he will find a solution that is acceptable to all. In many families the elder women/grandmothers are useful, and they can help because others would listen to them.' (FGD, Kandahar)

We heard one story of successful resistance to marriage, which gathered support from wider family networks to convince the girl's father:

'A girl got engaged at the age of 10 to her cousin. After some years she was not satisfied with this relationship, because she was a kid when she got engaged. She tried to talk to her parents and to convince them, but she couldn't convince her father. Then she talked to her uncles and aunts and elders of her family, and all of them helped her to convince her father and to stop this marriage from happening. Finally, the family elders convinced her father to stop the marriage.' (FGD, Jawzjan)

Respondents identified a chronic lack of outside support for the prevention of early marriage, support that used to exist before the Taliban. Today, they say there are no government or civil society organisations where a girl can find help to prevent a marriage. Their descriptions imply that the prevention of child marriage now relies on parents alone, and that they are the only ones who can offer the resources and awareness to find different options for their children.

The main external source of support mentioned was the possibility of *imams* exerting their influence.

‘If the marriage proposal is from the family [uncle or aunts] then the girl can talk to her parents and solve the issue. If it’s from outside the family, and someone powerful, then the girl and her family can talk to imams of the mosque and family elders to solve this problem.’ (FGD, Balkh)

Participants still regard marriage as an institution governed by Islam, rather than law or government policy.

‘Girls can talk to their families about the laws and conditions of marriage according to Islam and the Qur’an, because in our communities families are very religious, so she can convince her family. One of the marriage conditions in Qur’an is that both girl and boy must consent to the marriage, and they have the right to choose, if still the family is not convinced then they can talk to the Imam of the mosque to help them.’ (FGD, Baghlan)

Imams are sources of authority, and families may listen to them if they support delaying a marriage. However, the different schools of Islamic jurisprudence upon which these religious figures

rely do not necessarily agree on regulations around marriage. Even the Hanafi school, which the Taliban seeks to impose in a highly rigid form, offers diversity in legal interpretations (Mandaville, 2020).

Finally, our respondents, who are mostly well-educated activists, said that they themselves might be able to intervene in cases of forced marriage. Respondents reported mixed success when they tried to intervene. In one case a respondent’s family even organised a tribal council, or *jirga*, to help a girl being forced into an early marriage, but her parents rejected its decision (FGD, Kandahar).

‘Very recently I witnessed the marriage of a 14-year-old girl to a 50-year-old man. The girl wasn’t happy but had to accept the marriage. Her mother came to my house and said that her daughter even attempted suicide, but she couldn’t stop the marriage. The mother was not able to help her daughter and none of the relatives could help since the man was a Taliban member. There are many such incidents and many young girls have been married to older people.’ (FGD Kandahar)

The Taliban rule was identified by our respondents as exacerbating the pre-existing structural drivers of child marriage. They described the bans on girls’ education and employment as deepening the family’s poverty, reducing girls’ agency, and reframing girls as only useful as wives. Respondents understood girls’ financial independence and education as empowerment that would support their free choice over marriage. As one respondent from Farah province stated, ‘Now, they have to obey the men since they depend on men’.

Our respondents mentioned awareness-raising for parents as a possible way to resist the negative consequences of early marriage,

along with poverty reduction and opportunities for girls' education and employment. Current strategies rely on advocates against early marriage intervening directly with families, with little help from NGOs or the international community. There is a strong sense that the Taliban takeover has destroyed years of slow change.

5.4 Resistance to Taliban

We asked our respondents if they were aware of any acts of resistance to Taliban restrictions. Bearing in mind that our sample consisted of mostly younger, unmarried women with a profile in rights-based activism, their responses show the possibilities for everyday resistance. They also reveal an encouraging picture of underground activity centred on education, income generation and solidarity networks. Women also framed everyday activities and practices in terms of resistance, such as participating in our research or talking to friends, along with more overt forms such as street protests.

