Survey Report:

Afghan Youth Attitudes On Afghanistan's Future

For the Raul Wallenberg Institute (RWI)

By Belquis Ahmadi, Scott Worden, and Muzhgan Y.

December 28, 2025

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Executive Summary

This report synthesizes responses from Afghan youth about life under Taliban rule, their needs and aspirations, and their ability to shape the future. The Researchers[1] conducted individual and focus group interviews with 57 respondents living in 15 provinces who identify with different ethnic groups and genders asking them two sets of structured questions covering governance, rights, agency, representation, security, economy, and personal aspirations.

Across all regions, genders, and ethnicities, Afghan youth express remarkable consistency in their views. They are distressed by the current situation, feel unrepresented in decision-making, and are deeply pessimistic about their future. Women describe far greater suffering and exclusion than men. Yet men also described deep hopelessness as they watched their sisters—and in some cases their daughters—being denied the right to education, knowing they were powerless to change the situation.

Youth consistently define human rights as equality, dignity, and fairness, all of which have sharply deteriorated since 2021. Respondents argue that Taliban rule contradicts both Islamic principles and international norms, and that without justice and equal treatment—particularly for women and minorities—Afghanistan cannot achieve stability or trust.

Education was single strongest cross-cutting aspiration. All groups agree it is the foundation of empowerment, economic stability, justice, and national development. Women view access to schooling as existential. Men stress its importance for skills and employment. Respondents noted that in addition to gender restrictions, the quality of education has deteriorated sharply, leaving classrooms under-resourced and students disengaged.

Young people are deeply affected by economic hardship due to high unemployment and a stagnant economy. The job market today favors graduates of religious studies, particularly those who align with Taliban ideology, leaving little to no space for others with different educational backgrounds or skills. Many government positions are being filled by individuals who lack the necessary qualifications, further weakening public services and limiting opportunities for capable youth.

The absence of jobs and education has caused widespread mental and emotional stress. With limited freedom, few jobs, and almost no pathways to build a stable future, many feel trapped and increasingly hopeless. Many youth say they have lost motivation altogether, unable to see how education or hard work can lead to a better life under current conditions. As a result, a growing number are actively seeking ways to leave the country in search of safety, opportunity, and dignity.

The information landscape is fragmented and heavily censored. Most youth distrust Afghanistan-based media and rely instead on social media, international outlets (e.g., BBC, Afghanistan International), and UN or NGO reports. Youth believe most what they experience first-hand or hear from trusted personal connections. But in a country with less mobility and fear about censorship and informants, the circle of trusted information is shrinking.

Within Afghanistan, youth feel leaderless and unrepresented in government and politics. When asked who represents their interests, the overwhelming answer was “no one.” Advocacy inside Afghanistan has collapsed under intimidation, shrinking civic space, and the threat of punishment. Formal youth organizations are silenced; political parties are irrelevant; and public speech about women’s rights or education is dangerous. Remarkably, no respondent could identify a national leader or political

[1] Research was conducted by Belquis Ahmadi, Scott Worden, and Muzhgan Y.

movement they believe represents their interests and aspirations. Instead, youth identified small underground networks, university professors, and diaspora activists as their main advocates.

Respondents noted the important advocacy role played by diaspora activists and international organizations—including exiled Afghan activists, journalists, human rights defenders, and international institutions. These groups are trusted because they can speak freely about discrimination, gender restrictions, violence, and repression. For many youth, these external actors are the only ones capable of conveying the truth of life in Afghanistan to the world. Women rely most heavily on international actors because they lack mobility and a voice inside the country.

Interview responses indicate four overarching national priorities: inclusive and accountable governance, employment, security, and social cohesion. Youth view governance as the cornerstone of progress, linking economic collapse, unemployment, and migration to the absence of representative leadership. Security is described both as physical safety and freedom from fear and censorship. Social unity across ethnic and regional lines is seen as essential for lasting peace.

While there was significant commonality across interviewees, demographic differences reflected disparate treatment by the Taliban. Women spoke most urgently about emotional suffering and lost dignity due to the Taliban's extreme gender restrictions. Tajiks expressed heightened political fear. Hazaras highlighted discrimination and equality. Uzbeks objected to conservative norms and barriers to education. Pashtuns reference limited trust in local authorities but had greater economic hopes. Regionally, repression appeared to be felt more in the north and central highlands; patriarchal norms seemed strictest in the south; and political awareness is highest in Kabul and Herat.

Youth expressed confidence in their ability to improve social and economic conditions in Afghanistan if they are given the chance. They want to become educated, skilled, self-reliant, and able to support their families. Women aspire to careers in health, law, education, and advocacy; men imagine themselves as providers, entrepreneurs, and community contributors. Despite oppression and fragmentation, youth across regions emphasize unity, respect, and cooperation as essential for Afghanistan's recovery and believe they can help bridge divides through dialogue, awareness, and community action.

Youth seek safe platforms and spaces where they can exchange views and discuss the key issues affecting their lives. Such environments are important to foster dialogue, reduce isolation, and enable young people to collectively navigate the challenges they face under current restrictions. Youth from across the country described the presence of underground informal youth groups that operate discreetly, providing peer-to-peer support and facilitating the exchange of information. Due to safety concerns, however, participants were reluctant to disclose the names of these organizations.

