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**The Observer**

# Taliban order all Afghan women to cover their faces in public

**Decree forces male relatives to police law by making them liable to fines or prison for breaches**

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**Emma Graham-Harrison**

Sat 7 May 2022 19.36 BST

The Taliban have ordered all women to cover their faces in public in Afghanistan, the latest sweeping restriction by a government that has taken away women's right to travel long distances alone, work outside healthcare or education, and receive a secondary education.

In a cruel twist, the decree makes women's relatives and employers the enforcers. If their faces are seen in public, their male "guardian" will be fined, then jailed. If the woman who goes out uncovered or her relative work for the government, they must be fired.

It suggested women should not leave their homes at all if possible, saying that was "the best option to observe the sharia hijab", essentially imposing the extreme traditions of conservative parts of rural areas on all women.

“For all dignified Afghan women wearing hijab is necessary and the best hijab is chadori [the burqa], which is part of our tradition and is respectful,” Shir Mohammad, an official from the vice and virtue ministry, told a conference in Kabul, AP reported. “Those women who are not too old or young must cover their face, except the eyes.”

The all-enveloping burqa, traditional in [Afghanistan](#), allows women to see only through a small grille. The alternative would be the niqab, which covers the face but not the eyes. While almost all adult women in Afghanistan wear some form of hijab, many in cities cover only their hair.

The latest restrictions on women, part of a system of controls that activists have attacked as “gender apartheid”, are likely to set back the Taliban’s bid for international recognition and support, as the country grapples with an [economic crisis and widespread hunger](#).

“The world is a bystander to our pain, to an apartheid, to complete tyranny,” Shaharzar Akhbar, the former head of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, now living abroad in exile, said on Twitter.

“So much pain and grief for women of my country, my heart is exploding. So much hatred and anger against [Taliban](#), enemies of women, enforcers of gender apartheid, enemies of Afghanistan and humanity.”

The Foreign Office said the Taliban could not hope for international recognition or an end to sanctions imposed when they were an insurgent group carrying out regular suicide attacks that took a heavy civilian toll, if they did not live up to obligations on protecting women.

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📷 Taliban fighters search a vehicle at a checkpoint in Kabul. Women are no longer permitted to travel long distances alone. Photograph: Rahmat Gul/AP

“Responsibility for what happens in Afghanistan lies with the Taliban,” a spokesperson said. “We will judge them by their actions, not their words. If they want international acceptance, they must live up to their obligations and commitments, particularly on the rights of women and girls.”

The group had promised it had changed over the two decades since it ran Afghanistan as a brutal, impoverished theocracy in the late 1990s, where women were barred from almost all work and education.

But since sweeping to power last August, increasingly harsh restrictions on women’s rights suggest that pledge was rhetoric designed to secure the departure of US forces, as many activists warned at the time.

Perhaps most painful was the abrupt U-turn in March on reopening girls’ secondary schools, already shuttered for six months since the Taliban swept to power. Students were back in class, at their desks and ready to learn when hardliners ordered them to return home. Many left sobbing.

“This should finally put to rest the last bits of speculation about the ‘Taliban 2.0’,” said Heather Barr, associate women’s rights director at Human Rights Watch. “The strategy of compelling men to be the enforcers on their own relatives is particularly disturbing, because it means women can’t even make their own decisions about what risks they are going to take.

“One of the big questions is what does the world do about this? We’ve been waiting since last August to see how the international community responds, and we haven’t seen anything serious or coherent. This is particularly frustrating from several countries that claim to have a ‘feminist foreign policy’.”

The Taliban have also prevented women from protesting, and many former activists, journalists, security force members and other high-profile women have been in hiding for months after several attacks and murders.

Although the new ruling is worrying, many women have even more serious concerns, said Hasina Safi, former minister for women’s affairs. “Women are even more urgently concerned about their mobility, education and health, participation security and safety.”

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