



# AFGHAN WITNESS

A project by



CENTRE for  
INFORMATION  
RESILIENCE

## FINDING ALTERNATIVES

Entrepreneurship and resilience

by Afghan women online

# FINDING ALTERNATIVES

## Entrepreneurship and resilience by Afghan women online

7 March 2025

### TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	2
2. INTRODUCTION	3
3. METHODOLOGY	4
4. BACKGROUND: WOMEN'S RIGHTS, ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND SOCIAL MEDIA USE UNDER THE TALIBAN	5
4.1 ACCESS TO THE LABOUR MARKET AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP	6
4.2 RESTRICTIONS ON SOCIAL MEDIA	6
4.3 SOCIAL MEDIA AS A VEHICLE FOR WOMEN-LED PROTESTS	7
5. AFGHAN WOMEN ON INSTAGRAM	8
5.1 INCREASE IN PUBLIC PROFILES ON INSTAGRAM	9
5.2 DEMOGRAPHICS	12
5.3 VISIBILITY OF FACES	14
6. THE NATURE OF AFGHAN WOMEN'S PRESENCE ON INSTAGRAM	18
6.1 DIVERSE, BUT NON-POLITICAL, CONTENT	18
6.2 TALIBAN RESTRICTIONS AS A MOTIVATION FOR JOINING INSTAGRAM	20
6.3 AFGHAN WOMEN'S ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES ON INSTAGRAM	21
6.4 INSTAGRAM: A MARKETING TOOL FOR UNDERGROUND BEAUTY SALONS	29
7. CHALLENGES AND COPING MECHANISMS	31
7.1 CONSERVATIVE SOCIAL NORMS AND FAMILY PRESSURE	32
7.2 ONLINE HARASSMENT	32
7.3 THREATS TO PHYSICAL SAFETY AND SELF-CENSORSHIP	35
7.4 THE PVPV LAW AND PROSPECTS FOR CONTENT CREATION AND ONLINE MARKETING	36
7.5 OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES OF ONLINE BUSINESSES	37
8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	39

---

## 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since seizing power in August 2021, the Taliban de facto authorities have imposed severe restrictions on the human rights of women and girls. An intricate web of policies, edicts and laws have affected all aspects of women's lives, amounting to a deliberate attempt to erase women and girls from public spaces, as [documented](#) by Afghan Witness and other credible actors.

Despite the crackdown, Afghan women have shown remarkable resilience. As the Taliban have harshly repressed protests in public spaces, women have increasingly relied on social media to make their voices heard. Women activists both inside Afghanistan and among the diaspora have used platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook to voice opposition to the Taliban, including by arranging indoor protests.

Afghan women are, however, also turning to social media for non-political reasons. Instagram, in particular, appears to have grown in popularity with Afghan women since 2021, as it is seen as a relatively safe space with less abusive content or risk of Taliban reprisals. It has become a platform for women and girls to express themselves, share and create content about their daily lives, and to earn a living as influencers or owners of online businesses.

This report by Afghan Witness examines the presence and activities of Afghan women and girls on Instagram, and the challenges they face under Taliban rule. It is based on an analysis of 100 public accounts belonging to Afghan women using OSINT tools. In addition, AW interviewed 10 women with public Instagram accounts as well as two women working in beauty salons, who have used Instagram since the Taliban [closed down their businesses in 2023](#) and forced them [underground](#).

Women reported having turned to Instagram largely due to restrictive policies by the Taliban, in particular the lack of access to education and work opportunities. Out of the 100 accounts analysed by AW, 86 had been created after the Taliban takeover in August 2021 - an indication of the platform's growing popularity among women. The accounts were engaged in a range of mostly non-political activities, including promoting their online businesses, sharing vlogs from their lives, or producing other work- or Afghanistan-related content.

Afghan women on Instagram, however, face a hugely challenging environment. Women said they feared for their safety due to their online activities, whether due to Taliban reprisals or other misogynistic attacks. This has led to self-censorship, a reluctance to go outside, and efforts to conceal their identities when they do have to leave their homes, even if they do not show their faces in Instagram posts.

Some women described having already faced reprisals for their online activities. One woman had her camera confiscated by a Taliban official while taking pictures

outside, while another had been directly threatened due to her acting and modelling work. An AW analysis also showed that Afghan women face abusive messages on Instagram – including sexualised and gendered abuse – although not to the same extent as on other platforms, notably on X.

The recently published (August 2024) Law on the Prevention of Vice and Promotion of Virtue has heightened fears about Taliban reprisals against online content creators or business owners. The Law bans footage of living beings on various platforms, while [reinforcing and widening](#) other restrictions on women's rights, including a ban on revealing their faces or interaction between genders.

Taliban restrictions have also created severe operational challenges for women who run online businesses through Instagram. Movement restrictions, including the *mahram* (male chaperone) requirement, means that women must rely on male family members to handle shipping of products and other logistical tasks. One business owner said that Taliban officials had forcibly closed her workshop, where she employed at least 30 women. Another woman, who owns a beauty salon that operates underground, said she had to pay regular bribes to Taliban officials.

AW urges donors, technology companies and other international actors to provide support to Afghan women using Instagram and other social media platforms. This should include resources for dedicated trainings in both digital security and online entrepreneurship, improved content moderation efforts to counter abuse, and pressure on the Taliban de facto authorities to remove barriers for women business owners.

---

## 2. INTRODUCTION

This investigation focuses solely on Instagram, and does not include other social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) or Facebook. AW believes that the presence and activities of Afghan women on Instagram, and the challenges they face, merited a standalone investigation, in particular in light of the rise of such accounts since the Taliban takeover.

The research, however, builds on and complements past work by AW on the rights of Afghan women and girls - including online - since the Taliban's return. In November 2023, for example, AW exposed how online abuse on primarily X and Facebook against women had increased exponentially under the Taliban in the report [Violence behind a screen: rising online abuse silences Afghan women](#). In April 2023, AW [examined](#) how Afghan women's online presence has changed more broadly since the Taliban's return, as well as how technology-facilitated

gender-based violence targeted politically active women. In addition, other AW reports have focused on women-led online protest movements (available on request).

Section 4 of this report provides brief context on the rights of women and girls under the Taliban, with a particular focus on social media and entrepreneurship. Section 5 then gives a quantitative and qualitative overview of Afghan women on girls on Instagram, including their activities and geographical spread. Finally, Section 6 draws primarily on interviews to highlight the breadth of challenges women on Instagram face, while the conclusion provides recommendations to international actors.

---

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Afghan Witness (AW) collected data for this investigation using open-source investigation techniques (OSINT) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). AW analysed the data using quantitative and qualitative methods.

AW investigators employed OSINT techniques and qualitative analysis to initially identify 100 public accounts belonging to Afghan women for further investigation, including their creation dates. AW deemed these accounts to be representative of Afghan women's usage of Instagram based on the following criteria:

- Numbers of followers
- Levels of engagement
- Visibility
- Content type
- Connected accounts on other social media platforms
- Language of produced content
- Location
- Exposure to online harassment

From these 100 accounts, AW selected 28 accounts for additional in-depth analysis, including of their location, ages, primary function, engagement in online commerce, and language. While the investigation primarily focuses on accounts belonging to women based in Afghanistan, AW has included some accounts based abroad that are linked to businesses inside the country, or whose creators have recently left Afghanistan.

In addition, AW conducted 12 semi-structured interviews with Afghan women for this investigation. This included ten women - referred to as Key Informants (KIs) throughout this report - who own public Instagram accounts, aged between 18 and 26, and based in either Afghanistan (eight) or Pakistan (two). The women inside Afghanistan are based in Kabul (5), Balkh(2), and Faryab (1) provinces.<sup>1</sup> The interviews were conducted remotely through secure communications channels in Farsi/Dari, and later translated and transcribed into English. In addition, AW interviewed two women in the beauty salon business, one owner of a salon in Kabul (based in Turkey) and one staff member at the same salon.

In order to understand the scale and nature of online harassment on Instagram, AW investigators further manually analysed comments on 1,834 posts shared by the 28 accounts between 1 January and 1 November 2024. The analysis was combined with findings from the KIs.

