

# Cultural Violence against Women under Taliban Rule in Afghanistan (2021-2022)

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## Abstract

*The Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan after the fall of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan government in 2021. The Afghan government has now been transformed into the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (EIA). The Taliban-dominated EIA government has implemented new discriminatory and restrictive policies, particularly against women. This study employed qualitative methods, collecting data from literature reviews and interviews. Data analysis was conducted using content analysis, and validity was tested through data triangulation. The indicator of discrimination against women used in this research is SDGs No. 5 (Achieving Gender Equality and Empowering Women), in which the government should be responsible for meeting nine related targets. The conclusion of this study is that of the nine targets that should have been achieved, the Taliban have not met any of them. Using the concept of cultural violence, this condition is analyzed, and the influence of religion and ideology on the legitimacy and implementation of the Taliban's discriminatory policies against women is revealed.*

**Keywords:** *Afghanistan, cultural violence, discrimination against women, SDGs No.5, Taliban,*

## Abstrak

Taliban kembali berkuasa di Afghanistan setelah tumbangannya pemerintahan Republik Islam Afghanistan di bawah pimpinan pada tahun 2021. Kini, pemerintahan Afghanistan berubah menjadi Emirat Islam Afghanistan (EIA). Pemerintahan EIA yang didominasi Taliban menerapkan kebijakan-kebijakan baru yang diskriminatif dan restriktif, khususnya terhadap perempuan. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan data yang dikumpulkan dari studi literatur dan wawancara. Analisis data dilakukan dengan menggunakan analisis isi, dan

validitas diuji melalui triangulasi data. Indikator diskriminasi terhadap perempuan yang digunakan dalam riset ini adalah SDGs No. 5 (Mencapai Kesetaraan Gender dan Memberdayakan Kaum Perempuan), dimana seharusnya pemerintah bertanggung jawab memenuhi 9 target terkait. Temuan penelitian ini adalah dari 9 target yang seharusnya dicapai, Taliban belum memenuhi satupun di antaranya. Dengan menggunakan konsep kekerasan budaya, kondisi ini dianalisis dan ditemukan pengaruh agama dan ideologi dalam legitimasi dan implementasi kebijakan Taliban yang diskriminatif terhadap perempuan.

**Kata kunci:** Afghanistan, diskriminasi terhadap perempuan kekerasan budaya, penindasan perempuan, SDGs No. 5, Taliban

## Introduction

On September 7, 2021, the Taliban declared the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (EIA). The Taliban is an Islamic fundamentalist group that first came to power in Afghanistan in September 1996. During the post-Soviet Afghan civil war, certain mujahideen groups joined a group of Pashtun madrassas students in Pakistan— which eventually became the Taliban (Al Jazeera, 2021). Taliban gained public attention and control when they promised stability and security in Afghan cities. In September 1996, they successfully took over Kabul (Maizland, 2023).

During its first reign, the Taliban enforced a strict law based on their pre-Islamic tribal codes and their interpretation of Sharia law and Wahhabi doctrines in the Islamic emirate of Afghanistan (Al Jazeera, 2021). In enforcing the law, the Taliban government often neglected both social services and other state functions. They also controlled minor aspects of people's lives and violated human rights (Maizland, 2023). The punishments for offenses were harsh, not excluding public executions. With the Taliban's strict law enforcement, Afghan people were deprived of their human rights, especially women. Women faced discriminatory or violent acts perpetrated by the Taliban, such as clothing restriction and ban on girls' education. In 2001, the Taliban lost its rule in the country when the US invaded. After the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the Taliban did not regain control until 20 years later. The return of the Taliban to power also marked the return of strict and violent laws, often affecting women's rights. Their return has perpetuated restrictive rules on women, including limitations on mobility, clothing regulations, and bans on education and employment; in which all were measures the Taliban justified as necessary for the "protection" of women.

The cultural identity of Taliban, such as history, beliefs, values, and norms, played a large role in its discriminatory policies against women. The use of religion and culture served to legitimize and justify Taliban's actions in discriminating against Afghan women. This can be related to one of the concepts from identity studies, which is cultural violence. First introduced by Johan Galtung, cultural violence is "any aspect of culture that can be used to justify or legitimize violence in direct or structural forms." Legitimization occurs when actors are able to moralize a wrongful act into a righteous one and or make reality opaque, where violence cannot be seen. Galtung mentions seven examples of cultural violence: religion, ideology, language, art, empirical science, social science, and cosmology (Galtung, 1990). Furthermore, the Taliban's strict laws and discriminatory actions against women violate one goal of a global commitment, namely Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) No. 5: Gender Equality. SDG No. 5 focuses on gender equality and women empowerment, consisting of nine targets that serve as indicators of progress (United Nations, n.d.).

This research aims to explain the cultural violence in Afghanistan which affects discrimination against women under the Taliban rule in 2021-2022. The indicators of discrimination against women used in this research are SDGs No. 5 (Achieving Gender Equality and Empowering Women), utilized to identify if the Taliban has violated the nine referenced targets. In conducting this research, a qualitative research method was used to explore the meaning and process of women's discrimination in Afghanistan based on cultural violence. Through literature study (archival and document-based and internet-based) and interview, data was collected. The acquired data was analyzed using content analysis, then cross-referenced to ensure the validity of the data (Lamont, 2015). With this method, this research sought to explain how cultural violence by the Taliban can lead to the discrimination against women in Afghanistan.

### **Cultural Violence**

Cultural violence, first introduced by Johan Galtung in 1990, is defined as "aspects of culture that are used to legitimize both direct and structural violence." Cultural violence essentially occurs when the act of direct violence and the fact of structural violence are legitimized and accepted by society. This process of legitimization and acceptance occurs in two ways. First, Galtung compared this process metaphorically to colors: morally wrong as red, morally acceptable as yellow, and morally right as green. The process changes the moral color of an action from red to yellow and or green. Second, it makes things blurry, where an act or fact of violence is not seen as violent.