Respondents across provinces and demographics mentioned the existence of secret schools and online classes for girls. Girls who have been banned from formal education are finding creative ways to continue learning. Schools are sometimes set up in a physical location, disguised as a business or *madrassa*, and sometimes take place in someone's house. We were unable to assess the quality of the education on offer, but women teach school subjects to the best of their ability, and offer vocational training in sewing, baking and computer classes.

'I think all women and girls in Afghanistan resist in different ways. Many women and girls who were working or studying in the university, they have started creating schools or courses at home.' (FGD, Kandahar)

'A girl has opened a [training] centre for girls, but there she used to teach girls maths, physics and English to prepare them for the exams. They have hope someday they would be able to take these exams. I am also taking some online classes, and trying to motivate myself.' (FGD, Faryab)

'I have started a class at home for girls at different levels and I encourage them that they should continue to study, so that when schools are opened, they will be ready to be promoted to the next grades.' (FGD, Nangarhar)

Many respondents knew of girls taking part in online classes, often language courses, and one-off workshops. Respondents sometimes teach online to earn an income, and girls seem to participate in these classes, which rely on Internet access and mobile phones – assets that are more readily available to wealthier families in urban areas. Online learning is presumably less risky for girls because they can do it from home, and the authorities are less likely to be able to identify participants. It is unclear if family members support girls' learning, but a few respondents mentioned family concerns about girls being caught and punished.

Continuing education represents hope, as seen in the quotes above, that formal schools will reopen one day, and that girls may resume their studies from where they left off. Our respondents view secret schooling as a lifeline to the possibility of a better future.

Holding on to hope for a better future is deeply important in a crisis, as our respondents also talk about feeling a crushing despair in the current circumstances. Learning is also described as 'keeping girls busy' with positive activities and preventing depression, as well as increasing their knowledge. Educational activities may be small-

scale and clandestine, but they are seen as a form of direct resistance against Taliban edicts.

Banned from most formal employment, many women have turned to informal work. Our respondents frame this as a form of resistance to Taliban restrictions.

‘I know many women in my community who do small pieces of work to earn something for the family, such as sewing. Because they cannot do anything else to resist the current situation, they keep busy in these small works and show their resistance.’ (FGD, Paktia)

‘Before, women used to work in offices, now they are working from home, they are sewing clothes, training other girls to sew clothes, women are teaching English language online to have income, others keep themselves busy reading books, this is how women are resisting these restrictions.’ (FGD, Baghlan)

Women describe under-the-radar small businesses that operate from home, doing traditionally gendered activities like mending clothes, embroidery and baking. Male family members can take handicrafts to markets to sell.

Women are defying many Taliban restrictions – travelling alone, working, refusing to get married,

and participating in community activism – but it would put our respondents at risk to describe these in too much detail. Some women are, on occasion, able to carry out resistance activities, showing that Taliban control is not absolute. One province stands out as unusual in our data, which remains unnamed for security reasons. Here, women reported that girls are studying, working and, at the beginning of Taliban rule, even protesting on the streets.

‘In our area, girls have access to every kind of job, such as sewing clothes, embroidery and other things. There are many online universities, girls are pursuing their master’s degrees: all these universities are free and provide valid international degrees. Many girls are teaching Islamic subjects; every girl is busy as a student or a teacher.’ (FGD, Jawzjan)

‘Many women raised their voices in media, many of them protested on the roads, women are studying and teaching online, somehow every woman is trying to resist.’ (FGD, Jawzjan)

These examples of resistance indicate there may still be opportunities to support civil activism for women’s rights. Although there is a climate of fear, and oppressive restrictions are still increasing, women are still using their skills and resources to retain some hope for a better future.