All information in this report is used with the informed consent of interviewees. Although other analysis in this report is based on content available publicly online, AW has chosen to remove all identifying information (including screenshots, account names, and links) to protect those featured from possible reprisals. A non-anonymised version of this report is available upon request. AW wishes to express its sincere thanks to the women who agreed to be interviewed or featured despite the personal risks involved.

---

## 4. BACKGROUND: WOMEN'S RIGHTS, ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND SOCIAL MEDIA USE UNDER THE TALIBAN

Since seizing power in August 2021, the Taliban de facto administration has imposed sweeping restrictions on the human rights of women and girls, affecting all aspects of their lives. According to the UN, women have effectively been [“erased from public life”](#), while human rights groups, including [Amnesty International](#) and [Human Rights Watch](#), have stated that the Taliban's policies amount to the crime against humanity of gender persecution.

Taliban policies have severely affected women's freedom of movement and access to public spaces, including by imposing *mahram* (male chaperone) requirements. The de facto authorities have further barred women and girls from accessing education beyond the sixth grade, including by recently barring them from attending medical institutes. According to [UN Women](#), the Taliban's policies have triggered an “acute mental health crisis” among women and girls, as shrinking access to public spaces has compounded a sense of hopelessness and despair.

---

<sup>1</sup> The apparent lack of Instagram accounts from Pashtun-majority areas could be explained by the more conservative social culture there, as well as the effects of decades of intense conflict.

## 4.1 ACCESS TO THE LABOUR MARKET AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The Taliban have not imposed a generalised ban on women working across the country, and women can still officially be hired across several sectors. A range of Taliban policies have, however, combined to severely curtail women's access to employment. These include the [order](#) in August 2021 for women public sector employees to stay at home, and a [ban](#) on women working for Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in December 2023, [extended](#) to the UN in April 2023 (although some exceptions were allowed in the health and education sectors). In July 2023, the Taliban further ordered the closure of beauty salons, which are estimated to have employed more than [60,000 women](#) across the country. Other Taliban policies – such as clothing restrictions or *mahram* requirements – have [further curtailed](#) women's ability to work in certain sectors, such as in the media or healthcare provision. Between 2020 and 2023, according to the [World Bank](#), women's labour force participation rate fell from 16% to 5%.

Before 2021, women played an increasingly important role in entrepreneurship in Afghanistan. According to Manizha Wafeq, the former [President](#) of the [Afghanistan Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industries](#), there were 2,471 women-owned businesses in 2020 across the country, as well as some 56,000 informal ones – all together creating more than 130,000 jobs.

Many female entrepreneurs have left the country since the takeover, while others have been forced to shut down or move their businesses underground. According to [one estimate](#), half of the formal women-owned businesses had closed already by 2022. While the Taliban Ministry of Economy is still able to issue [licences](#) to female-run businesses, the female entrepreneurs who remain face [mounting challenges](#). Women entrepreneurs have reported the Taliban imposing [arbitrary taxes](#) and price restrictions on their businesses, or demanding bribes, while [UNAMA](#) has documented how MoPVPV officials have arbitrarily shut down female-led businesses across the country. UN Women has further stressed the [particular barriers](#) facing women in pursuing online businesses, including lower literacy levels and less ownership of technological devices like mobile phones.

## 4.2 RESTRICTIONS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Since seizing power, the Taliban have imposed sweeping restrictions on freedom of expression, including on social media. A [string of laws and directives](#) have banned all criticism of the authorities and content deemed to be “un-Islamic”. The Taliban have furthermore taken steps to ban or restrict some social media platforms. On 21 April 2022, the Taliban [instructed](#) the Ministry of Information and Communication (MoIC) to block access to the social media platform TikTok as well as the online

game PUBG to “prevent the younger generation from being misled.” While the bans were still in effect as of November 2024, TikTok is reportedly still [widely accessed](#) in Afghanistan through Virtual Private Networks (VPNs). The Taliban furthermore reportedly [announced plans](#) in April 2024 to block Facebook, but have seemingly yet to implement the decision. Similarly, the MoIC in September 2023 [announced](#) unspecified plans to “regulate” YouTubers, but has apparently not followed through. Beyond social media platforms, the Taliban have also restricted access to several foreign websites, including [prominent media](#) outlets, and [shut down](#) the websites of Afghan-run media outlets.

The Taliban have targeted those criticising the authorities on social media, including women or others championing their rights, through harassment, arbitrary arrests and torture. In August 2024, for example, two social media activists - Khetabullah Bangakh and Abdul Rahman Gulab – were [arrested](#) in the eastern Nangarhar and Laghman provinces, accused of “spreading propaganda” against the Taliban. Both subsequently appeared in [“confession” videos](#) circulated through pro-Taliban accounts and media outlets. In 2022, the Taliban also arrested two prominent YouTubers: the fashion influencer [Ajmal Haqiqi](#) on 7 June and the video blogger [Khatam Ali Salahshor Kamrak](#) in early December.

#### 4.3 SOCIAL MEDIA AS A VEHICLE FOR WOMEN-LED PROTESTS

Afghan women have used social media to protest the Taliban, both through online campaigns and to share footage of demonstrations. Almost immediately after the takeover in August 2021, women began taking to the streets to voice opposition to the new regime, rallying around the slogan [“food, work, freedom”](#). The Taliban often responded by violently cracking down on the protests through [threats](#), [beatings](#) and arbitrary [detentions](#). AW and human rights groups have documented how women protesters [were held incommunicado and tortured](#) as apparent retaliation for public demonstrations.

The Taliban’s harsh response has meant that, since 2022, there has been a notable shift in women-led protests from public spaces to those organised inside. Such indoor protests mostly feature groups of women – ranging from a [single](#) protester to [larger](#) groups - holding signs or chanting slogans, with footage later shared on social media channels. Women participants mostly [cover](#) their faces as a way of avoiding identification and retaliation by the Taliban, as highlighted in previous [AW reporting](#). Sporadic outdoor protests have continued despite the crackdown, however, including as recently as on [International Women’s Day](#) on 8 March 2024.

Afghan women, both inside the country and among the diaspora, have also used social media to organise online campaigns protesting Taliban rule. The #LetHerLearn [hashtag](#) has, for example, been widely used to highlight restrictions on women and girls’ access to education. Since August 2024, Afghan women have



also taken to social media to protest the Law on the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, using the [hashtag](#) [#صدای\\_من\\_عورت\\_نیست](#) (“My Voice Is Not Awrah”) or by defiantly filming themselves singing (see section 7.4).

Afghan women’s rights activists have faced steadily increasing online abuse since the Taliban takeover. An [AW investigation](#) revealed how gendered hate speech and other abuse had more than tripled (217% increase) in June-December 2022 compared to the same period the previous year. The investigation highlighted how prominent Afghan women online were targeted with overwhelmingly sexualised abuse, as well as being accused of being “agents of the West.”

---

## 5. AFGHAN WOMEN ON INSTAGRAM

Created in 2010, Instagram had some [two billion](#) active users globally as of January 2024, making it the fourth most popular platform globally after Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp. According to [Meltwater’s](#) Global Digital Report 2024, Instagram is the most popular platform among active users aged 16-64, in particular in the 16-34 demographic.

In Afghanistan ([estimated](#) population of 42 million), some 3.7 million people are [estimated](#) to use social media, [15.6%](#) of whom are female. Instagram (5.75%) [stands](#) as the third most used social media platform after Facebook (79.21%) and X (8.6%) as of October 2024. Women in Afghanistan are [estimated](#) to make up 21.1% of Instagram users as of October 2024. The proportion of female users spiked immediately after the Taliban takeover to reach 24.1% in October 2021, but has since reverted to pre-2021 levels, as shown in. Table 1 below.