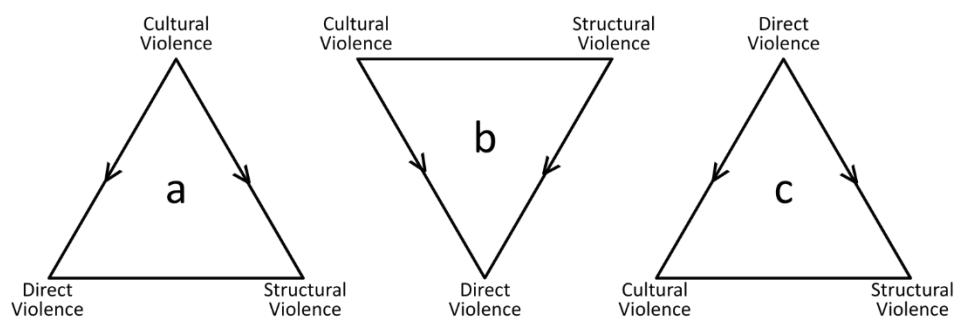
Galtung defined violence as “avoidable insults to basic needs, and more generally to life, lowering the real level of needs satisfaction below what is potentially possible,” and antecedently sorted violence into two categories, which are direct violence and structural violence. Galtung labeled these types of violence based on the negation of basic human needs (survival needs, well-being needs, identity needs, and freedom needs), ultimately forming eight types of violence with subtypes.

**Table 1: Typology of Violence (Galtung, 1990)**

	Survival Needs	Well-being Needs	Identity Needs	Freedom Needs
<b>Direct Violence</b>	Killing	Maiming Siege, sanctions Misery	Desocialization Resocialization Secondary Citizen	Repression Detention Expulsion
<b>Structural Violence</b>	Exploitation A	Exploitation B	Penetration Segmentation	Marginalization Fragmentation

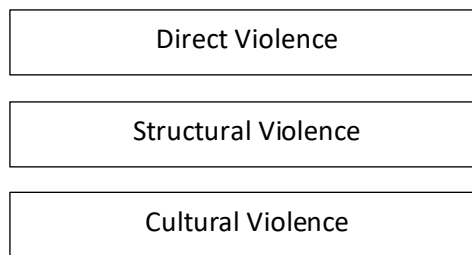
Galtung then added cultural violence as a third super-type (in addition to direct and structural violence) and illustrated these three super-types of violence as a "triangle of violence." The triangle of violence illustrates how direct, structural, and cultural violence affect each other. Triangle a in Figure 1 illustrates how direct and structural violence are legitimized by cultural violence. Triangle b shows cultural aspects or structural facts as sources of direct violence. Meanwhile, triangle c shows direct violence impacting structural and cultural violence. Essentially, the points of these triangles can be inverted to form three triangles pointing upwards and three pointing downwards, demonstrating the relationship between the three types of violence.

**Figure 1: Violence Triangle**



Furthermore, the temporal relationship between the three types of violence can be illustrated using the violence strata. The violence strata are designed to explain how each type of violence enters time differently. At the base of the strata lies cultural violence, which is "permanent" and serves as the source of the other two forms of violence. Culture can teach and shape human consciousness to see exploitation and repression as normal, or even to ignore them altogether. As a "process," structural violence occupies the middle position of the strata. In this position, patterns of exploitation intensify with increasing violations of basic human needs, preventing the formation of awareness and organization to counter violence. Direct violence, a concrete "event," lies at the top of the strata and is the eruption of structural and cultural violence. Furthermore, this causal relationship can be explained in six directions, starting from any point (Galtung, 1990).

**Figure 2: Violence Strata (Galtung, 1990)**



Galtung explained that cultural elements or domains, such as religion, ideology, language, art, empirical and formal sciences; could be used to legitimize direct violence or structural violence. Galtung then provided examples of the use of cultural elements to legitimize violence:

1. Religion: The concept of 'the Chosen' and 'the Unchosen' is a consequence of the belief in which God (das heilige) has chosen or is closer to some groups than other. The assumption is God chooses those who best suit Himself, and leaves the 'rest' to Satan. Examples for the Chosen/the Unchosen include humans/animals, man/woman, His people/The others, and Whites/Colored.
2. Ideology: With ideology, value is given to the concept of 'Self and the Other', where the value is Self is elevated and the Other is devalued. This assignment of value will lead to structural violence such as exploitation and transition into direct violence. In this stage, the Other is dehumanized, become victims of direct violence and simultaneously blamed for it.

3. Language: The use of certain language that ignores women by using the same word for men and the entire human species, and language features that emphasize on logic.
4. Art: Paintings like Execution Without Process by Henri Regnault and The Death of Sardanapal by Eugene Delacroix depicted the negative views of Europeans towards non-Europeans.
5. Empirical Science: As a consequence of empirical science, such as the concept of comparative advantage, a vertical status quo was created.
6. Formal Science: Formal science, for example mathematics, could lead to a black-and-white and polarized way of thinking.

While the research draws on the broader theoretical framework of cultural violence, it will address only two of the six referenced points (religion and ideology) within the context of women's discrimination under the Taliban rule. The decision is based on the relevance of these two points to the scope of the research and the feasibility of conducting a thorough analysis within the available time and resources. The four remaining points fall outside the boundaries of the research and therefore will not be analyzed in detail.

### **Discrimination against Women and Sustainable Development Goals No. 5**

Despite international treaties addressing gender discrimination and women's rights such as Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women in 1979, women around the world still experience unfair treatment solely based on their gender or situations where their rights are violated. In other words, gender inequality is still prevalent. Actions categorized as gender inequality include gender-based violence, sexual harassment and violence, gender-based discrimination in the workplace, and the restriction of women's rights on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, or sex characteristics (Amnesty International UK, n.d.). Women in many countries are denied the same opportunities to learn, earn, and lead as men. This can be reinforced by governments and social institutions that treat women unfairly, leaving them with fewer resources, power and influence. Furthermore, the risk of women's oppression can be augmented by class, ethnicity, age and religion (Oxfam International, n.d.). Therefore, empowering women to achieve equality and end oppression requires a purposeful global commitment.

One global commitment that includes a goal focused on gender equality is Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically Goal No. 5: Gender Equality. Established by the UN, Goal No. 5 has a primary focus on achieving gender equality and

empowering women and consists of nine targets that serve as indicators. Failure to meet these targets indicates that the state is systematically perpetuating forms of discrimination against women. (United Nations, n.d.):

- Target 5.1: End discrimination against women and girls
- Target 5.2: End all violence against and exploitation of women and girls
- Target 5.3: Eliminate forced marriages and genital mutilation
- Target 5.4: Value unpaid care and promote shared domestic responsibilities
- Target 5.5: Ensure full participation in leadership and decision-making
- Target 5.6: Universal access to reproductive health and rights
- Target 5.A: Equal rights to economic resources, property ownership, and financial services
- Target 5.B: Promote empowerment of women through technology
- Target 5.C: Adopt and strengthen policies and enforceable legislation for gender equality<sup>1</sup>

This research adopts all nine targets of SDGs Goal No. 5 as a framework to determine whether discrimination against women in Afghanistan is evident based on the compiled data. Each target will be interpreted as an evaluative tool to assess patterns of discriminatory practices. As such, the research is confined to how the data aligns with or diverges from the conditions defined in these targets.