6 Implications and recommendations

Child marriage has remained an enduring problem in Afghanistan for many years, spanning different political regimes. Recent national survey data suggest that government policies and opportunities for women during the Republic period (2001–2021) may have initiated some reductions in the number of girls in early or forced marriages. Our survey data indicates that women, particularly those in younger age groups, have a normative preference for an ideal age at marriage that is 18 years or above. However, our data also strongly indicates that there is an alarming increase in early and forced marriage as a response to the Taliban’s restrictions on women’s rights and freedoms.

The contribution of this BISHNAW survey is to provide insights into the dynamics of this increase. While national-level statistics have a time lag in detailing the prevalence of child marriage, smaller-scale surveys such as ours, when combined with qualitative research, provide a snapshot of immediate changes and responses to crises. Our data contributes new insights on families’ responses to the extreme political change triggered by the Taliban takeover, based on direct access to Afghan women and the sharing of their voices. Given the challenges in collecting such data, and the unlikely prospect of any national survey in the near future, it is vital to listen to our respondents’ voices.

This analysis shows that Afghanistan’s current context has elements of both normative and crisis response in the practice of child marriage. While child marriage exists as a social norm in Afghanistan, the Taliban regime has deeply exacerbated the drivers that push parents into choosing early marriage for their daughters.

Perceptions of the value of girls as economic assets, patriarchal views of their sexual agency, and the removal of opportunities for girls’ education and employment have reinforced conceptualisations of their value through reproductive roles only. Deep poverty and gender inequality coupled with extreme insecurity have resulted in a climate of fear for girls’ safety and a narrowing of opportunities for their life paths.

Our data suggests that this increase in child marriage is likely to be a direct result of today’s extreme circumstances and may change if restrictions ease. Before the Taliban takeover, there were positive signs of a slow shift to support for an appropriate age for marriage of 18 years and older. These changes were attributed to relative political stability and some improvements in economic security which, if sustained, had the potential to lead to more inclusive marriage practices taking hold within communities (Smith, 2009: vii).

Our quantitative and qualitative findings confirm this norms shift had begun, as evidenced through changing attitudes among younger age groups that have remained in place despite the extraordinary pressures imposed by Taliban rule. The data also shows a high value placed on girls’ education, and an aspiration that girls will not get married until after they have finished secondary school at age 18.

If there is a current spike in child marriage nationally, and if it is a coping strategy as a response to the country’s political and economic crisis, it could reduce with greater gender equality. However, this must happen soon, before the ground that was being gained is lost.

Our focus group participants spoke of strategies to prevent an early or forced marriage in terms of convincing the family, even possibly religious figures in the community, not to take this decision. There was only limited mention of an individual's ability to resist early marriage. Previous research found that girls often resorted to running away, often to shelters set up by the government or NGOs, which are no longer in place. (Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, 2017).

Success in preventing early marriage is more likely if it involves awareness-raising with families, and working with support from community leaders, informing them of the negative consequences of early marriage. The FGDs have shown that participants regard marriage as an institution governed by Islam, rather than law or government policy – a finding similar to those from other reports on Afghanistan (GoIRA, 2018).

In a context where the authority of the state is weak, Islam has been described as 'a fundamental link between how people conduct their lives and what the law regulates' (Smith, 2009: 2). Even though faith-based development initiatives to change gender norms have been attempted in the past, with extremely mixed results, our research shows that communities suggest working with religious leaders as one of the few entry points left available to address the issue. Given that local religious figures are often supporters of the Taliban, and that differing interpretations of *fiqh* are used within communities, further exploratory research would be needed before embarking on such an effort.

Household- and community-level strategies primarily target fathers as decision-makers over their daughters. Other literature on Afghanistan concurs that marriage decisions are largely seen as a family matter (Wimpelmann, 2017a). But successful norm change often requires a combination of

individual attitudinal change, broader change in the community, and the existence of structural opportunities and alternatives (Malhotra et al., 2011).

Our research has also gathered insights from women on how they are resisting Taliban edicts more broadly, revealing a promising mosaic of everyday resistance strategies. Girls and women have found ways to continue their education, through clandestine schools and online learning. Continued schooling provides a form of hope for girls and women in a future that involves more than marriage. Activities like these are the backbone of the capacity to resist oppression by maintaining a belief in a better future.

