

Taliban Criminal Code on Women Sparks Global Outrage

Afghanistan's Taliban leadership has approved a sweeping new criminal code that human rights advocates warn formalizes inequality, expands the legal ability for men to physically discipline women and children, and introduces legal distinctions between "free" people and those categorized as "slaves."

The code, reportedly spanning about 90 pages, was issued by Taliban supreme leader Hibatullah Akhundzada with little transparency, public input, or legislative review. The move marks the latest escalation in the group's reshaping of Afghan law since reclaiming power in August 2021 following the U.S. withdrawal and the collapse of the previous government.

Reports describing the document indicate it establishes different punishments based on a person's legal status, including references to "free" and "slave" classifications. Critics say such language institutionalizes unequal treatment under the law and disproportionately affects vulnerable and marginalized populations.

Several provisions outlined in reporting on the code have drawn particular concern regarding women and children. The framework reportedly permits men to physically discipline family members in the home as long as the punishment does not result in broken bones or severe injury. Even in cases of serious abuse, penalties for offenders are described as relatively limited, with maximum jail time measured in days rather than months.

At the same time, women face stricter punishment for violations of Taliban social rules. Reports suggest that women could receive longer sentences for actions such as traveling

without a husband's permission, including situations where they may be attempting to escape domestic violence.

Legal pathways for women seeking justice also appear constrained. Women are said to be required to provide proof of harm in court while simultaneously complying with strict dress requirements that limit their ability to show injuries. In addition, court appearances often require a male guardian, even when that guardian may be the alleged abuser.



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Afghan media coverage of the new code has emphasized broader restrictions beyond family law. The document reportedly enforces adherence to the Taliban's interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence and outlines punishments for speech or behavior considered disrespectful to authorities. Activities such as dancing or even watching dance performances are also listed among prohibited conduct.

The code further strengthens the authority of the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, the Taliban body tasked with monitoring social behavior and enforcing morality rules. The ministry has played a central role in policing dress, movement, and public conduct since the Taliban's return to power.

Human rights organizations and activists have condemned the code as a systematic attempt to formalize social control. Critics argue that dividing citizens into separate legal categories undermines equal protection and allows authorities to apply harsher penalties to groups with fewer resources or political influence.

International reaction has been limited so far, in part because of the opaque rollout of the document. United Nations officials have signaled concern and indicated they are

reviewing the provisions, while advocacy groups continue urging greater global attention to conditions inside Afghanistan.

The new criminal code follows a series of policies that have sharply curtailed women's rights since 2021. Taliban authorities have restricted women's employment, required full-body coverings, limited movement without male guardians, and barred girls from secondary education. United Nations estimates indicate that roughly 1.4 million Afghan girls have lost access to schooling as a result.

Taliban officials have defended many of these measures as necessary for enforcing their interpretation of modesty and social order, while critics say the policies amount to the systematic removal of women from public life.

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