## **Taliban Identity and Cultural Dynamics**

### ***History of Taliban Regime in Afghanistan***

Afghanistan is a land-locked country located in Central-South Asia which borders Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan (Chua, 2023). The four largest ethnic groups are Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras; with Pashtuns dominating the landscape. Pashto, the language spoken by the Pashtuns, is the official language of the country, aside from Parsi or Dari (One World Nation Online, n.d.).

During the Soviet-Afghan War lasting from 1979 to 1989, Soviet faced resistance from the mujahideen or rebel groups. The mujahideen covertly received foreign support where the United States funneled \$5 billion worth of arms and ammunition through Pakistan. Meanwhile, Pakistan strategized in dividing Afghan ethnic groups, particularly Pashtuns, to destroy Pashtun nationalism and turn Afghanistan into a radical Islamists-

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<sup>1</sup> The target numbering here follows that written in the SDGs document, but later in the discussion section, the author will use the numbering of Targets 1-9.

dominated country. Not a homogenous group, Pashtuns was internally fragmented into hundreds of small clans and could be generally categorized into religious rural tribes and moderate urban tribes. This reality was taken advantage of by Pakistan, who aimed to separate the religious from the moderates to ally with the Pakistani regime, by building madrassas in Pashtun-dominated areas. These madrassas became the forerunners of Taliban fighters of Pashtun origin (Bloch, 2021).

Post-Soviet, Afghanistan continued to experience instability with a civil war between mujahideen groups who fought for Kabul from 1992 to 1993. This period of instability was marked with human rights violations perpetrated by the mujahideen, such as executions, detentions, sexual violence, abduction of women, and forced marriages. Women were also raped and used as weapons of war or rewards for militants (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2023). Furthermore, Pashtuns dominance was declining as a coalition of Tajiks and Uzbeks took power of the country, including the capital Kabul. In Afghan bureaucracy, military, and spoken language, Pashtuns lost their control. This decline resulted in deep anger and fear of marginalization among Pashtuns (Chua, 2023). The fear of marginalization for Pashtuns and instability in Afghanistan led to the rise of the Taliban.

The Taliban movement began with students of madrassas built by Pakistan and funded by Saudi Arabia. These madrassas shaped Pashtun students into extreme and violent fundamentalists of hardline Sunni Islam, where they also learned combat skills from Pakistan-based mujahideen groups (Chua, 2023). In 1994, under the leadership of Mullah Mohamad Omar, the Taliban was formed in response to the instability in Afghanistan (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2023). Taliban promised to bring security and peace and to implement sharia law in the Pashtun region around the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Starting in southwestern Afghanistan, the Taliban movement quickly managed to take over major Afghan cities and by 1998, Taliban controlled almost 90% of Afghanistan (BBC, 2022).

The rapid success was due to the support and popularity Taliban gained among the people. The Taliban succeeded in eliminating corruption from the previous government, reducing lawlessness, and securing roads and territory to enable trade. On the other hand, the Taliban introduced and enforced a strict interpretation of sharia law. The new rules included requiring men to have beards and women to wear burqas, banning television and music, and prohibiting women over the age of 10 from going to school (PBS News, 2021). As punishment for offenses, the Taliban imposed penalties such as public executions for murderers and adulterers and amputations for thieves. The Taliban was also accused of human rights violations due to torture, assassinations, beatings, and detention of journalists and activists (BBC, 2022).

The Taliban's movement and smooth takeover were, in part, driven by ethnic factors. Most of Taliban soldiers in every ranking were Pashtuns, which was evident in the language they use, and the way they dress and behave. Additionally, the Taliban promised to restore Pashtun dominance. By carrying and acting in accordance with Pashtun values, the Taliban succeeded in gaining the support of Pashtuns, the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan. (Chua, 2023).

In 2001, Taliban lost its control over Afghanistan when the US and the UK launched airstrikes and bombed Taliban base targets. The US believed that the al-Qaeda founder, Osama bin Laden, was hiding in Taliban-rule Afghanistan, following the 9/11 attacks. Taliban declared that they were ready for jihad and fighting ensued. In December the same year, Taliban leaders surrendered the last Taliban-held territory, Zabul province, which marked the end of Taliban rule in the early 2000s (PBS News, 2021). Although the Taliban has lost its power, the Taliban kept fighting against the US army for 20 years.

In that 20-year period, negotiations between the Taliban and the US were held. The negotiation in February 2019 which promised the withdrawal of US troops and the obstruct of international terrorists in Afghanistan by the Taliban was called off by Trump in September 2019, following the death of a US soldier in a Taliban-led attack (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). Eventually, the Doha Agreement which includes the previous terms and intra-Afghan negotiations was signed by the Taliban and the US in the next year. Under the Biden administration in September 2021, the US completed its withdrawal without informing the new Afghan commander. By the following month, the Taliban successfully took over Kabul and its presidential palace, almost all provincial capitals, and border crossings. This marked the Taliban takeover in 2021.

The 2021 takeover instead deteriorated the situation in Afghanistan. In the first six months, Afghanistan saw terrorist attacks, such as mosque and embassy bombings, and abduction and murder of 500 security forces. Bans on music, school for girls, and non-burqa garments for women; and violent punishments were reinforced (Center for Preventive Action, 2024). Afghanistan also faced a humanity crisis, where 22 million Afghans inside the country and 5.7 million people outside the country needed assistance (United Nations, 2022). By March 2022, food supplies were insufficient for 95% of households and nutrition care support was needed for more than 3.5 million children. As many as six million Afghans were on the brink of famine. It was intensified by natural disasters and extreme weather that increased vulnerability to food shortages. Meanwhile, Afghanistan's economy was further weakened by international isolation. The Taliban's request for recognition from the UN was met with rejection: recognition would not be possible as long as the Taliban continued to enforce restrictive laws on

women. The UN even categorized Taliban's actions towards women as gender apartheid (Center for Preventive Action, 2024).