And finally, our respondents warn against the normalisation of Taliban ideology among Afghan people and acceptance of the regime by international actors. Women are still resisting repression through their everyday practices. But respondents alert us to the risks of ongoing oppression, and the prospect that it may wear down families and communities until reducing the age at marriage even further becomes normalised.

6.1 Recommendations

International actors must act now to resist early and forced marriages, and this means keeping the interests of women and girls central to negotiation processes with the Taliban.

Our study shows that early marriage in Afghanistan may now be a growing and negative coping response to the political and economic crisis. While a change in the political regime is essential, international actors can still take some decisive actions in the interim to reduce early and forced marriages by continuing to support stakeholders working inside the country who are trying to address the drivers of these marriages.

A key driver is fear of unwanted marriages to the Taliban, which is pushing families to marry girls early to protect them from this fate. Global policymakers should remain focused on the needs of women and girls in Afghanistan, recognise how the Taliban add to their insecurity, and include their voices when deciding on pathways to engagement.

Afghan women’s rights activists in the diaspora must continue their advocacy to address the root causes of violence and discrimination against women and girls.

Activists exercise policy influence on decision-making processes about the future of Afghanistan at the international level, and their knowledge and insights inform humanitarian and development activities on the ground. The data in this report may be useful to support their calls to end gender persecution in the country.

International development actors must maintain assistance that supports economic security, with a view to weakening some of the drivers of early marriage.

Building on evidence that programmes to end child marriage in other countries have made effective use of cash transfers (Malhotra and Elnakib, 2021), targeted income-generating projects, economic asset transfers, and social protection to women and their families may help to provide an economic buffer against child marriage. It would be valuable for all stakeholders who seek to protect girls’ well-being to work to build their earning capacity (even if it is limited for the foreseeable future).

Development actors, working from outside and within Afghanistan can support girls’ access to education as a central resistance strategy to early marriage as it builds daughters’ agency and voice in decision-making about marriage.

Girls’ education can be secured by ending gender discrimination and achieving a higher age at marriage. Equally, a lack of progress in any one of these three areas holds back progress in the others (UNESCO and Education 2030, 2021). There are ways to support the continued informal learning of girls and women who are excluded from education in Afghanistan’s current climate.

Community-based groups can and should facilitate dialogue and discussion within families to support the alignment of marriage practices with positive new and changing beliefs about marriage norms.

Our research concurs with earlier findings that individuals and families may be more open to discussing how marriage decision-making can become more inclusive of the aspirations of young people (Smith, 2009). The challenge for communities under the Taliban is to retain and secure spaces that enable families to act on their beliefs and delay the marriage of underage girls. This requires the building of collective action coalitions with support from civil society organisations, community leaders, religious leaders, youth rights activists, academics and media within Afghanistan. These stakeholders can ensure continued debates and discussions around harmful gender norms and marriage, raise awareness, educate the public and continue to advocate for change.

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Appendix 1 Taliban decrees and directives that infringe on the rights of women

