



Executive summary

Changing social norms around age of marriage in Afghanistan

Data on repression and resistance under the Taliban

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February 2024



DROPS

ORGANISATION FOR PEACE RESEARCH
& ECONOMIC DATA

نهاد پژوهشی و توسعه

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank colleagues and research participants in Afghanistan and at the Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies (DROPS) whose support and dedication made this data collection possible. We also thank colleagues in the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) team at ODI for their support to this collaborative research, particularly Rachel Marcus and Caroline Harper for their feedback on the text. The authors are also grateful to Althea-Maria Rivas and Torunn Wimpelmann who kindly agreed to review an earlier draft of the report and offered valuable comments and contributions, Sara Hussein, Angela Hawke and Emilie Tant for excellent copyediting and proofreading, and Garth Stewart and Emily Subden for typesetting.

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How to cite: Safi, M., Browne, E., Kamninga T. and Khan, A. (2024) *Changing social norms around age of marriage in Afghanistan: Data on repression and resistance under the Taliban*. ODI Report. London: ODI (<https://odi.org/en/publications/report-changing-norms-age-marriage-afghanistan>).

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

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 a 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 in Afghanistan.
- 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.

Introduction

This is an Executive summary of an ODI report that 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 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).

Afghanistan's history of political turmoil and social upheaval has been marked by contestation over the rights of women. During the Republic period (2001-2021) 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.

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.

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), which severely curtailed the rights of women and girls to education and employment, health services and justice, and public space.

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 laws. It is widely understood to prohibit forced marriages but permit the marriage of girls after they reach puberty.

Data on marriage patterns drawn from the Afghanistan Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys show 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 lower levels of education 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.

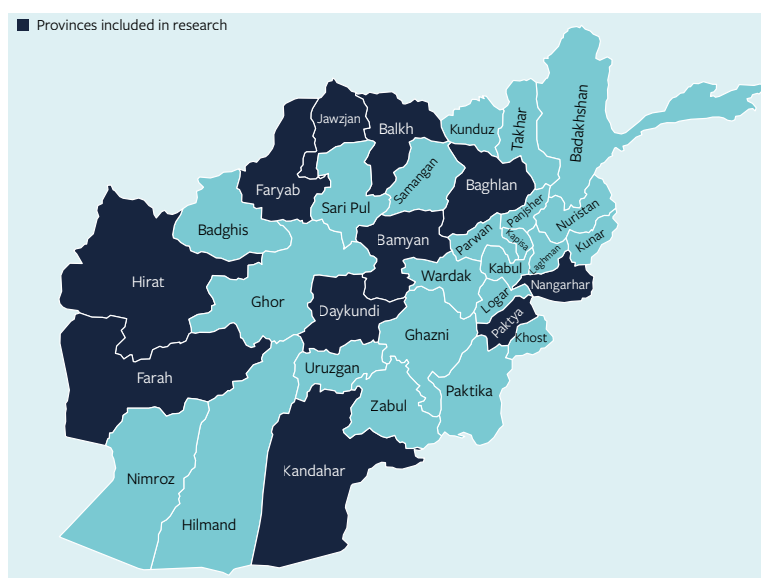
Table 1 Taliban edicts that restrict women's rights

| Taliban edicts | Current status |
|-------------------|---|
| Education | Co-education banned, university education and secondary schools closed to girls. |
| Employment | Women cannot: teach in secondary or higher education; work in offices, for NGOs or for the UN; run women's bakeries or beauty salons. They may work in hospitals and treat female patients 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 are 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, Hudood laws implemented to punish sex outside of marriage with death; dismantling of family and violence against women (VAW) courts; female lawyers and judges banned from working; existing laws abolished. |

Methodology

DROPS, founded in 2014 in Kabul, is an interdisciplinary and independent research-oriented non-governmental organization (NGO), operating from Canada. Committed to strengthening the values of pluralism and inclusivity in Afghanistan, DROPS 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.

The data gathered for this research report used both quantitative and qualitative research tools, building on the methodology already in use by the BISHNAW initiative. The data are drawn from 11 provinces: Baghlan, Balkh, Bamyan, Daykundi, Farah, Faryab, Herat, Jawzjan, Kandahar, Nangarhar and Paktia.

Figure 1 Map of provinces included in research

A representative survey was administered to 2,799 women using both online and in person tools, and 11 online focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with women to explore the survey findings.

Findings

Quantitative results

Most respondents (53%) were aged between 18 and 25 years, followed by women between ages 26-35 (27%). A high percentage reported having reached secondary (31%) or higher education (36%) levels. This reflects the snowballing sampling technique, with a greater likelihood that an educated young female participant would identify another participant with similar characteristics.

