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Banned from speaking in public, Afghan women are fighting against a regime experts call 'gender apartheid'

IT'S BEEN THREE years since the haunting scenes of the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, when desperate Afghans jumped into moving planes in attempts to flee their rule. For women, the reality that followed has been bleak. The Taliban have issued decrees that systematically erase women from public spaces, restricting access to education and jobs outside the home.

Now, a new edict has been issued, banning women from hearing each other's voices in public spaces. Taliban minister Mohammad Khalid Hanafi declared that even during prayers, a woman's voice should not be audible to other women – essentially preventing them from having conversations outside the home.

It comes months after the introduction of new 'vice and virtue' laws, in which women's voices are deemed to be potential instruments of vice and cannot be heard in public. Women must also not be heard singing or reading aloud, even from inside their houses.

Khatera, a woman living in Afghanistan, tells *Grazia* her spirit has been broken by it. 'These laws feel like another step toward eliminating women from social life and establishing a fully male-dominated community,' she says. 'Each new restriction breaks my spirit and feels like gender-based abuse. I had no choice in being born a woman. But I am punished for being one.'

Human rights experts are concerned recent amendments to the law will isolate women even further. Sahar Halaimzai, director of the Afghanistan Initiative at Malala Fund, an international, non-profit organisation that advocates for girls' education, tells *Grazia* this isolation 'erodes the social bonds women

rely on for emotional resilience and survival under these oppressive conditions,' adding, 'The restrictions force women into a kind of solitude, heightening their vulnerability by severing their ties to each other.'

Research published this year by UN Women found only 1% of Afghan women feel they have influence in their communities, and 18% report not meeting once with women outside their immediate family for the last three months.

The law also gives the Taliban powers to ensure morality laws are observed. Halaimzai says the organisation is hearing first-hand the 'chilling' effect this latest ruling has on women and girls. 'The fear of being punished has left many feeling paralysed, knowing even the smallest interaction could draw unwanted attention or consequences.'

Despite the threat of punishment, some Afghan women are taking a stand by posting videos of themselves online, their faces covered, singing songs about freedom. In one video, a woman sings, 'You placed the stamp of silence on my mouth until further notice. You will [not] provide me with bread and food until further notice, you've imprisoned me inside the house for the crime of being a woman.'

Now, Malala Fund and other human rights groups are pushing for the Taliban's treatment of women and girls to be recognised as 'gender apartheid'. 'The term isn't just a label – it identifies a deliberate, institutionalised system aimed at erasing women from public life through restrictions on education, work and even basic freedoms,' Halaimzai says.

Payvand Seyedali of Women for Women International says that these restrictions on women's participation in life outside the home have 'far-reaching' implications. 'One overwhelming worry is the loss of economic activity and income. In 2019, some 20% of Afghanistan's workforce was female. In 2022, the year after the regime change, the number fell 11%. In 2024, that number slipped to 6%,' she says.

For women like Khatera, their dreams for a better life stop them from giving up. 'I'm a poetry vocalist and speaking out is my passion,' she says. 'I share my recitations on social media. Since the new restrictions, I've changed my account to a pseudonym because, for me, raising my voice is more important than staying silent.'

Afghan women wait in silence to receive fiscal aid in Kohsan

WORDS: ALICE HALL; PHOTO: GETTY

'My spirit has been broken by Taliban rule'