Sector	Decrees and directives
Marriage	<p>4 March, 2023: <u>Invalidated</u> thousands of divorce cases decided during the republic.</p> <p>18 May, 2023: Taliban <u>banned</u> “hena bandan”, a type of pre-wedding ceremony in Kandahar province.</p> <p>20 May, 2023: Taliban and local elders imposed ceilings of women and widows dowry in Parwan province. [Note: the issue has been dealt with differently by the local leaders and Taliban’s <i>ulema</i> in different provinces.]</p> <p>25 October, 2023: The Taliban, in Faryab, prohibited private videography/photography firms from hiring female employees to work at wedding ceremonies. <i>Source: Contacts on the ground.</i></p> <p>19 November, 2023: Taliban religious police in Samangan province verbally imposed a <u>ban</u> on photographing and recording videos at weddings.</p>
Schools	<p>30 August, 2021: <u>Declared ban on co-education and prohibited men from teaching girls.</u></p> <p>12 September, 2021: <u>Banned girls from secondary education.</u></p> <p>3 January, 2022: <u>Closed blind girls’ schools in Nangarhar and Kunar.</u></p> <p>24 March, 2022: <u>Announced schools for girls in grades 7 and above will remain close.</u></p> <p>1 June, 2022: <u>Ordered female students in Ghazni in grades 4-6 to cover their faces while commuting to school or face expulsion.</u></p> <p>11 September, 2022: <u>Closed secondary and high schools for girls that had briefly opened in Paktia.</u></p> <p>6 October, 2022: <u>Expelled hundreds of pubescent female students in Kandahar based on verbal instruction from Taliban’s education authorities.</u></p> <p>22 December, 2022: <u>Banned girls beyond grade 6 from attending private courses.</u></p>
Universities	<p>29 September, 2021: <u>Women banned from attending and teaching at Kabul University.</u></p> <p>24 April, 2022: <u>Ordered universities to enforce gender-segregated classrooms.</u></p> <p>16 August, 2022: <u>Attending religious classes mandatory in universities, adding five new religious subjects to the existing eight.</u></p> <p>29 August, 2022: <u>Female university students ordered to cover their faces in classrooms.</u></p> <p>29 April, 2022: <u>Universities to offer lessons on different days of the week for female and male students to ensure gender segregation.</u></p> <p>7 October, 2022: <u>Women blocked women from choosing agriculture, mining, civil engineering, veterinary medicine and journalism as their university major. Taliban said these subjects are too difficult for women.</u></p> <p>20 December, 2022: <u>Banned female students from public and private universities until further notice.</u></p> <p>24 December, 2022: Ministry of Higher Education letter that higher education for girls is suspended but madrasas education is not. <i>Source: copy of the letter.</i></p> <p>21 January, 2023: The Ministry of Higher Education, in a letter to institutions of higher education, ordered the exclusion of females from university entry exam. <i>Source: copy of the letter.</i></p>

Sector	Decrees and directives
Universities continued	<p>25 January, 2023: Ministry of Higher Education, in a letter to Kabul University, instructed female lecturers to sign their timesheets on the last Thursday of the month in a designated location in the north entrance of the campus. <i>Source: copy of the letter.</i></p> <p>6 March, 2023: Institutes of higher education to only admit male students in the forthcoming academic year (which started on March 22).</p> <p>12 March, 2023: Transcripts and certificates for female university graduates banned.</p> <p>5 December, 2023: By the verbal order of Haibatullah, the Taliban's religious police suspended delivery of nursing and midwifery education to female students in Kandahar. <i>Source: Contacts on the ground.</i></p>
Justice	<p>23 November, 2021: Afghan Independent Bar Association ordered to suspend activities.</p> <p>16 May 2022: Dissolved the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission.</p> <p>23 August, 2022: Established female moral police department.</p> <p>25 March, 2023: The Emir issued a verbal decree re-tasking the Attorney General's Office as the 'General Directorate for Monitoring and Follow-up of Decrees and Directives.'</p> <p>30 March, 2023: Taliban's Emir issued an order to courts to re-examine and invalidate legal cases settled by Republic courts that did not comply with Shariah.</p> <p>17 July, 2023: Abolished the Attorney General's Office (AGO), replaced with Directorate of Supervision and Prosecution of Decrees and Orders, that does not investigate or prosecute cases directly. That function is taken over by the court and police. <i>Source: Copy of the decree.</i></p>
Employment in non-governmental organisations and United Nations agencies	<p>February 2022: NGOs ordered to replace board members and those in leadership positions with Afghans living inside Afghanistan. <i>Source: copy of the order.</i></p> <p>24 March, 2022: By the verbal order of Haibatullah, women forbidden from working in offices and must not leave their home. <i>Source: copy of the letter.</i></p> <p>24 December, 2022: Female staff banned from working for international NGOs.</p> <p>4 April, 2023: Prevented female Afghan staff of the United Nations from reporting to work. Ordered NGOs to replace board members and those in leadership positions with Afghans living inside Afghanistan. <i>Source: copy of the order.</i></p> <p>8 June, 2023: Banned foreign NGOs from providing educational programs, including community-based education.</p> <p>September 2023: In Uruzgan, the governor issued an audio-recorded message banning women from working remotely with NGOs. <i>Source: Contacts on the ground and copy of the audio message.</i></p>
Employment in government institutions and businesses	<p>17 September, 2021: Replaced Ministry of Women's Affairs with Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice.</p> <p>20 September, 2021: Professional and working women to stay home until further notice.</p> <p>13 March, 2022: Ordered enforcement of segregation of women's and men's offices. By verbal instruction of Haibatullah, women must not be employed in offices and must not leave home. <i>Source: copy of the edict.</i></p> <p>18 July, 2022: Directed women employees of the Ministry of Finance to send a male relative to take their jobs if they want to be paid their salaries.</p>