Almost all respondents (68%) reported no income. This was most likely to be because of the restrictions on their employment under the current Government. Almost half (45%) were currently unemployed or homemakers. Where women did cite their professions, they often referred to their work before the ban on women's employment, signalling its continued importance to their identities.

We asked four questions to probe norms related to age at marriage for girls. This section presents the responses to these questions:

1. At what age do most people in your community think girls should be married?
2. If a girl is not married by this age what would the community's likely response be to her and her family?
3. At what age do you think girls should be married?
4. 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?

Normative expectations

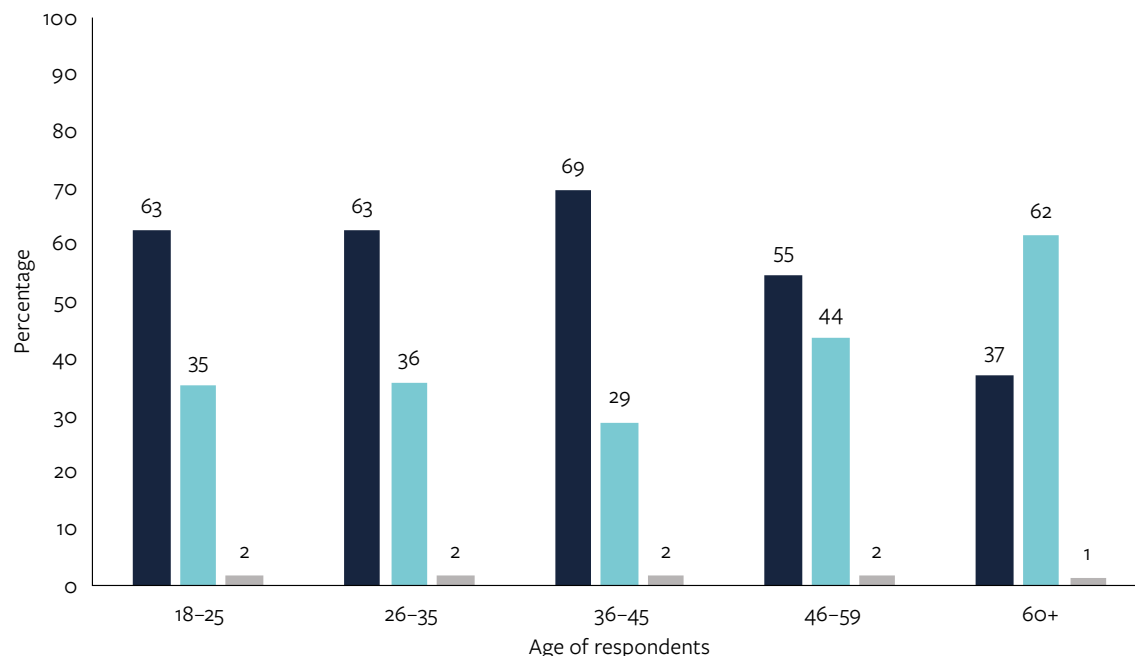
At what age do most people in your community think girls should be married?

- Almost 63% of the youngest cohort (aged 18 to 25) said that their community saw the preferred age of marriage as being above 18 (see Figure 2), compared to only 37% of the oldest cohort (aged 60+).
- Provincial variation: In 8 of the 11 provinces, the majority (ranging from 62% to 93%) said that their communities believe that the appropriate age at marriage is between 18 and 25.
- More respondents reported norms that favour marriage below the age of 18 in Daykundi (69%), Farah (63%) and Kandahar (55%).

Figure 2 Respondents' views of community norms regarding appropriate age at marriage for girls (by age)

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

■ Above 18 ■ Below 18 ■ No response



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?