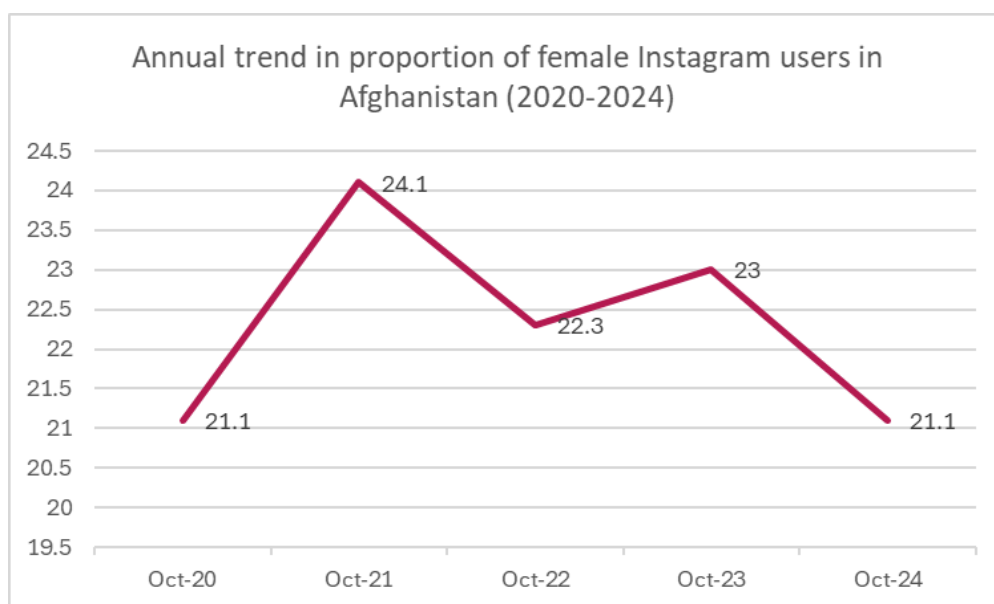
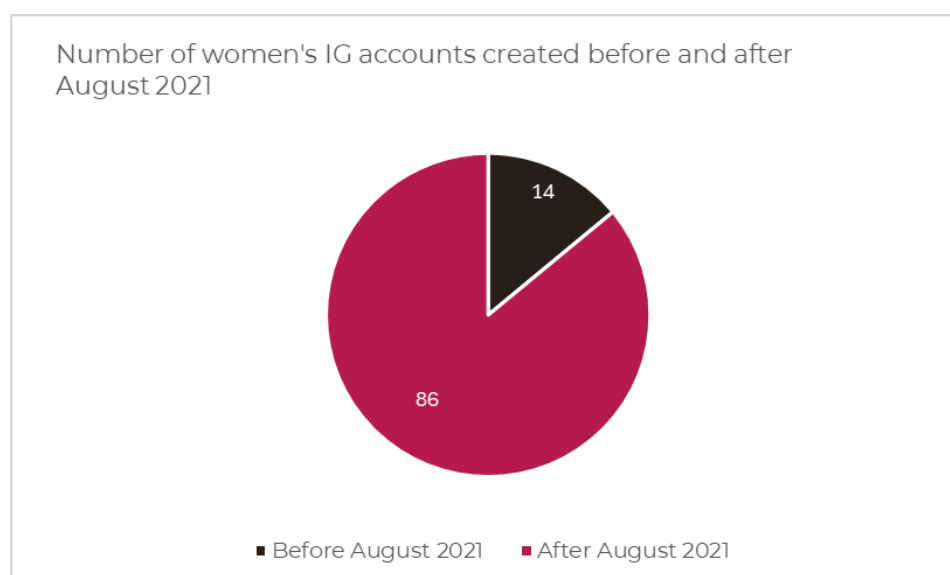


Table 1: Graph showing the proportion of female users in Afghanistan from October 2020 to October 2024. (Source: [Napoleoncat.com](https://napoleoncat.com))

## 5.1 INCREASE IN PUBLIC PROFILES ON INSTAGRAM

AW's investigation indicates an increased presence of Afghan women and girls on Instagram using public accounts (as opposed to private) following the Taliban's return to power in 2021.<sup>2</sup> Out of the 100 public accounts belonging to Afghan women that AW analysed for this report, 86 were created after August 2021 and only 14 before, as seen in Table 2 below.



<sup>2</sup> Content on public accounts can be accessed by anyone, while private accounts are restricted to those approved by the account holder.

Table 2: Chart showing the number of women's public accounts created on Instagram before and after August 2021. (Source: AW analysis)

Out of the 86 accounts created after August 2021, 35 were created in 2023, 26 in 2022, 15 in 2024 (until September), and 10 were created in 2021 (August-December), as seen in Table 3 below. The accounts appear to be predominantly inside Afghanistan, although some were listed as in foreign locations including Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey.

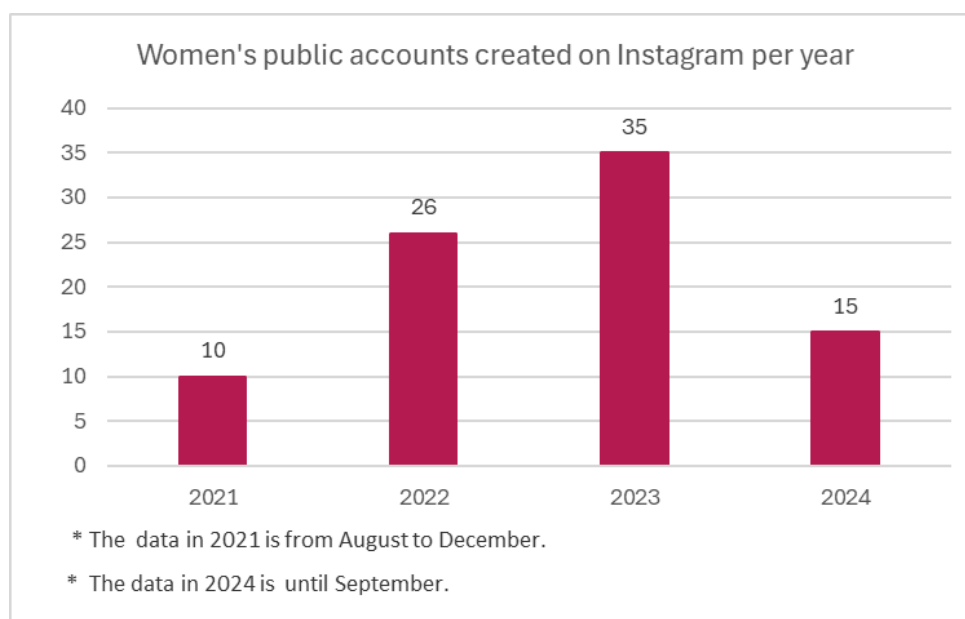


Table 3: Chart showing women's public accounts created on Instagram in 2021-2024. (Source: AW analysis)

The apparent increase in women joining Instagram in 2022 coincides with increasingly restrictive policies by the Taliban, including the [U-turn](#) over the decision to re-open secondary schools for girls in March. The additional spike in 2023 mirrors further restrictions, including the bans on women's access to [higher education](#) and on employment with [NGOs](#) in December 2022.

In interviews with Afghan women, seven of the 10 KIs said they had created their public-facing personal accounts after the Taliban takeover, while one had turned her private account into a public one after August 2021. Nine of the women said they had been motivated to create public accounts, or to become more active on them, as a direct result of Taliban policies (see section 6.2 below).

## 5.2 DEMOGRAPHICS

Drawing on information from 10 KIs and the in-depth analysis of 28 public accounts, AW determined the location, age, and ethnicity of the account holders. The number of followers of the 28 accounts ranged from 2,123 to 175,000.<sup>3</sup>

### **Age**

According to the Global Digital [Report](#) 2024, Instagram is the most popular social media platform globally among female and male users aged 16-34, with 18-24-year-olds [comprising the largest age user group](#) worldwide. In Afghanistan, a number of “Gen Z”<sup>4</sup> [influencers](#) gained popularity on Instagram during the Republic era, but [many](#) reportedly [relocated](#) abroad after the Taliban’s return.

Accounts created by women after August 2021 also appear to fall into the “Gen Z” demographic. The ten women interviewed for this research are 18-26 years old. AW was unable to determine the ages of most of the public accounts analysed for this report, since users rarely make their ages public. AW, however, estimates that the majority of Afghan women with public Instagram accounts appear to be in the same age demographic (less than 30 years old).

In addition, AW investigators observed accounts used by girls who appeared to be younger than 18. One of the KIs interviewed also expressed concern that girls are spending too much time on Instagram after being forced out of school, saying, “After the closure of the schools, I have understood that young girls aged 16, 17, 18 - who are very young and cannot take proper decisions - are there just to attract attention and get famous.”

### ***Ethnicity and language***

The ten women with public accounts on Instagram interviewed for this report come from diverse ethnic backgrounds, and include Tajiks (five), Hazaras (three), Turkmen (one) and Arab (one). One of the KIs, an ethnic Tajik living in Kabul, said about Hazara women and girls often owning public accounts, “I think people in our Hazara communities are more progressive in their thinking.” AW was unable to determine the ethnicity of the 28 public accounts analysed.