### ***Taliban Identity and Culture***

The Taliban began as a movement fighting for a stable and safe country in the midst of a Afghan civil war. The name "Taliban" derived from the Pashto word for students, talibs. Taliban fighters were originally Afghan students at Pakistani madrassas who fled from the Soviet-Afghan war as refugees. Post-Soviet, these students were joined by several mujahideen groups, and they gradually transitioned into a military force under the leadership of Mullah Mohammed Omar. Garnering public attention, the Taliban movement captured Kabul in 1996 with a goal in creating an Islamic Afghanistan emirate and implementing a strict interpretation of sharia law (South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2024).

The Taliban painted itself as a religious and nationalist movement who sought to replace the republican Afghan government with an Islamic government that enforced a pure and legitimate Taliban interpretation of the sharia law (Feminist Majority Foundation, n.d.). The Islamic government was to be based on the Taliban ideology—a combination of Islamic fundamentalist thought, and totalitarianism and Pashtun values (South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2024). It also emphasized on an open and power-sharing government that would maintain peace and security through intra-Afghanistan dialogue (Ruttig, 2021).

In addition to being a religious and nationalist movement, the Taliban was also considered to be a pro-Pashtun movement. Taliban membership had a Pashtun majority and their ideology was deeply rooted in Pashtun values. As previously mentioned, Taliban quickly garnered public attention with its promise to restore Pashtun dominance in Afghanistan (Chua, 2023).

### ***Pashtun Dominance in Afghanistan***

Comprising around 42% of the population, Pashtun is the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan. Pashtuns are spread across southern and eastern Afghanistan, and western Pakistan. Pashto, the language of Pashtuns, has been the Afghanistan official language since 1936. A majority of Pashtuns practice Sunni Islam (Minority Rights Group, n.d.). In politics, Pashtuns had dominance and a central role, dating back to the creation of the Kingdom of Afghanistan (Minority Rights Group, n.d.). Hardline nationalist

Pashtuns have called for the creation of Pashtunistan, drawn from the Pashtun-dominated regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan, but this idea is almost impossible to realize (Szczepanski, 2019). The tribal system, known as *qawm* and *khel*, is an important element for the Pashtuns where lineage strongly influences their identity and social organization structure (Karrer, 2012). Tribe and family are important values for Pashtuns and loyalty to them is highly valued (Pamir, Waheedi, & Habib, 2023). Therefore, the group is not immune to tribal divisions. Pashtuns are not a homogeneous ethnic group and this fact is often exploited by the elites of their community to oppress them (Minority Rights Group, n.d.).

Pashtun culture certainly plays a major role in shaping the lives of Pashtun individuals and communities. Pashtuns are guided by a traditional code of conduct referred to as *Pashtunwali*. *Pashtunwali* (“the Pashtun way”) is a tribal code that teaches how a Pashtun should live through a set of values, customs, and unwritten cultural codes. The principles in *Pashtunwali* have a huge impact on how they organize their lives. Following *Pashtunwali* principles will make a Pashtun a *gairatmand* Pashtun or an ideal Pashtun, living a fully respectable life (Devasher, 2023). *Pashtunwali* applies to both men and women in the Pashtun-dominated southeastern Afghan region and is still relevant today since the 17th century (Hawkins, 2009).

The *Pashtunwali* principles include:

1. **Nang/Ghayrat:** As the core of *Pashtunwali*, Nang or honor, dictates the behavior of Pashtun society. Upholding honor, both individual and tribal, is the responsibility of Pashtun men. Pashtun men often carry weapons, symbolizing nang and his status as the protector of his community (Devasher, 2023). Because of nang, it is common for Pashtuns to carry out extreme acts of revenge as an attempt to protect their honor from external parties (Hawkins, 2009). Besides nang, ghayrat also teaches about honor and dignity. A Pashtun is obliged to show his ghairat. Otherwise, she fails to be a true Pashtun (Ali, 2013).
2. **Namus:** Honor for Pashtun women is referred to as namus. Relating to male family and clan member’s honor, female honor is tightly guarded in Pashtun society. Namus concerns the chastity and sexual integrity of women from Pashtun families (Ali, 2013). Violating a woman’s honor is one of the biggest threats to the tribe and can trigger intense fighting (Devasher, 2023).
3. **Badal** is essentially about taking revenge or seeking justice. As one of the core principles, badal demonstrates the capability of individuals and families to maintain their honor. If revenge after an insult is not taken, the nang of the insulted individual and family is considered to have been taken away (Ali, 2013).

Badal does not necessarily mean violence, but can also mean an exchange like arranged marriages. (Hawkins, 2009).

4. Tora is courage in times of need, especially when honor is insulted, and cowardice will lead to a decline in social status (Zahid, 2013).
5. Melmastia preaches hosting and providing the best for the guests regardless of race, religion, and economic status. Moreover, a host should never harm or hand over the guest to an enemy, regardless of existing relationship between the host and the guest. Violating melmastia can deprive a person of honor and social status among their tribe members (Zahid, 2013).
6. Nanawatey: Based on this principle, Pashtuns are obliged to give asylum to anyone who seeks refuge from an enemy. As hosts, they must ensure the safety of his guest even if they need to fight a war to do so (Zahid, 2013).
7. Jirga is a council or assembly of tribal elders that aims to resolve inter-tribal and intra-tribal disputes (Zahid, 2013), to decide on communal issues, advises on social and legal issues, and acts as a criminal court (Pamir, Waheedi, & Habib, 2023).
8. Sabat refers to loyalty to friends, famil, and relatives from the same tribe (Zahid, 2013).
9. Puth is pride and protection of self-esteem (Nocker & Junaid, 2011).
10. Kheegara is the welfare of the community that involves selfless acts (Nocker & Junaid, 2011).

### **Taliban Ideology**

The Taliban ideology is essentially an integration of Pashtun values and a radical form of Islam. Pashtun members of Taliban plays a role in shaping Taliban ideology, particularly due to their strong adherence to Pashtunwali like namus. Besides Pashtunwali, Pashtun sub-tribes and areas also influence the ideology, For example, in rural areas, Pashtunwali and sharia law are considered to be mutually supportive and inseparable (Frear, 2012). Despite the ethnic influence, the extreme Taliban ideology is not favored by the majority of Pashtuns (Borthakur & Kotoker, 2020).