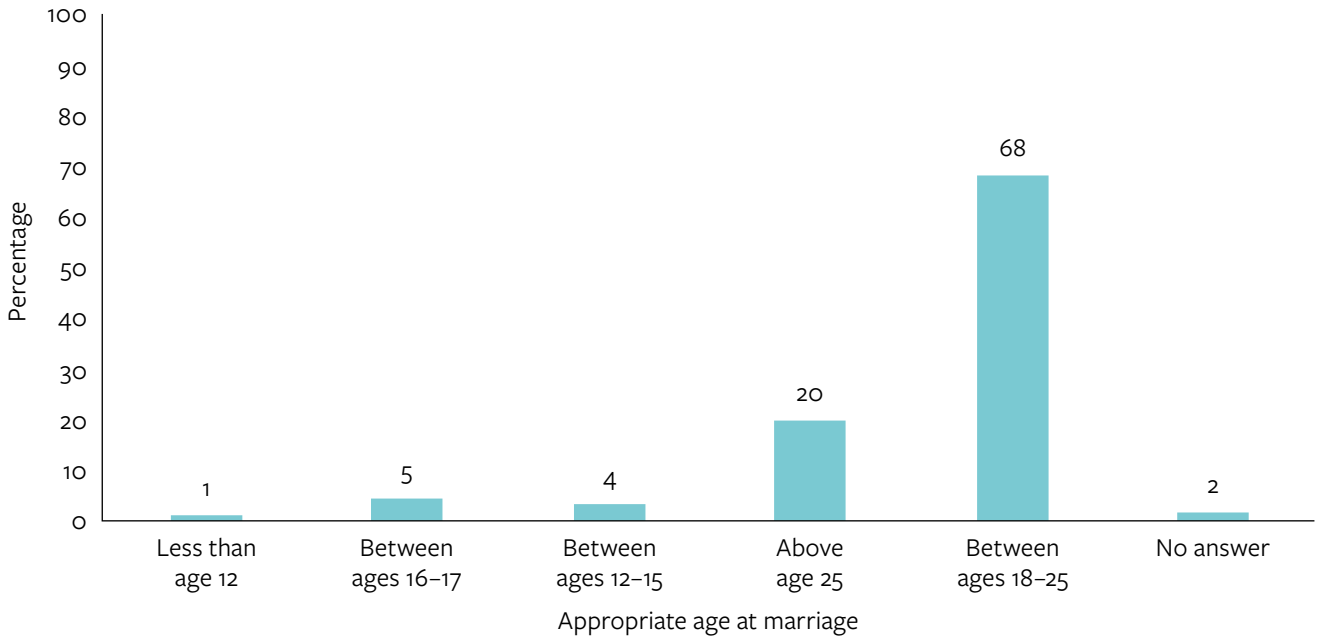
- A combined total of 48% of respondents said that if a girl does not marry by the socially approved age, it will have negative repercussions for the family – as the girl will be seen as an economic burden, or her family will stand out negatively as ‘different’.
- Among older women (aged 60+), 18% said that no one in the community will marry girls who are above the age seen as appropriate.
- Younger women (aged 18 to 35) said that not getting married is more likely to reflect badly on the family.
- 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.

Individual beliefs

At what age do you think girls should be married?

- Almost 70% considered 18 to 25 years to be an appropriate age for marriage (see Figure 3).
- A combined total of 88% of individual respondents believe that the appropriate age at marriage is 18 years and above.
- Most respondents aged 18 to 59 think that the appropriate age for marriage is between the ages of 18 and 25 years.
- Most older respondents aged 60 and above think that the appropriate age at marriage is between 12 and 15 years.