Interviews and OSINT analysis of women’s accounts show that Farsi/Dari is the language predominantly used for both spoken and written content, including by women who identified themselves as Turkmen and Arab. Other languages used are English, Pashto and Arabic.

### ***Location***

---

<sup>3</sup> All data on followers throughout the report as of September 2024, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>4</sup> People born between 1997 and 2012, who today are 12-27 years old

Afghan women on Instagram appear to be based primarily in urban centres like Kabul and Mazar-e-Sharif, as well as other northern and western provinces. AW investigators determined the locations of the account holders based on the information on profiles, content shared and interactions with their followers. Based on this information, 26 accounts are based in Afghanistan and one in Islamabad, Pakistan as of 13 September 2024. While the final account is officially listed as in Switzerland, an analysis of its content shows it is likely actually based in Afghanistan. Using geolocation and analysis of the content and interactions of the accounts, AW determined that the Afghan accounts were based in Kabul (17), Balkh (7), Herat (1), Takhar (1) and Faryab (1), as seen in the map below.

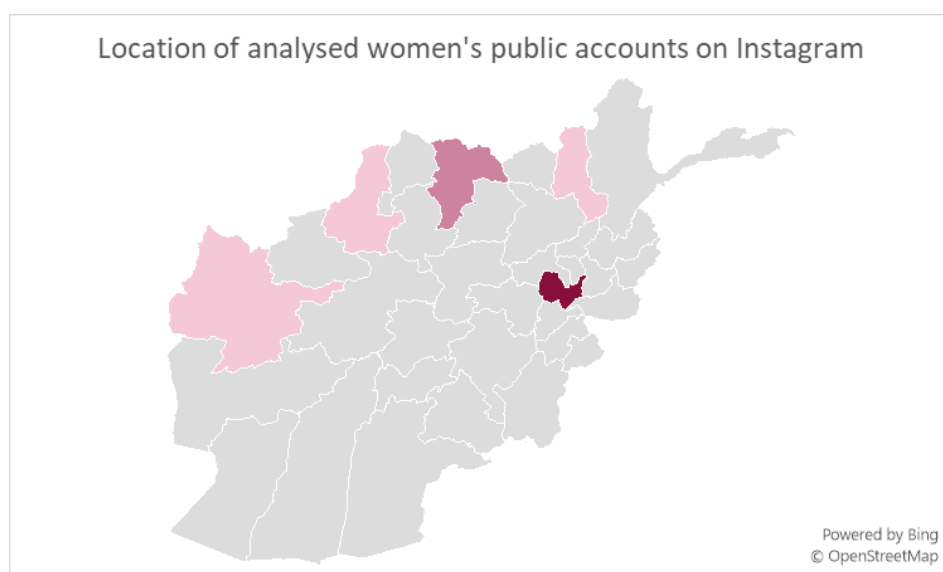


Table 4: Map showing the geographical distribution of the 28 analysed women's public accounts on Instagram.

AW was unable to identify relevant accounts based in Pashtun-majority provinces (which include southern, eastern, and southeastern Afghanistan). The absence of Pashtun women and girls in the online sphere can be attributed to a more [conservative](#) culture compared to in Tajik and Hazara-majority areas. Furthermore, Pashtun-dominated areas have historically been strongholds of the Taliban and often faced intense levels of conflict under the previous Afghan government.

In the interviews, the ten KIs said they are based in Kabul (five), Balkh (two) and Faryab (one). Two KIs were based in Pakistan, and said they had left Afghanistan due to threats and increased restrictions under the Taliban (see section 7.3).

### 5.3 VISIBILITY OF FACES

Despite the rise in public accounts by Afghan women, many are still choosing to at least partly cover their faces. AW analysed accounts based on the visibility of women's faces, categorising them as "visible", "mostly invisible" and "invisible". In 12

out of 28 accounts, women's faces were visible; in 13 accounts, invisible; and in three, mostly invisible (see Table 5 below).

Percentage of accounts based on the visibility of women's faces

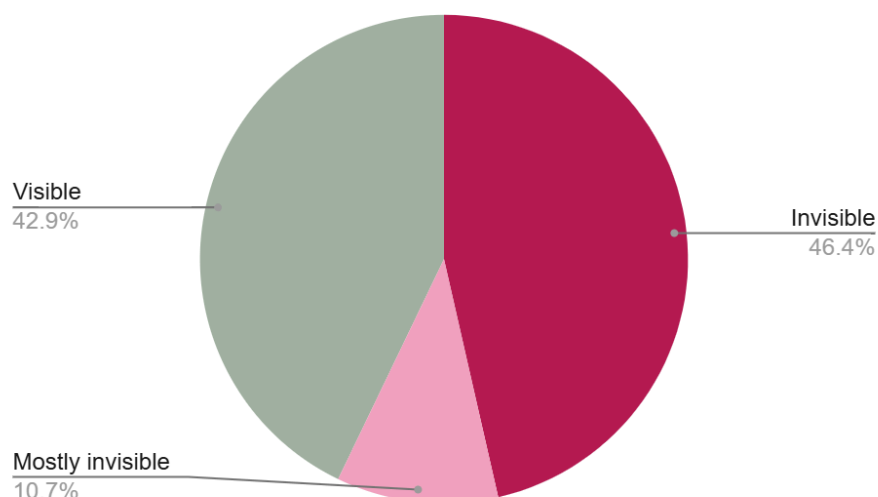


Table 5: Chart showing the visibility of women's faces in the content they share on Instagram.

Women with visible faces posted photos and videos both indoors and in public spaces, as shown in Figures 3 and 4 below. However, AW noted that it was mainly women based in Kabul who posted pictures or videos with their faces visible. In locations outside the capital, including in other urban areas like Mazar-e-Sharif, content on public Instagram accounts rarely showed women's faces.

AW also noted a shift in how women appeared in photos in public spaces over time, gradually adopting more conservative clothing to apparently comply with harsher Taliban restrictions.

Of the women who hide their faces in posts and reels, some use head coverings, while some use stickers, smartphones, or other means. Similarly, some women also produce video logs (vlogs), showing their routines and daily lives without appearing in the videos or showing their faces.

Eight KIs highlighted concerns around sharing photos online, including with their faces visible. These included family pressure and expectations, social norms, Taliban-imposed restrictions, and the fear of reprisals by the de facto authorities. One KI from Balkh, who shows her face on Instagram, said, "At first, no family is happy for their daughters to be in the media. It is a common saying in Afghanistan that 'we have honour'. Thus, my family did not want me to be on social media. However, when you want something, no one can stop you." She added that she was scared of the de facto authorities and wears a *niqab* (veil covering the entire face except for the eyes) whenever she goes outside to hide her identity.

Another woman from Kabul, who produces content without showing her face, said, “The only concern I have on social media is my security. If I post my photos in the future, God forbid I face issues that I cannot handle.”

---

## 6. THE NATURE OF AFGHAN WOMEN’S PRESENCE ON INSTAGRAM

### 6.1 DIVERSE, BUT NON-POLITICAL, CONTENT

Blogging in written form [evolved](#) to become popular among Afghan women after the first fall of the Taliban in 2001, often inspired by the work of Iranian women. Women wrote about their daily lives, shared photos, and interacted with readers. Social media gradually expanded and diversified the blogging landscape, but the topics covered have continued on Instagram.<sup>5</sup>

AW’s analysis of 28 accounts reveals that the type of content produced by women on Instagram is highly diverse. It includes video blogs (vlogs) of personal daily lives, travels, shopping, parties, social gatherings, picnics, house chores, cooking, lifestyle, skincare routines and other events; photos and videos of life in the city, nature travels, and sightseeings; comedy; promotions of products of their own and other businesses; posts with inspirational quotes; posts related to work, such as work on set as a journalist, packaging orders as a business owner, production of artisan products.