The Pakistan and Saudi Arabia-funded madrassas where future Taliban fighters studied helped shape their ideology. The madrassas followed the Deobandi and Wahhabi Islamic movements and were run by the Jamiat-i-Ulema-i-Islami (JUI), a Pakistani Islamic fundamentalist political party that rejected ijthihad (innovation), prohibited women from taking non-domestic roles, and opposed tribal and feudal structures. These factors shaped the madrassas curriculum and later shaped the students' way of thinking—conservative, literalist, and categorical in its moral logic. This

narrow-mindedness was the reason for the Taliban rigidity and inability to compromise (Frear, 2012). Although the Taliban claims that it adheres to the Deobandi school, its approach is considered too radical. Meanwhile, the Wahhabi influence in Taliban ideology comes from the funding provided by Saudi Arabian Wahhabis for the Taliban madrassas and movements. The Taliban also does not have a global jihad agenda (Borthakur & Kotoker, 2020). Nevertheless, Islam is used by the Taliban to legitimize their rule, seen through the establishment of a pure Islamic Emirate and implementation of sharia law. The Taliban's ideology is a very traditional and patriarchal interpretation of Islamic ideology (Borthakur & Kotoker, 2020).

### **Discrimination against Women in Afghanistan in 2021-2022 as a Form of Cultural Violence by the Taliban**

As previously stated, in this research, the authors implement SDGs No. 5 (Achieving Gender Equality and Empowering Women) as the indicator of oppression or discrimination against women. The government should be responsible for fulfilling the 9 related targets. When these targets have not been achieved, it indicates that the state is still systematically perpetuating various forms of discrimination against women.

#### ***Target 1: Eliminating Discrimination***

Unfortunately, Taliban-dominated EIA government implements rules that restricted women and girls in four areas:

##### ***1. Education***

Although Afghanistan has one of the worst gender education gap, it saw a steady progress in girls education a couple years before the 2021 takeover. After the takeover, Afghan education underwent a tumultuous period with ministries announcing the reopening of schools for boys, yet offering no clarity on girls' education. For example, the Ministry of Education delayed the reopening of girls' schools for girls, originally scheduled for March 23, 2022, due to technical issues in developing a "standardized" uniform (Amnesty International, 2022).

The rules Taliban imposed had an impact on the education sector, complicating girls to pursue education: not having a mahram to go to school, families' inability to pay for school, lack of teachers, limited fields for women, and fears of becoming victims of violence. Furthermore, girls faced more discrimination at school with rules obligating them to only be taught by female lecturers, to wear burqa, and gender-separating barriers. Not only that, female students were prohibited from using cell phones, doing

presentations, speaking in class, attending conferences, meeting male lecturers and visiting administrative offices alone. This situation is worsened with inadequate facilities, thus forcing female students to change majors (Amnesty International, 2022).

## 2. *Employment*

Women's right to work continued to regress since 2021 when the Taliban issued a stay-at-home order. Many women of various occupations, including lecturers, flight attendants, NGO workers, and Ministry employees, were forced to leave their jobs (Feminist Majority Foundation, n.d.). Many of them switched careers to sewing and weaving at home, which reflected the Taliban's socio-cultural norms (UN Women, 2023). Meanwhile, women were only allowed to work in fields that could not be replaced by men such as health and education.

For employers, employing women became extremely difficult due to mobility restrictions and gender segregation in offices. Hence, female employees were left to do marginal, non-public roles. The Taliban's restrictions on women's employment have hindered women's participation in the economy, eventually jeopardizing the country's future development (UN Women, 2023).

## 3. *Mobility*

The Taliban issued multiple decrees limiting women's movement in the public, beginning with a stay-at-home order in August 2021. The order was announced on the grounds that Taliban soldiers have not been trained to respect women, and was justified by a decree stating that staying at home was one of the best practices of the hijab. It continued with a decree requiring women to be accompanied by a mahram (husband or male family member) if they wished to travel more than 72km. However, the 72km requirement became insignificant when Taliban revised the decree, mandating that women must always be with a mahram when travelling at any distance (United States Institute of Peace, n.d.).

Women were further limited from being in public spaces. The Taliban prohibited women from using public transportation, ordering at restaurants, and seeking treatment at clinics or hospitals without a mahram. The Taliban either enforced gender segregation in public spaces (ex. classrooms, offices, parks) or closed public facilities for women (beauty salons, bathhouses, parks, gymnasiums) (AP News, 2024). Moreover, women were deprived of their independence. Health workers in public hospitals were also required to have a mahram at work (United States Institute of Peace, n.d.).

#### 4. Clothing

The Taliban launched a campaign on full-body covering hijab for women (Kumar & Noori, 2022). The hijab that is considered by the Taliban to be the best was the burqa which has long been a part of Afghan culture, especially in the rural south (Clark & Rahimi, 2022). The campaign was spread through billboards and public announcements, and enforced at checkpoints, public places, and during patrols (Amnesty International, 2022).

On May 7, 2022, the Ministry of Virtue and Vice issued a decree on the best ways to observe the sharia hijab which were wearing burqa and staying at home (Ahmad, 2022). The decree was spread through media, mosques, and other public spaces by promoting the benefits of hijab and the harm in not wearing hijab, which include: obeying God's order, a privilege for noble Muslim women, protected from sinful actions, and becoming honorable. It also made men responsible for their female family members' obedience to the hijab (Ahmad, 2022).

Any disobedience would be followed by punishments which came in several stages and were imposed on the guardian: From verbal warnings, a call to the government office, 3-days detainment, then being brought to court (Clark & Rahimi, 2022). However, women were also at risk of violence by Taliban officers for any disobedience against the hijab decree (Amnesty International, 2022).

#### **Target 2: Ending Violence**

The rate of violence against women was already high before the Taliban takeover. In 2017, as many as 51% women aged 15-49 have experienced intimate partner violence (IPV) at least once in a lifetime (UN Women, 2017). Lack of awareness was one of the reasons for the high rate. Beatings from husbands were justified by women for several reasons such as travelling without husbands' permission, arguing, refusing sexual intercourse, neglecting children, burning food, and wearing immodest clothes (Clifton, 2012). Women for Women International conducted a survey on people's responses regarding physical violence, marital rape, rape, and asset deprivation. There were several factors that drove the rate of these violence. Physical violence was driven by low literacy level, drug abuse, economic instability, job loss, limited mobility, and depression. Also, limited mobility for women only worsened existing rape stigma and victims' access to support and justice. Moreover, women were further deprived of their ownership over money and assets due to the humanitarian crisis (Women for Women International, 2022).