Figure 3 Respondents' individual perceptions of appropriate age at marriage

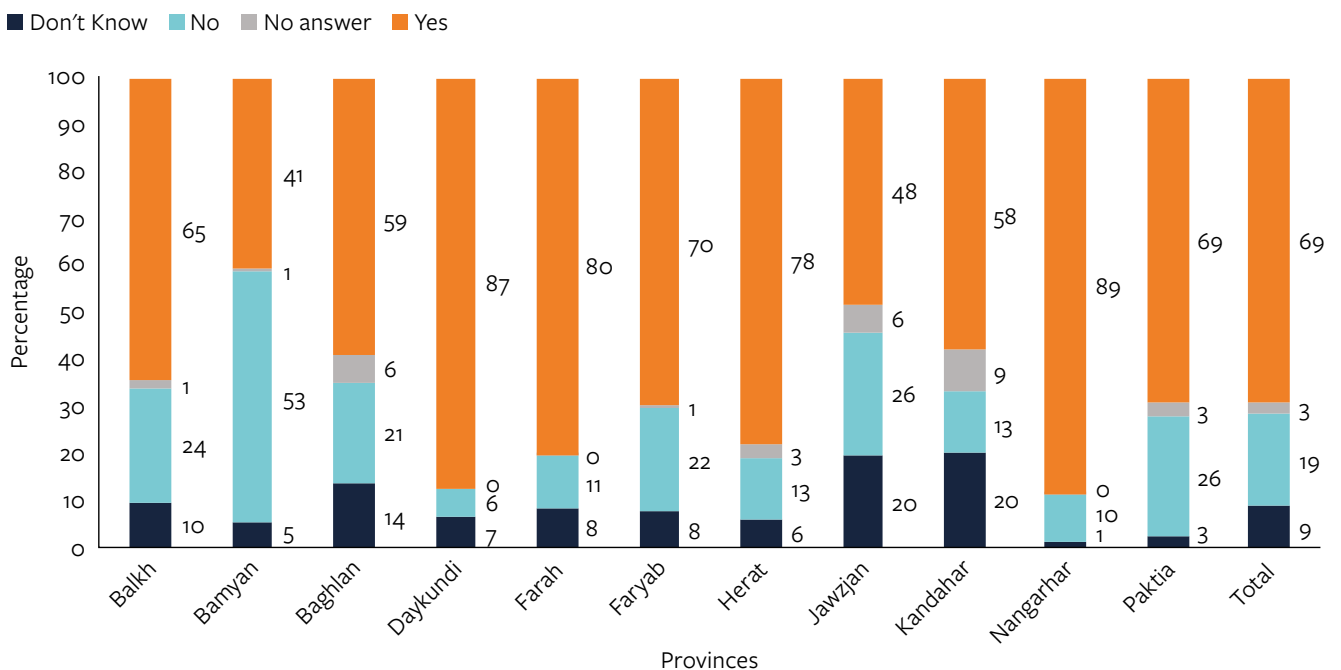


Recent norm changes

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?

- About 69% of the total sample responded 'Yes'.
- Only in Bamyan, 53% of the respondents said they did not know any families that married their underage daughters.

Figure 4 Knowledge of inappropriate age at marriage (by province)



Summary of quantitative results

The analysis of this quantitative data shows that the majority of respondents perceive the appropriate age for 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.

Qualitative results

We held 11 focus groups (using WhatsApp) with groups of women aged 18 to 49, about half of them married with children. They were mostly aged 20 to 35 (an accurate reflection of Afghanistan's youth bulge). Almost all had an undergraduate degree, but many had little or no income, reflecting their lack of economic opportunities.

Community attitudes

Participants explained that a girl is often deemed ready for marriage upon reaching puberty, which tends to happen before the legal age of 16 that was in place before the Taliban takeover. 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)

FGD participants agreed that child, early and forced marriage was always more common in rural areas than in cities. Factors such as the level of awareness in families, literacy, access to schools and universities and employment opportunities were all regarded as contributing to the lower prevalence of early marriage in cities. However, the sharpest rise in early marriage is now in cities, which they attribute to the effect of Taliban restrictions on other opportunities for women and girls.

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.

'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)

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 aware of the formal legal age, even if they do not necessarily comply with it.

Social change and its impact on marriage norms

Younger cohorts are shifting norms around age at marriage.

‘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 repeatedly underscored as key factors that shaped local decisions and attitudes towards marriage by the FGD participants.

‘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 of 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. 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.

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, particularly no access to justice institutions (FGD Kandahar).

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 easily into marriage, before the Taliban takeover (FGD participant in 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)

The ban on education is the predominant factor leading to child, early and forced marriage. FGD participants explained that because of the Taliban's vague directives about when they will re-open education facilities for girls, families feel less hopeful about their children's future. 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 (FGD, Kandahar).

When women and girls were able to work and earn a living, they shared the family's financial burdens which granted 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).

Participants from Herat explained that the issue of marriage in Afghanistan and its interpretation through Shariah was largely a matter of personal opinions, prior to the Taliban takeover. 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.

The humanitarian crisis on vulnerable communities in rural areas has made underage and forced marriage seem like a viable response.

'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, [he says] 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)

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.

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

'I know a girl who was a medical student, and she was also engaged, a Talib used to follow her on her way home every day. One day he sent a marriage proposal for her. When her family refused saying, 'she is already engaged', then he started threatening 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 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 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).

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. Respondents believe that the international community's response must not allow 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)

The normalisation of restrictions, they warn, will lead to a reversal of progress around norm change, resulting in 'a 90% change in [communities'] behaviour around girls age of marriage. Only 10% will be left who support their girls' (FGD, 25, Farah).

Resisting early marriage

Our participants reported feeling hopeless and without a future since the Taliban takeover, leaving marriage at a young age as one of the only meaningful life paths. 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. While fathers are believed to hold the ultimate decision-making power over children's marriages, mothers 'can talk to the man of the family [and] convince them not to sacrifice their daughter for the current situation' (FGD, Daykundi). Other family members who command respect can intervene on behalf of girls.

Since there are no government or civil society organisations where a girl can find help to prevent a marriage, respondents suggest that families may listen to imams, as religious authority figures, if they support delaying a marriage.

Everyday resistance to Taliban restrictions

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.

'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)

Continuing education, even clandestinely, represents hope that formal schools will reopen one day, and that girls may resume their studies from where they left off.

Recommendations

Women in younger age groups have a normative preference for an ideal age at marriage that is 18 years or above. Women also observe 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. 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.

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 under-age 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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