Unlike on X, which is often used by politically engaged Afghan women including anti-Taliban protesters, women on Instagram largely refrain from political content. Instead, they mostly identify themselves as bloggers, business owners, YouTubers, photographers, videographers, among others. Out of the 28 accounts AW analysed, women identified themselves as: owners of online shops that sell clothing, jewellery, and handmade accessories such as bags and phone cases (nine); journalists (four); healthcare workers (three); bloggers (five); YouTubers (two); photographer (one); and one founder of a professional society. The remaining five accounts did not mention occupations on their profiles. One of the KIs, a business owner who emigrated to Pakistan after the Taliban takeover, mentioned that she was inspired to begin selling products with political messaging following the suicide bombing at the Kaaj Education Centre in Kabul in September 2022, although her posts are still mostly non-political.

---

<sup>5</sup> Academic research has highlighted how blogs provided Afghan women with space to express opinions, reduce social isolation, and raise their confidence. See, eg. [https://www.academia.edu/87635226/Women\\_in\\_Afghanistan\\_Creating\\_a\\_Space\\_on\\_the\\_Internet](https://www.academia.edu/87635226/Women_in_Afghanistan_Creating_a_Space_on_the_Internet)

Several KIs mentioned that their content, particularly footage from Afghan cities, landscapes or landmarks, attracts viewers both inside Afghanistan and among the diaspora, who miss their home country. The women stressed that they saw this as an opportunity to show life inside the country to Afghans abroad.

## 6.2 TALIBAN RESTRICTIONS AS A MOTIVATION FOR JOINING INSTAGRAM

As discussed above, the apparent increase in public Instagram accounts by Afghan women appears to be directly linked to Taliban restrictions on women's rights. Nine of the 10 KIs said they had been motivated to create public accounts, or to become more active on them, as a direct result of Taliban policies. They mentioned the psychological, social and economic impact of Taliban restrictions - including on their rights to education, work and movement - as drivers of increased online activity. As one of the women explained, "There are psychological factors at play. Many women are at home, unemployed, and lack access to education. Whenever I have free time, I find myself on Instagram. I don't have a job, I can't pursue my education, and going outside is difficult. If I do go out, the PVPV police often criticise my clothing and headscarf, among other things. Women leave their homes filled with fear."

The KIs said that a sense of boredom, an inability to go outside, and "having nothing to do" due to the closure of schools, universities and job opportunities had motivated them to increase online activities. Several KIs also mentioned that Taliban restrictions on women's access to the labour market meant they turned to Instagram to make a living (see below 6.3). They also mentioned other reasons, such as a desire to express themselves, follow their passions, share their work and feelings, stay in touch with others, show a different image of Afghan women, and inspire others. On why she became a blogger, a 26-year-old woman from Kabul said, "Following the Taliban takeover, in October [2021] I decided to change my Instagram page into a public page. And the reason was that I felt very fed up and had lost motivation." Another KI said, "I am very happy that such a platform exists and allows me to show my work to people. I can show a different image of Afghans and Afghan women through this platform."

Four KIs highlighted that before the Taliban's return, they were occupied with studies and had no or limited access to social media. A 21-year-old KI from Kabul said, "One year ago [in 2023], I started focusing on YouTube and Instagram. Before that, I did not even have a phone or know how things worked."

## 6.3 AFGHAN WOMEN'S ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES ON INSTAGRAM

The severe restrictions on women's access to the labour market under the Taliban have meant that young Afghan women are increasingly using Instagram to earn a



living. They use the platform both to run small businesses and to work as influencers / digital marketers.

Eight of the KIs said they thought women were joining Instagram at least in part due to possible financial benefits. Five of them already run businesses on the platform, while two others earn incomes as influencers. A 26-year-old KI, who runs two clothing and jewellery businesses via Instagram, said, “I started working online in 2022 and was among the first women to do so. When I started my work, there were so many restrictions on us that we could not do what we wanted to. But I started this page and told other girls that, despite the restrictions, we could do things, earn a living, and give hope to others.”

An 18-year-old woman from Faryab, who runs a small business selling handmade bracelets, explained her reasons for using Instagram, “The real reason is that since I was 12 or 13 years old, I wanted to be independent, to work, and to earn for myself. I decided that after I turned 18, my life should be in a way that I would earn for myself and not get any pocket money from my parents.”

### ***Afghan women influencers and online marketing***

There are an estimated [127 million](#) influencers worldwide as of 2024. Instagram has become the leading platform influencers globally, with its influencer marketing growth estimated to reach US [\\$22.2 billion](#) by 2025. Instagram offers influencers several [ways](#) of earning through content creation, including through [subscriptions](#), [paid partnerships](#) and [bonuses](#), although Afghanistan is among the countries where users are ineligible to take part.

AW’s OSINT analysis and interviews highlight how Afghan influencers often collaborate with businesses through online marketing. Out of the 28 accounts analysed, seven engaged in online marketing and the promotion of products (their followings ranged from 14,600-175,000).

One woman from Kabul spoke about Instagram as a platform for female entrepreneurs in Afghanistan: “On Instagram, there are many women and girls aged around 18, 28 to 30. Since the Taliban takeover, more women have joined Instagram for work. They have created online shops and daily vlogs, and turned their accounts from private to public to do marketing and earn money.”

The women collaborate with both larger and smaller businesses, including other women-run enterprises. For instance, one blogger with 175,000 followers, posted a video promoting Roshan Movie Box by the Roshan Telecommunications Company.<sup>6</sup> On 25 October, she also posted a video showcasing a female-run bakery in Herat.

---

<sup>6</sup> An Afghan telecommunication company founded in 2002.

Collaborations also include stores, restaurants, and aesthetic clinics. Content taken from restaurants appeared particularly common. One KI from Kabul said that women influencers often promote restaurants by sharing online videos of their visits, in return for promotional fees and other perks.

In addition, female influencers often collaborate with beauty salons, even after these moved underground following the [Taliban's ban](#) in July 2023. The influencers post videos of themselves visiting the salons and using their services.

Collaborations do not always translate into financial gain. Only one of the eight KIs said she made a consistent income from promotions, amounting to a monthly minimum of USD 300 (~ GBP 238.87).<sup>7</sup> Three KIs said they kept the products they promoted but did not charge any fees. Four KIs said they did not charge fees for their collaborations with women's online businesses, but saw it as a way to support other women. "I do free marketing for women's businesses who need support. I love supporting women who run small businesses on Instagram. They are working under challenging circumstances. Kudos to them," said a KI from Kabul. AW also noted a culture of "sisterhood" and mutual support among the women on Instagram, including admiring and positive comments.

The women also stressed the importance of only promoting products of good quality, in order to maintain their own credibility. One KI also stressed that she believed that if women have an established and credible presence online, it will make it easier for them to eventually set up their own online businesses.

### **Online stores**

Instagram is the second most used [marketing tool](#) and channel for online businesses worldwide after Facebook. E-commerce is a relatively new phenomenon in Afghanistan and was only introduced in 2016 when the Click.af [platform opened](#) to connect female entrepreneurs to the global market. It has not been widely used since due to factors including low literacy rates, low Internet usage rates, and poor infrastructure. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, online shopping [increased](#), with Facebook [reportedly](#) dominating the online market.

While Facebook has remained Afghanistan's dominant e-commerce platform, young women have increasingly turned to Instagram to run small businesses since the Taliban takeover. Nine out of the 28 accounts analysed mentioned businesses they run on their profiles, with two listing more than one business. AW also observed dozens of other accounts of online stores that appear to be run by Afghan women. The stores sell clothing, jewellery, and accessories, such as

---

<sup>7</sup> All currency conversations throughout this report are based on rates as of 24-25 November 2024, unless otherwise noted.

handmade bags, bracelets, phone cases, gift packages, candles, and skincare and makeup products.

The stores mostly have no websites, but sellers use Instagram to market products and interact with customers through direct messaging. The businesses appear to have customers inside and outside of the country, with those abroad mostly interested in handmade and traditional goods.

Five out of ten women interviewed run small Instagram-based online stores, with three of them running more than one business. All five women said that they had set up their businesses after the Taliban takeover, and that Instagram was their primary platform. One KI from Balkh said, “People in Afghanistan were not interested in online shopping before. But then the Taliban took over, and Afghan women and girls started online businesses, which led to people getting more interested in online shopping.”

Other [reports](#) have also highlighted how women are increasingly setting up online businesses under the Taliban. In October 2024, the Women’s Chamber of Commerce and Industries Department in Herat further [highlighted](#) an increase in women-run online businesses, with almost 300 women and girls running businesses mainly through social media.