**Table 2: Survey result by Women for Women International**

Type of Violence	Responses	
	Women	Men
Physical Violence	Violence cannot be justified even if it is women's fault. However, some agree that it is women's responsibility to not provoke their husbands.	Normal, even if it is because of a small mistake.
Marital Rape	Normal since men's feelings are superior (and do not need to consider their wives' reasons) and religious interpretation (wives should not refuse sex with their husbands without a definite reason).	Not normal
Rape	Victims are often blamed and questioned negatively (ex. immodest clothing and provoking men).	
Asset Deprivation	No data found	Normal if men want to control wives' income and finance.

However, since the return of the Taliban, women became more vulnerable to violence, especially IPV, due to the loss of protection for victims. The Taliban eliminated institutional support and legal protection, such as shelters, and forced victims to stay home with their abusers. They have also released perpetrators of gender-based violence which lead to increasing cases of deaths due to domestic violence. Unmarried women became strong criminal targets as they are more easily perceived to have behaved inappropriately or committed adultery. As a result of child and forced marriages, violence against women was not uncommon. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) received 87 reports of murder, rape, suicide, forced and child marriage, and assault; and 2 cases of honor killings during the year of the Taliban's return (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2023).

Taliban officers have also committed violence against women, including detaining women on the basis of moral corruption, activists/protestors, and victims of violence. These women became subjects to threats, torture, ill-treatment, and inhumane detention conditions. As for activists, they faced verbal and physical violence from Taliban officers from protesting. Such violence includes using tear gas and electric

shock devises, beating, destroying banners and pamphlets, banning telephones, and even stalking protestors home after protesting (Amnesty International, 2022).

***Target 3: Ending harmful practices (such as forced marriages and genital mutilation)***

Despite being one of the countries with the highest rates of child and forced marriages, the Taliban issued a special decree on December 2021 stating that no one could force a girl or woman to marry without her consent. This decree stated that women could not be considered as property, forced to marry with pressure, and both men and women should be equal (Azadi & Siddique, 2022). It did not state the minimum age for marriage, though it was previously set as 16 years old (Al Jazeera, 2021). At the local level, Taliban representatives also participated in socializations and raising awareness against child and forced marriages (Amnesty International, 2022).

In reality, despite the decree, the number of child and forced marriages in rural and urban areas has increased, based on reports by UNICEF, Danish Refugee Council, and Too Young to Wed (Amnesty International, 2022). Now, baby girls as young as 20 days have already been promised for future marriages in exchange for dowries (Fore, 2021). There is a correlation between the increasing number of marriages and the return of Taliban, as more families now, particularly in urban areas, see it as an urgency due to three factors (Lecumberri, 2023).

The first factor, Afghanistan's economic and humanitarian crisis, force families to marry off their daughters in exchange for dowries and to reduce the cost of family members. Second, the lack of educational and employment prospects for girls push girls to get married since there is no good future than the hope of having a better life as a wife. The third factor is to avoid their daughters being forced to marry Taliban officers or even marrying Taliban officers for protection and security (Amnesty International, 2022).

***Target 4: Value Domestic Work***

In Afghanistan, it was already the norm for husbands to control their wives and assets, resulting in a sense of superiority over their wives (Women for Women International, 2022). Under the Taliban, this sense of superiority could become greater considering the many responsibilities placed on men. For example, the "mahram requirement to travel" could lead to intense control of the wife's mobility. Meanwhile, following the employment ban, women's role in domestic role could become even more demanding with them forced to fully take on the role. These factors could risk women becoming highly vulnerable to IPV (Yong, 2023).

Unfortunately, as women were becoming highly vulnerable to IPV, shelters for victims were abolished since shelters were seen as an unnecessary western concept. The Taliban opted with sending victims back home to their husbands or male relatives. If they do not have a male relative, victims are sent to prison for women's safety (Yong, 2023).

#### ***Target 5: Women's Participation in Society***

Under the Taliban, no woman holds leadership roles in various sectors, including in the parliament (UN Women, n.d.). Taliban spokesman Sayed Zekrullah Hashimi said that women do not have the capability to be ministers and that women should be content with childbirth (Fox, 2021). The decline is due to decrees issued by the Taliban. For example, the ban on women's participation in the judicial system, where women are not allowed to work as judges, prosecutors, and lawyers (Medica Mondiale, n.d.).

#### ***Target 6: Guaranteed Access to Healthcare***

The inadequate state of Afghanistan's healthcare is worsened by Taliban complicating women's access to healthcare (Lee, 2022). One of Taliban's policy requires women to be with a mahram when visiting a clinic or else women will be denied treatment. The Taliban prohibits doctors to provide treatment to women who come without a mahram. The number of treatment refusal is unfortunately increasing due to few factors. First, 10% of Afghan citizens live 30 minutes to 2 hours away from the nearest clinic, which requires women to travel with a mahram even though the distance is already a nuisance as it is. Second, the presence of mahram has made some women uncomfortable in communicating their needs like reproductive matters (Lee, 2022). Third, there are cases where the Taliban punished those who violated the policy. In one case, Taliban officers arrested a midwife and her husband, and prosecuted 18 clinic workers; 3 days after delivering a baby of a woman who arrived without a mahram (Nader & Amini, 2022). According to Alaa AbouZeid, Head of the WHO Emergency Team in Afghanistan, requiring a mahram when travelling is a cultural factor which limits women's mobility and access to healthcare, however this situation is certainly worsened by Taliban's mahram policy (Lee, 2022).

The Taliban's burqa policy is also enforced on female health workers. Health workers are required to wear a burqa based on the Ministry of Vice and Virtue orders when working and performing operations, and any violation will face punishment (Amu TV, 2023). This policy obstructs health workers movement and risks slowing down proper health treatments for female patients.

Access to healthcare for women is unfortunately predicted to not have any progress. The restrictions for girls' education will impede the regeneration of female health workers. In the long run, this will worsen women's access to adequate healthcare, especially when women are only allowed to be treated by female health workers (UN Women, 2023).

#### ***Target 7: Women's Access to Ownership and Control over Economic Resources***

Although data on women's and men's access to ownership and control over assets is scarce, it can be assumed that ownership and control in Afghan households is unequal. As a norm, both a woman's body and finances are seen as the property of her husband. With the return of the Taliban, this norm is solidified as a consequence of the restrictions on women. The lack of employment opportunities for women led them to become economically dependent on their husbands (Women for Women International, 2022). In addition, it was noted that in 2021, only 5% of women had personal bank accounts (UN Women, n.d.). This reality shows how women in Afghanistan are not yet independent in owning and controlling their economic assets and resources.