Sector	Decrees and directives
Employment in government institutions and businesses continued	<p>10 August, 2022: <u>Removed female flight attendants from their jobs.</u></p> <p>8 September, 2022: <u>Made attending daily religious classes (offered by Ministry of Vice and Virtue agents) mandatory in all government offices. To keep their jobs, they must pass a test.</u></p> <p>17 September, 2022: <u>Prohibited hiring former government employees that had worked for Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs, the Supreme Court, and the Ministry of Education, ordered their termination. Source: copy of the order.</u></p> <p>27 December, 2022: <u>Banned women-run bakeries in Kabul.</u></p> <p>1 February, 2023: <u>Instructed female staff of hospitals in Kabul to wear black hijab (Arabic long gown) and mask at all times.</u></p> <p>22 February, 2023: <u>Closed four medical centers run by female doctors in Ghazni because male patients were treated by female doctors.</u></p> <p>13 March, 2023: <u>Small businesses council in Parwan issued a circular to its members that operate beauty salons and instructed them to require their clients to ‘take an ablution’ before a service is initiated. Source: copy of the decree.</u></p> <p>24 June, 2023: <u>Banned all women beauty parlors across the country.</u></p> <p>6 July, 2023: <u>Taliban’s Ministry of Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice announced ban on beauty salons [all run by women for women] as forbidden by Islam. Owners of beauty salons were given one month notice to wind down their businesses. Source: Copy of the letter</u></p>
Women in media	<p>18 March, 2022: <u>Banned foreign TV series.</u></p> <p>19 May, 2022: <u>Female TV presenters on air to cover their faces.</u></p> <p>26 September, 2022: <u>Media outlets must ensure female TV guests cover faces.</u></p> <p>28 October, 2022: <u>Removed women’s seat from Commission of Media Violations.</u></p> <p>11 May, 2023: <u>Taliban officials verbally directed media outlets not to produce content about women’s hygiene issues.</u></p> <p>17 June, 2023: <u>Women banned from radio and TV shows in which presenters are men.</u></p> <p>September 2023: <u>In Helmand, the Department of Information and Culture, through mosques, instructed media outlets not to feature women in programmes without prior approval from the department and warned women against using social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, X (formerly known as Twitter) and similar tools. Source: Contacts on the ground.</u></p>
Women outside the home	<p>25 August 25, 2021: <u>Women to stay indoors at home because soldiers are not trained to respect women.</u></p> <p>8 September, 2021: <u>Protests and slogans that don’t have prior approval from Taliban banned.</u></p> <p>26 December 26, 2021: <u>Women banned from taking long-distance (72 km/45 miles) road trips without a mahram.</u></p> <p>29 December, 2021: <u>Closing of public baths for women in Balkh.</u></p> <p>7 January, 2022: <u>Coffee shop owners in Herat not to serve women if they are not accompanied by a mahram.</u></p> <p>2 March, 2022: <u>Banned women from entering health centers without a mahram.</u></p> <p>5 May, 2022: <u>Stopped issuing drivers’ licenses to women.</u></p>