## **Operations**

Women said they had to rely on the support of male family members to launch and run their businesses. Due to *mahram* requirements and other movement restrictions, women depend on male family members for business-related travels, to manage deliveries, and other tasks that require leaving the home.

“We deliver the orders I get from people in my district once weekly. My younger brother, who is 14 years old, delivers the order with his bike. If the orders are in the centre of the province, then my father has spoken with a driver at a station, and he delivers the orders to Maimana [capital of Faryab], Sheberghan [capital of Jawzjan], and Mazar-e Sharif [capital of Balkh] once per week. For orders in Kabul, which is probably 18 hours away, my father sends them to my uncle in Kabul via other travellers. Then my uncle delivers them to customers,” a KI from Faryab province said. The businesses accept orders through direct messages on Instagram, while trusted customers can also communicate with the women via WhatsApp.

Through online businesses, women have created job opportunities for their family members and other women. A woman from Kabul who runs two businesses stated that her team consists of 20 to 25 people, including family members. The women mostly run their businesses from home. Two of the KIs said they had set up workshops for their workers, who were all women, but the Taliban shut them down (see section 7).

Inside Afghanistan, payments are mostly made in cash-on-delivery and rarely processed online. Three out of five business women said they had shipped orders outside Afghanistan. One KI from Kabul said she sent international orders to a wide range of countries, including the US, Canada, Australia, and other European and Asian countries. The KIs stressed, however, that for logistical reasons it was much easier to handle international shipping from Kabul than from more remote provinces. A KI from Faryab said that she had received international orders but was unable to accept them due to the high shipping costs from her home in a remote district.

Three KIs said they were largely satisfied with the revenues from their businesses, although they did not specify the total earnings. Two others said they struggled, with one of them saying, “Wa’Allah [I swear to God], the people’s purchase power is not high, and you know that before, for instance, three people in a family worked, and it is no longer the case since there are not as many jobs as before. Thus, they [customers] bargain a lot to buy something. We might get 10% in profit and only sometimes around 20%, not beyond that.”

All five KIs who own online businesses said that they could have expanded their business more if they had started them before the Taliban seized power. “I did not do any work before the Taliban takeover and did not have an online shop. If I had done this then, I could have made a lot of progress,” a KI from Kabul told AW.

### ***Why Instagram and not other platforms?***

The KIs highlighted safety as the main reason they preferred Instagram over other social media platforms. One of the KIs said, “The first reason for joining Instagram was that I thought the Taliban might not easily find me here.” The Taliban maintain an active presence on Twitter, but Meta, which owns Instagram, has [banned](#) the Taliban from the platform, including any content featuring “praise, support and representation” of them. In addition, Meta reportedly had more robust [content moderation practices](#) than X, although the effects of Meta’s decision to [terminate third-party fact-checking programs](#) from January 2025 are as yet unknown. An AW analysis of comments on the women’s Instagram pages showed less harassment and hate speech than on X (see section 7.2). Two KIs, however, mentioned receiving threatening messages from apparently Taliban-linked accounts (see section XX below).

The KIs also mentioned that it was easier to conceal their identities in content they produce on Instagram, in particular compared to YouTube. Through vlogs, in particular, women can share their daily lives and travel while concealing their faces, including through Instagram’s built-in sticker function.

Moreover, the KIs believed it more difficult to create fake accounts on Instagram than on other platforms, in particular compared to Facebook. One KI said, “On Facebook, there is everyone, a shopkeeper, a watchman, a housewife, whoever they

are, they have a fake account. My thinking was that Instagram was safer.” They expressed concern that fake accounts facilitated harassment of women online. Conversely, women stressed the generally supportive and encouraging feedback they receive on Instagram. One of the KIs said, “I get a very positive response. Many people message me, and I receive 20-30 messages containing compliments daily.”

Women further perceived users on Instagram as being from better socio-economic backgrounds. They were seen as better educated and financially better off, and therefore a better platform for online commerce. “For the shoes we imported, I was looking for people who earned well and had the power to purchase our goods, and those who use Instagram are well-off,” said a KI who runs an online store.

The KIs also stressed the convenience of using Instagram for commerce, as it allows them to sell their products inexpensively from home. One KI from Balkh said, “If I have a shop, I have to pay for rent, electricity, and cleaning, but If I am at home, my goods are at home, and I can do the packing as I want, cleanly and tidily, with lots of passion. I can photograph the goods as I want to as per my taste. I do not have to pay any expenses; I am next to my family, and even my family can help me with the work.”

Furthermore, Instagram is [user-friendly](#), designed for visual content, and can be easily used on mobile phones. Small women-led businesses [benefit](#) from Instagram as a marketing tool also because it is free, and the businesses do not pay taxes on advertisements.

## 6.4 INSTAGRAM: A MARKETING TOOL FOR UNDERGROUND BEAUTY SALONS

The Taliban officially [closed](#) down beauty salons in Afghanistan in July 2023, claiming they violated Sharia law and caused economic hardships for families during weddings. The decision led to widespread condemnation from human rights groups and a public [protest](#) in Kabul. Many beauty salons have, however, [reportedly](#) continued operating underground since the official closure.

AW’s investigation shows that the underground beauty salons maintain a widespread presence on Instagram despite the ban. The exact number is unclear but AW estimates that at least several dozen beauty salons are active on the platform. They market their services and share photos and stories, while many salons also publicly share their locations and contact numbers, as seen in the images below.

AW interviewed two women in the beauty business in Afghanistan, one who owns a salon in Kabul but lives abroad, and one staff member of the same salon. Both

stressed that, since the ban, many salons have begun operating from owners' homes or rented apartments, or provide services to trusted clients at private homes or during events .

The owner reopened her business to ensure her employees could still earn an income, as some of them were their families' lone breadwinners. She recalled one employee, who did not have any adult men in her family, calling her to say they did not have money for food and she was worried about her daughter having to turn to sex work. "Hearing that, my whole body was shaking," she said.

Both interviewees said that the Taliban are aware of the secret salons, but demand bribes to allow them to continue to operate. One owner of a beauty salon in Kabul said they paid bribes to the local district representative, also known as Wakil-e Guzar,<sup>8</sup> and local Taliban authorities, as well as occasionally to police. The bribes amount to AFN 100,000 ( ~ GBP 1168.64 GBP), and had to be paid every three to four months. She also claimed that Taliban police had detained her employees several times for working "illegally", and that she had to pay bribes of AFN 10,000-50,000 ( ~ GBP 116.86- 584.32) to secure their release.

The women said that, despite the bribes, beauty salons work in constant fear of harassment not just by the Taliban but also by landlords and local residents. "There is a shop on the road where our salon is located. We pay them AFN 2,500-3,000 Afghanis (GBP 29.22-35.06) monthly and send them food. We request that if the Taliban ask about us, tell them there are no beauty salons on this road," said one beauty salon owner. Similarly, Amu TV, a US-based independent media outlet, [reported](#) in September 2024, that Taliban police demanded monthly bribes from underground beauty salons in Kabul.

One of the women said that she had heard accounts of female beauticians being sexually harassed and threatened at gunpoint by customers when they provided at-home services. "My husband and 18-year-old son are both jobless, otherwise, I would not continue this work at a beauty salon that is accompanied by lots of worries and stress," said the staff member. She added that they had to relocate the salon three times, and that Taliban forces had beaten her husband and son during an inspection.

The salons have also experienced drastic reductions in revenue since the ban. According to the salon owner, her salon's monthly income reduced from USD 30,000-40 000 (~GBP 23,864.40-31,819.20) to \$1,000 (~795.48 GBP) to USD2,000 (~ GBP 1,590.96) monthly. As a result, beauticians and salon workers do not get paid regularly, but instead only on an ad hoc basis depending on when they have customers. Only a handful of workers attend the salon on a particular day as they fear residents or the Taliban might notice their commute.

---

<sup>8</sup> Neighbourhood representative, connecting the government with local communities.

Instagram has become the only way for the salons to promote themselves and interact with customers. “In Kabul alone, 50 to 60 salons have been created with the same name as ours and claim to be the real one. We have to fight back. There are no rules that I can hold them to account for. Instagram is the place to keep in touch with our customers and attract new customers,” said the owner. She added that salons share their contact details and addresses on Instagram despite the risks, because they have no other way to attract customers and “they have nothing to lose anymore”. She said others share their details since they think bribes protect them from reprisals by the Taliban.