#### ***Target 8: Use of Technology for Women's Empowerment***

The technology access gap between women and men is still prevalent in Afghanistan. Though both men and women still struggle to access the internet due to a lack of reliable electricity and information technology infrastructure, the reality for women is worse because of social norms and restrictions. By 2022, only 6% of women in Afghanistan have internet access compared to 25% of men. However, the 2022 figure is an improvement from the previous year's 2% (Nusratty & Crabtree, 2023).

Although internet access has long been difficult due to the country's lack of infrastructure and poverty, internet access coverage under the Taliban became more difficult with frequent connection stoppage and blocking webpages that were considered immoral. On the contrary, the Taliban have plans to upgrade the national internet network to 4G, which shows how they still rely on technology (Nusratty & Crabtree, 2023).

However, misinformation on Taliban's technology policy is common. For example, in 2022, there was a social media post showing a video of Taliban soldiers destroying thousands of cell phones and it was written that the Taliban banned and destroyed cell phones. In fact, the video was of Pakistani soldiers destroying contraband, and it was confirmed by local Taliban officials that the Taliban did not ban cell phones (Abreu, 2022). Misinformation like this makes it difficult for researcher to know whether the Taliban oppress women in terms of technology.

**Target 9: Implementation of Policies that Empower Women**

In September 2021, the Taliban dissolved the Ministry of Women's Affairs and replaced it with the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, which would act as Taliban moral police. The Ministry of Vice and Virtue issued restrictive virtues that hinder Afghan women's empowerment, such as the ban on employment and school, ban from television appearances, public facilities closure, and more (Feminist Majority Foundation, n.d.). However, Taliban did issue a decree that prohibits forced marriages, although it was not implemented properly, given the increasing number of forced marriages in Afghanistan (Al Jazeera, 2021). Any violation on the policies will be faced with punishment, including intimidation and physical and verbal abuse. For example, women on the streets faced verbal abuse by Taliban officers, criticizing them with speakers (Ahmadi, 2023).

Furthermore, the judicial system in Afghanistan cannot provide justice and support for women, especially those who are victims of IPV. Taliban courts appear to favor men or perpetrators of violence, often letting abusers go unconvicted and released (with the exception of murder cases). This will create a sense of fearlessness and freedom to commit more violence against women, which shows how Taliban can have an impact in private households by enhancing on patriarchal norms. Thus, Taliban policies on women and law enforcement have normalized forms of violence against women which pushed people to treat women as second-class citizens who have no rights (Ahmadi, 2023).

**The Influence of Taliban Identity and Culture on Discrimination Against Women Afghanistan**

In the following part, the authors will analyze the reasons for not achieving these targets by using the concept of cultural violence in which religion and ideology have an important role.

**Religion**

When considering the origins of the Taliban, Islam was not only the basis of their movement, but also shaped their regime. The combination of Deobandi curriculum and Wahhabi ideology in fundamentalist Pakistani madrassas, where Afghan refugees were educated, shaped the mindset of Taliban students-turned-fighters into a literal, rigid, uncompromising, and conservative worldview (Frear, 2012). This, in turn, affected the formulation and implementation of policies that oppressed women's rights.

For Taliban, religious factors are used to legitimize their new policies. The policy makers or leaders are seen to have an authority related to God. This is because the leaders are responsible only to the Taliban's supreme leader (Hibatullah Akhundada), and this supreme leader is responsible to God (Dawi, 2022). This hierarchy will give policy makers an exclusive authority to determine policies for women, as long as it is approved by Hibatullah Akhundada.

The Taliban has used religion to advance its political agenda. One example is the policy on hijab, more specifically burqa, for women, which was campaigned by promoting the religious benefits of hijab (Ahmad, 2022). Hijab in Islam is generally defined as a headscarf worn by Muslim women to cover the hair and neck, and is considered obligatory by the majority of scholars. However, burqa or niqab is not considered obligatory and seen as an extra form of modesty (Chamas, 2024). Thus, by requiring women to cover their bodies excessively (beyond the limits of Islamic law) it can be said that Taliban has manipulated religious teachings to justify its excessive hijab policy.

Moreover, the hijab decree is only imposed on women and ignores the practice of hijab for men. In Islam, hijab refers to the practice of modesty for both men and women. For men, hijab is known as "hijab of the eye", where men must lower their gaze from women and maintain modesty. However, by the Taliban, it is not enforced with the same intensity as it is to women and even puts the blame on women. For example, women in Afghanistan were forced to stay at home after Taliban's return on the basis of Taliban officers had not been trained to respect women (United States Institute of Peace, n.d.).

Another policy example is the mahram (a male legal guardian) requirement for women when leaving the house. In the Qur'an, no verse specifically mentions requiring a mahram to accompany women when leaving their homes. Some Muslims, although, use verse 33 and 59 of Surah al-Ahzab as justifications for this rule. However, in those verses, there is no prohibition for women to leave the house or to work without a mahram, and only specify on wearing a veil when outside of home. Many scholars agree that a mahram is only required when the safety of the traveling woman is compromised. Thus, if a woman's safety is guaranteed, she is not required to have a mahram (Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, n.d.).

According to Yuniyanti Chuzaifah, a women's rights activist, former Vice Chair of the National Commission on Violence against Women, and Executive Board of AMAN Indonesia (The Asian Muslim Action Network); the Taliban's approach to women is protectionist. Taliban clerics have an influential role in the formulation and

implementation of laws related to women. Based on the Taliban's understanding, policies such as hijab and mahram companion are Taliban's government efforts to protect Afghan women. Aside from religious influences, the protectionist nature and role of Taliban clerics are partly due to cultural influences.

### ***Ideology***

As part of the two aspects that influenced Taliban ideology (religion and culture), Afghan culture, particularly Pashtun, is reflected on Taliban's policies that lead to the discrimination against women. One of them is the policy on girls' education. The Taliban was in process of developing school uniforms for girls that reflected Afghan customs and culture and the sharia, which made them postponed the opening for schools for girls. A cultural practice of *pardah* is also to be implemented by the Taliban. *Pardah* or curtain, which aims to cover and separate women from men, is expected to be practiced at schools (About Afghanistan, 2011). Another example of cultural reflection is how women are forced to take up work at home, such as sewing and weaving, which is more in line with Afghan cultural norms than when women working outside of home (UN Women, 2023). These examples show how there are cultural aspects reflected in Taliban's policies.