Sector	Decrees and directives
Women outside the home continued	<p>7 May, 2022: <u>Issued order that women are not allowed to use public transport if they are without a mahram.</u></p> <p>7 May, 2022: <u>Issued recommendation and implementation plan regarding proper hijab practices, stating the best hijab is for women to wear a burqa or stay home.</u></p> <p>6 November, 2022: <u>Ordered closing of public baths for women in Badghis.</u></p> <p>1 February, 2023: <u>Verbally instructed female government medical staff to be accompanied by a mahram while going to their offices in Kandahar.</u></p> <p>15 March, 2023: <u>Ordered restaurants in Takhar not to serve women without a mahram.</u></p> <p>5 April, 2023: <u>The Taliban's Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice banned women from restaurants in Herat. (Previously, they had issued an edict on May 12, 2022, instructing restaurant owners to segregate male and female diners.) Source: copy of the edict.</u></p> <p>4 May, 2023: <u>In a recorded voice message, the head of the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice in Kandahar, Mawlawi Abdulhai Omar, ordered all provincial departments to ban girls and women from health centres and cemeteries. Source: audio clip.</u></p> <p>5 May, 2023: <u>Banned young and unmarried women from going to health centres and shrines in Kandahar province.</u></p> <p>16 September, 2023: <u>Officials from the Department of Vice and Virtue have issued verbal warnings to clothing store owners in Bamyan to refrain from selling glamorous/party dresses to women. This directive has also been reiterated in local mosques. Source: Contacts on the ground. Also reported by online media.</u></p>
Visiting parks/sightseeing	<p>6 April, 2022: <u>Dictated different days for men and women to visit parks.</u></p> <p>25 August, 2022: <u>Issued an order banning women from going to parks where park authorities cannot ensure segregation between men and women.</u></p> <p>10 November, 2022: <u>Banned women and girls from parks and gyms.</u></p> <p>11 January, 2023: <u>Taliban's Herat Department of Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice issued a letter banning women from visiting historic places. Source: copy of the letter.</u></p> <p>26 August, 2023: <u>Taliban Minister of Vice and Virtue during visit to Bamyan announced that women are no longer allowed to enter Band-e Amir national park.</u></p>
Sports	<p>8 September, 2021: <u>Banned women from playing sports.</u></p> <p>10 November, 2022: <u>Banned women and girls from parks and gyms.</u></p> <p>1 February, 2023: <u>Taliban closed a karate club in Farah province spite of operating earlier ban on female sports clubs.</u></p>
Travelling outside the country	<p>27 March, 2022: <u>Banned women from travelling abroad without a mahram and without a legitimate reason.</u></p> <p>16 January, 2023: <u>Instructed travel agencies not to sell tickets to women without a mahram.</u></p>

Sector	Decrees and directives
Corporal punishment	<p data-bbox="368 322 1444 387">14 November, 2022: Reinstated Hudud and Qisas punishments in cases such as robbery, kidnapping and sedition.</p> <p data-bbox="368 405 1444 436">Recent examples:</p> <p data-bbox="368 454 1444 519">22 June, 2023: One person <u>accused</u> of illicit relationship and extramarital sex was punished by 25 lashes in Paktika province.</p> <p data-bbox="368 537 1444 645">17 August, 2023: Taliban <u>flogged</u> 17 men and two women in the sport stadium in Sar-e-Pul province. Those punished were accused of adultery, run away from home, theft and insult to the Prophet Mohammad</p> <p data-bbox="368 663 1444 728">24 December 2023: Two women accused of running away from home <u>flogged</u> in public in Badakhshan.</p>