---

## 7. CHALLENGES AND COPING MECHANISMS

Despite the opportunities the platforms offer, women using Instagram still stressed the hugely restrictive environment they face. This section outlines key challenges raised during interviews.

### 7.1 CONSERVATIVE SOCIAL NORMS AND FAMILY PRESSURE

Restrictions from families and social norms add to the challenges women face in accessing the Internet and social media. Women’s public presence online, especially through sharing personal lives and photos, is often considered a “social taboo” due to conservative norms around women’s roles in society.

The KIs discussed the challenges they faced with their families regarding their public presence on Instagram, particularly when it came to showing their faces. They noted that some families viewed this as a matter of “honour” or had security concerns. As a result, the KIs often had to persuade their families to allow them to create public accounts and share content. One of the KIs said, “Our relatives say that we put our photos online regardless of whether we wear headscarves. If you don’t wear your scarf properly, that also sparks many things [negative reactions].”

Women’s collaborations in digital marketing with businesses and brands are a new trend, and have also led to adverse family reactions. One of the KIs, an influencer who collaborates with businesses in digital marketing, said that although her family allowed her to appear publicly on Instagram, her husband was unhappy with her receiving goods and services for her activities.

### 7.2 ONLINE HARASSMENT

Gendered online harassment and hate speech targeting Afghan women has risen exponentially since the Taliban takeover. An AW investigation in 2022 found that such abuse had more than tripled (217% increase) on X. As noted above, several of the women interviewed for this investigation said that they had chosen Instagram because it was perceived as a safer platform with fewer instances of abuse. An AW



analysis shows that this appears to be broadly true, as women did not face the same pervasive levels of abuse as on other platforms (notably X), although it did occur on a smaller scale.

AW analysed comments on 1,834 posts shared by the 28 women's public between 1 January and 1 November 2024, and found that 16 of the accounts had received no abusive comments or harassment. The other 12 accounts, however, received abusive comments, including sexually explicit or suggestive harassment, abusive language and criticism of women being active online, as well as hate speech from Iranian accounts. Of the 1,834 posts analysed, 212 had received abusive replies. Overall, AW assessed abusive comments and harassment as not pervasive.

The comments include both flirtatious ("Your lips are beautiful") and more explicitly sexual ("Be with me for one night") messages, as well as gendered insults ("So what, this is prostitution"). AW also observed abusive posts from apparently Iranian accounts towards Afghan women on Instagram, including posts praising Iranian police for abusing Afghan migrants, or posts threatening violence: "I shit on your posts, which are all dishonouring. Well done to the Taliban for killing people like you."

In the interviews, eight out of 10 KIs told AW they faced harassment online, while the remaining two said that they did not. Three women said that the harassment they faced was on a small scale and rare. One woman said, "I sometimes receive messages from men who want to flirt, which is not a major issue. I have not faced any harassment at a larger level that would impact me or my work." They linked the absence of online abuse and harassment to having a community of "educated" and "decent" followers.

Two of the KIs said they received threatening messages from people who they suspected of being Taliban members due to their appearances. One KI from Balkh told AW, "I have the screenshot of their messages, in which they threatened me and called me a non-believer. They were part of the Taliban government, but I don't know their position. They had said very bad things and mentioned a verse of the Quran, saying Allah does not like non-believers."

Another KI from Kabul said other users on Instagram had shared her photos and falsely said that she had multiple boyfriends, and that videos of her sex chats had been leaked online.

The KIs saw the online abuse and harassment as a result of broader Afghan social and cultural attitudes, including from other women. One Hazara KI said that she had faced hate targeting Hazara, and also stressed that she often received abusive comments from Iranian users.

In response to the abuse and harassment women faced online, the majority chose to ignore it and take no action. Seven women said they ignored the comments,



while only one said she had highlighted the issue in her own posts. One of the KIs from Balkh said, “If I see messages containing improper language, I block them immediately. If somebody writes an inappropriate comment, I just block it and relieve myself. I do not need to bother myself or let them bother me.” None of them said they had reported the abuse to Instagram.

### 7.3 THREATS TO PHYSICAL SAFETY AND SELF-CENSORSHIP

The majority of women interviewed (eight out of 10), whether they show their faces or not on their accounts, said that they had feared for their physical safety. This has led to self-censorship, a reluctance to go outside, and efforts to conceal their identities when they have to go outside.

As noted above, this fear has led some women to avoid showing their faces when posting photos and videos. Those who do reveal their faces often fear leaving their homes, and if they do go outside, they take extra precautions to cover themselves to avoid being recognised. One woman from Balkh, who shows her face in her posts and reels, said, “The fear we experience when we post our photos or showcase the products we wear is unimaginable.”

According to the KIs, the fear of reprisals has also led to self-censorship in terms of what content they share and how they share it. A woman from Kabul, who has founded a non-profit and runs a public account, told AW: “I don’t highlight the stories I share on my profile, and thus, whatever I share stays there for 24 hours to be read and understood. I don’t know if it is being shared further or not.”

Another KI from Balkh said she was vigilant not to mention anything related to religion in her content, fearing she would face the same fate as Ajmal Haqiqi, a YouTuber whom the Taliban had [reportedly](#) detained in June 2022 on charges of blasphemy.

Producing content outdoors is another challenge highlighted by the KIs, with one woman estimating that 90% of her content is produced indoors, saying, “Not everything is worth the risk. They [the Taliban] may detain you for taking photos, and when you return, you will be looked upon wrongly.” She also shared how a PVPV official snatched her camera and humiliated her in public when she tried to make a vlog inside a shrine in Western Kabul in July 2024. The official accused her of filming women for social media. Despite the serious challenge of creating content outdoors, some influencers continue to risk it. According to a KI from Kabul, content produced in public places simply attracts more viewers.

Six of the KIs expressed their fear of PVPV officials, citing concerns about increased restrictions on women. Five of them specifically worried about the possibility of detention. However, one KI from Balkh stated that she felt safer under the Taliban regime, suggesting that those targeted by the Taliban may have done something

wrong. She criticised the “inappropriate” appearance and dancing of some women on Instagram.

One KI said she had faced direct threats from the Taliban, who came to her house to warn her and warned her to stop working as a model and an actress (she left the country for Pakistan in mid-2024). As noted above, two women also said that PVPV officials had shut down their workshops. No other KIs reported receiving any direct reactions or warnings from the Taliban. One KI claimed to have heard that Taliban intelligence is monitoring public accounts of Afghan women and maintaining a list of these. “I don’t know what will happen in the future, but I think they check all these pages. I don’t know how accurate it is,” the KI said. On 2 September 2024, the Telegraph [reported](#) that the Taliban had hired women to monitor Instagram accounts and report cases of women posting photos with their faces uncovered. AW could not substantiate these claims, but they are indicative of the wider sense of insecurity felt by the women under the Taliban de facto authorities.

## 7.4 THE PVPV LAW AND PROSPECTS FOR CONTENT CREATION AND ONLINE MARKETING

In August 2024, the Taliban [announced](#) the ratification of the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (PVPV) Law. The law [reinforces](#) and expands restrictions on women, including by enforcing full coverage of faces and bodies in public, while apparently banning women’s voices “outside the home”. The law also forbids adult and unrelated women and men looking at each other. The law has also codified a [ban](#) on showing images of living beings, as well as on storing and watching photos and videos of living beings on mobile phones, computers, and other devices.

Two months after the announcement of the law, in October 2024, the Taliban [announced](#) they would begin implementing a ban on media from capturing and publishing images of living beings. AW [reported](#) the implementation of the ban to various degrees in several provinces, including the closure of state-run and private TV stations. AW also noted that the ban was implemented beyond TV broadcasts, and also applied to websites of certain Taliban-run ministries, education centres and social media accounts.

As noted above, the Taliban appear to be gradually implementing the law, and its full effects are not known yet. However, the increased restrictions on women’s appearance, [voices](#) and footage of living beings, could have wide-reaching consequences for online content creation.

None of the KIs, however, expressed specific concerns regarding the PVPV Law and its impact on online activities. However, one KI, who is also a YouTuber, spoke of the Taliban’s increased restrictions on YouTubers running family channels, saying, “They have not said anything to me, but my colleagues have been warned several

times [by the Taliban]. A number of YouTube channels have been closed down.” The Taliban have [reportedly](#) increased restrictions on YouTubers, particularly female YouTubers, following the ratification of the PVPV Law, by closing down channels and detaining YouTubers.