Another cultural aspect comes from the Pashtuns tribal code, *Pashtunwali*. An important principle in this code is *namus* or women's honor, especially on chastity and integrity, that must be guarded by men (Ali, 2013). Taliban's policies on burqa and staying at home reflected *namus*, if seen from a protectionist perspective. The Taliban sees the two policies as an effort to maintain women's honor, especially from sexual crimes. *Namus* is also seen on how the responsibility of women's obedience imposed on male family members by the Taliban, which shows how men are responsible and must guard women's honor (Clark & Rahimi, 2022). Another policy is the mahram requirement to travel, which can be seen as an effort to protect, ensure women's safety and guard their honor from any harm on the way. Aside from *namus*, other principles are also reflected in Taliban's policies, such as *puth* (protection of self-respect), *nang* (honor), and *ghayrat* (dignity).

The religious aspect of Taliban's ideology is reflected in how their goal is to create an ideal Islamic society by implementing a strict sharia law (Gopal & Linschoten, 2017). One of their efforts in achieving this goal is by destroying anything that goes against and is a threat to Islamic teachings. In doing so, it ultimately leads to depriving women of their rights. For example, the elimination of shelters for female victims of IPV was because of Taliban's perception of shelters as unnecessary and a western concept. Women could no longer hold leadership positions because the Taliban considers women

incapable and should already be satisfied with childbirth (Fox, 2021). The misogynistic traits of Taliban officers only aggravate their treatment and policies on women. The Ministry of Women's Affairs was also replaced by the Taliban with the Ministry of Vice and Virtue (Amnesty International, 2002). Another example includes frequently stopping internet connectivity to block immoral internet content and restrict opposition. Taliban's agenda and its efforts formed their ideology that legitimize the oppression of Afghan women.

### **Discrimination against Women in Afghanistan as a Form of Cultural Violence**

Based on the data above, the discrimination against women in Afghanistan in 2021-2022 was the result of cultural violence perpetrated by the Taliban. The oppression of women, as measured by Target 5.1, Target 5.5, and Target 5.C; is a direct impact of the Taliban's cultural violence. Decrees restricting and prohibiting women from attending school, working, mobilizing, and dressing in ways deemed inconsistent with the "Islamic hijab", along with bans on women's participation in leadership roles, and the lack of policies that promote women's empowerment— all reflect the significant influence of the Taliban's religious and ideological foundations.

However, these regulations have produced a ripple effect on other situations that oppress women, as measured by indicators Target 5.2, Target 5.3, Target 5.4, Target 5.6, and Target 5.A. Under Target 5.2, violence against women has become increasingly prevalent in Afghanistan, as the Taliban elimination of shelters and legal protection for victims of abuse has enabled perpetrators to re-commit violence against women. Relating to Target 5.3, although the Taliban issued a decree prohibiting child, early, and forced marriage, enforcement is ineffective— partly because the prohibition and restriction of girls' education leaves them with no future other than marriage. In relation to Target 5.4, women's domestic bargaining power is significantly weaker than that of men, a condition exacerbated by the Taliban's ban on women working. Then, regarding Target 5.6, access to health services for women, which was already poor due to inadequate facilities, has further worsened under the Taliban's restrictions on mobility and dress codes. Finally, in relation to Target 5.A, the ban on women's employment has deepened their economic dependence on their husbands.

Meanwhile, regarding Target 5.B, available data indicate that women's lower rate of technology use compared to men existed prior to the Taliban's return. Thus, it cannot be determined whether the Taliban-imposed internet limitations specifically target women or constitute a method of oppression. Nevertheless, ideological influence remains evident in the Taliban's blocking content they deem immoral, and no data

indicate efforts to bridge the gender gap in technology use. Therefore, it cannot be concluded that low technology use among women is a form of cultural violence intended to oppress women.

Based on the indicators of all nine targets of SDG Goal 5, it can be concluded that the situation of women in Afghanistan constitutes a form of discrimination against women. Of the nine targets examined, three were found to be directly and significantly shaped by Taliban cultural elements, five targets were secondary effects resulting from regulations imposed based on the previous three targets, and one target (although ideologically influenced) cannot be confirmed as a deliberate means of oppression. Overall, the data demonstrate that the Taliban are committing cultural violence against women in Afghanistan, particularly through policies shaped by their religious and ideological beliefs.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, the author uses the nine SDG targets No. 5 related to gender equality. The perspective used is: if a series of targets in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) such as eliminating discrimination, violence, and exploitation against women and girls; eliminating the practice of forced marriage and genital mutilation; recognizing unpaid domestic work and promoting shared responsibility in the household sphere; ensuring women's full participation in leadership and decision-making; ensuring universal access to reproductive health and rights; providing equal rights to economic resources, property ownership, and financial services; empowering women through technology; and strengthening policies and regulations that guarantee gender equality—are not achieved, then it shows that the state is still systematically maintaining forms of discrimination against women.

This research finds that Taliban-led Emirate Islam Afghanistan (EIA) government implements discriminative policies in education, employment, clothing, and mobility, prohibition of women's leadership roles, and lack of policies that empower or protect women. Furthermore, violence against women became more prevalent after the elimination of shelters and legal protection for victims of violence by the Taliban. Harmful practices like child and forced marriages are increasing since girls and women are considered to have no better future other than marriage due to the ban on education and employment—despite a decree that prohibits child and forced marriage by the Taliban. The Taliban's ban on women's employment worsens the reality of unequal power between husband and wife in private households. Access to already poor health services for women has worsened due to mobility restrictions and dress code by

the Taliban. Lastly, ban on women's employment has increased women's economic dependency on their husbands. Meanwhile, related the use of technology by women, there is insufficient data to conclude whether Taliban's restriction of the internet is only targeted at women.

It is concluded that women's situation in Afghanistan is a form of discrimination against women. Out of the nine targets measured, it was found that there are three targets that have a direct influence from Taliban's cultural elements, five targets that are the effects of enforcing policies based on the previous three targets, and one target that although there is an ideological influence, it is unknown whether it is targeted specifically towards women. Based on the data above, the Taliban has committed cultural violence against women in Afghanistan.

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