Another KI from Faryab spoke of increased Taliban restrictions on women’s clothing in public spaces, specifically in the district where she resides where women now have to wear burqas, but were previously in robes and niqabs. “Since the last two months, the PVPV have started their activities, and I heard they have detained some girls and beat them,” the KI told AW, adding, “It has been two months that I can no longer go outside. I went twice, though, but I had to wear a burqa. Wearing a burqa is very difficult. I do not understand how Afghan women have tolerated the burqa so far.”<sup>9</sup>

## 7.5 OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES OF ONLINE BUSINESSES

Women's online businesses on Instagram are mostly new ventures, and the interviews revealed several operational challenges

The KIs highlighted the lack of reliable, country-wide **delivery services**, which limits their ability to take orders from customers in various parts of the country. Women entrepreneurs rely on families and informal courier services, limiting their access to areas where they do not have families and acquaintances. One of the KIs who owns a hand-made jewellery and clothing business told AW: “Several times I had orders from Pul-e-Khumri [Baghlan], Kandahar and Nangarhar, but I could not accept the orders as I could not deliver them the items. There was nobody, no post office, for us to be able to deliver the items.”

The Taliban’s restriction on women’s movement and clothing has complicated the situation further, as women in some areas have to rely on male family members to deal with delivery drivers. One of the KIs who lives in Faryab told AW that her father dealt with drivers and passengers through whom they sent orders to other provinces.

Three out of five KIs who run online businesses via Instagram said they had international deliveries. However, international shipments are costly for small businesses and a deterring factor for customers, as they pay **high shipment costs**. One of the KIs said: “For one bracelet that is AFN 100 Afghanis (~ GBP 1.17), the shipment cost is very high. That is why I do not accept [international orders].”

Furthermore, businesses rely on cash upon delivery as most Afghans have no access to [bank accounts](#), and electronic money transactions are not widely available. Similarly, international orders rely on the hawala system<sup>10</sup> and money transfer services such as Moneygram and Western Union. One KI said that her

---

<sup>9</sup> The interview was conducted on 9 October 2024.

<sup>10</sup> Informal money transfer system based on networks of money brokers.

business would thrive if better money transaction and delivery systems were in place.

Only one out of five women running online businesses on Instagram reported having obtained a **business license**. The license was issued by a Taliban Kabul Municipality District Office for a workshop linked to her business. The woman described the process of obtaining a license as "fearful", explaining, "When I went there, I faced their awkward gazes. They behaved as if I came from another part of the world. In a nutshell, with lots of fear, I obtained the license." Despite having a permit, she said the Taliban would regularly inspect her workplace and question why the license was issued in the name of a woman.

Two other KIs said they did not seek to obtain a license as they believed the Taliban would not issue permits for women-led businesses. According to a [survey](#) conducted by the UN Development Programme in 2024, 70% of women-led businesses in Afghanistan work without licenses, which are prerequisites for some bank loans. If licensed, businesses can operate in the formal economy, which will increase their sales, exports, and access to exhibitions, among other things. As noted above, the Ministry of Economy under the Taliban can still issue licenses to women-led businesses, although in practice, sexist and discriminatory attitudes are obstacles for many female entrepreneurs.

Online jobs and businesses have become [lifelines](#) for Afghan women as the Taliban have **heavily restricted their employment opportunities and on-site work**. Two KIs reported having to close workshops for their all-female staff. A KI from Balkh said that Taliban police and PVPV officials forcibly closed her workshop in August 2024, which employed 35-40 women at the time, because of its female staff. Another KI said that Taliban police and PVPV officers repeatedly inspected the workshop she ran in Kabul, questioning how she had obtained a business license as a woman. The pressure eventually led to her closing down the workshop earlier in 2024.

The KIs also highlighted the **low purchasing power** of Afghans, as the country's economy is crippled, and more than half of the population relies on humanitarian [aid](#). A KI from Balkh said, "Before, for instance, three people in a family worked, and it is no longer the issue since there are not as many offices as before. Thus, they [customers] bargain a lot when buying."

Another KI pointed out the **challenge of access to raw materials**, saying the materials she needed were rare and imported to the country only twice a year. The KIs mentioned they travelled to Iran to buy the necessities for their businesses that were not available inside the country. One KI said she had to travel to Iran for the packaging and branding of her products. She later started to produce everything inside Afghanistan and such services for other businesses as well.

**Uncertainty and Taliban restrictions** were highlighted as other obstacles facing businesses. One KI said she would not make big investments as she saw the

situation in Afghanistan as uncertain, but she did not express any desire to leave the country. One of the KIs had moved to Pakistan only recently due to increased Taliban restrictions, including the forcible closure of her workshop in Kabul. Two other KIs from Balkh and Faryab said they had plans to leave the country due to threats from the Taliban and the ban on women's education, respectively. One of the KIs said, "I think all girls and their families in Afghanistan now think about how they can get their daughters out because there is nothing left for women in Afghanistan; no education, no job."

---

## 8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Denied access to work, education and public spaces under the Taliban, Afghan women have increasingly turned to Instagram. As highlighted in this investigation, Instagram has become a place for Afghan women to work, earn a living, create, share content and foster communities - despite considerable personal risks.

Women on Instagram in Afghanistan told AW that they fear for their own safety because of their activities online. Many self-censor and avoid leaving their homes, while taking steps to hide their identities when they do have to enter public spaces. Those who run businesses online face considerable challenges in doing so, including through severe restrictions on their freedom of movement and other misogynistic Taliban policies targeting female entrepreneurship.

Afghan women have so far shown remarkable resilience in their online work and engagement, despite overwhelming Taliban restrictions on their lives. They, however, face a precarious future, with the Taliban showing no signs of heeding international pressure to respect the human rights of women and girls. If anything, the de facto authorities are imposing further restrictions, as evidenced by the ban on women attending medical institutes in December 2024, as well as the PVPV Law introduced in August 2024. The full effects of the law on women online influencers and business owners will likely only become clear over the coming months. AW has, however, already documented how the Taliban have used it to restrict images of living beings in visual media, while harassing and arresting women who violate dress code requirements.

AW believes that international actors - including donor countries, regional states, tech companies and civil society organisations - can take steps to better support Afghan women and girls who use Instagram. The following recommendations have been formulated with input for the KIs featured in this report.

### Recommendations

- **Training on digital security:** With almost all KIs highlighting fears for their safety online, investment in training on digital security protocols and tools are essential. AW has, for example, created a booklet on Digital Safety for Women and Girls and distributed it to at-risk online activists in Afghanistan. International actors should invest in similar initiatives to deliver training and tools to women and girls in Afghanistan, in a way that does not compromise their security.
- **Training in online entrepreneurship:** Related to the above, donors and tech platforms should invest in training for Afghan women and girls on online entrepreneurship through platforms like Instagram.
- **Safer and more empowering social media:** As this investigation highlights, Afghan women on Instagram face relatively less abuse and gendered hate speech than on other platforms, notably X. Despite this, abusive practices continue, including in the forms of sexualised and gendered messaging. Tech platforms, including Instagram, should continue to invest in safety features while strengthening monitoring efforts in Dari/Farsi and Pashtun.
- **Resources and funding.** The KIs highlighted the importance of financial support for women running small online businesses and others wanting to start their journey. Donors and UN agencies should explore how female entrepreneurs, including online, can be supported inside Afghanistan.
- **Mentorship and networking:** The KIs reiterated the importance of support and guidance from successful Afghan female entrepreneurs, and highlighted that emotional support would make a big difference in their lives. Creating networks linking Afghan businesswomen will be crucial to foster further similar initiatives.
- **Pressure the Taliban de facto authorities:** International actors - including donor governments, regional states and relevant International organisations - must continue to pressure the Taliban to immediately end all illegal restrictions on women and girls. This should include ending all harmful practices harming female entrepreneurship, including: any restrictions on women's access to the workplace; legal or de facto restrictions on women obtaining business licenses; harassment of female business owners; and arbitrary closures of workshops or other facilities. The Taliban should also be pressured to lift the ban on beauty salons, which have now been forced underground where they face harassment and financial exploitation by Taliban officials.