To put Afghan youth experience into context and to examine options for greater youth agency, the Researchers conducted brief comparative studies of cases where youth movements participated in significant political transitions. **Examining the cases of Bangladesh, Colombia, Syria, and Madagascar, youth movements had success when they:**

a) **built capacity for organized protest over time;**
b) **articulated clear goals that appealed across typical political divides and demographics; and**
c) **benefitted from democratic and civic institutions that enabled youth groups to participate in civic and political processes.**

Youth movements outside of Afghanistan drew particular sustenance from universities, where organization can more easily occur and protests often originate. Youth groups also benefitted from leveraging information technology to organize and conduct public messaging.

Applying these cases to Afghanistan, the survey results show **there is a broad agreement across youth demographics on priorities for a future Afghanistan that have cross-cutting appeal**. Hopes for a stronger economy, better education, and more social cohesion unite youth cohorts and likely appeal to large portions of the broader public as well.

On the other hand, Afghanistan under Taliban rule is deeply authoritarian and there are few independent institutions or safe spaces to organize. This will make it difficult for a movement to coalesce. Linking community- based movements and perceiving space for independent thinking at universities are two opportunities where lessons from external cases can be applied.

The interview and comparative data suggest a number of measures that may be taken to accomplish three beneficial goals:

1) **Build capacity within Afghanistan for youth to better organize and advocate for their needs.**
   - Support informal and underground youth networks, including women-led and community-based groups.
   - Invest in capacity-building (leadership, digital security, advocacy, research skills).
   - Enable safe spaces and platforms—online and offline—for youth collaboration and dialogue.
   - Prioritize locally driven initiatives rather than externally imposed youth structures.

2) **Increase engagement between the international community and Afghans abroad with those inside Afghanistan to provide support and better represent Afghan youth interests.**
   - Ensure systematic inclusion of Afghan youth voices in international policy discussions and forums.
   - Support diaspora youth engagement as a bridge between in-country youth and global actors.
   - Coordinate among international stakeholders to avoid fragmented or duplicative youth programs.
   - Protect youth participants through confidentiality, security safeguards, and do-no-harm approaches.

3) **Provide international assistance to address Afghanistan's national needs that would benefit youth.**
   - Expand access to education pathways, including remote learning and skills-based training.
   - Support income-generating opportunities (micro-grants, entrepreneurship, digital work).
   - Prioritize young women's economic participation, especially those excluded from formal education.
   - Link livelihood support with psychosocial well-being and long-term resilience, not short-term aid alone.

Methodology

Between October 8 and December 2, 2025 the Researchers conducted a qualitative assessment of the attitudes of a diverse range of Afghan youth (aged 18-30) toward their role in shaping Afghanistan's future. Participants for this study were identified through established professional networks, trusted community contacts, and personal referrals. Each potential participant was approached individually and provided with a clear explanation of the study's purpose, objectives, and ethical considerations, including confidentiality and voluntary participation. Researchers did not attempt to contact any known members of the Taliban out of concern for the safety of the project.

The consultation dataset includes more than 69 respondents: 43 one-on-one; 13 in focus group discussions; and 13 diaspora youth. Interviewers had roughly hour-long individual interviews with 43 youth currently living in Afghanistan: 21 women and 23 men from 15 provinces with a mix of Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek ethnicities from Badakhshan, Bamyan, Balkh, Daikundi, Faryab, Helmand, Herat, Jawzjan, Kabul, Kapisa, Kandahar, Nangahar, Paktia, Panjshir, and Takhar. (See the attached **Annex A** for full demographic details of the interviewees).

Participants were offered flexible options for participation based on their comfort, accessibility, and security preferences. They could either take part in an interview conducted through encrypted WhatsApp calls or respond to an online survey. Those who preferred telephone interviews were contacted to schedule a convenient time for the conversation. Participants opting for the online survey received a secure link either via email or, upon request, through WhatsApp.

Each person was asked seven structured questions in round one. Questions covered topics of governance, rights, agency, representation, security, economy, and personal aspirations. After analyzing the individual responses, the Researchers conducted a second round of interviews asking five structured questions to clarify trends derived from the initial response data.. Specific questions are recorded in the attached **Annex B**.

After the initial interviews, follow up conversations were held with 15 (six female and seven male) to clarify specific points, validate interpretations of their written responses, and further explore their insights on key questions. This iterative process ensured depth, accuracy, and authenticity in capturing participants' experiences and perspectives.

Additionally, researchers conducted interviews with 13 young men and women in the diaspora residing in Northern America, Europe, Turkey and India. Based on all of these responses, this report identifies cross-cutting themes, analyzes variation by demographic category, and articulates youth priorities to inform policymakers, civil society, and international actors.

Finally, the Researchers conducted a comparative review of cases from outside Afghanistan where youth played a role in effecting change during a period of political transition. They interviewed select experts and youth activists on Colombia, Bangladesh, and Syria to understand what role youth played, or didn't play, in those political transitions, what were keys to success or failure, and what contextual factors such as political systems, education levels, and cultural traditions would help to compare these cases with Afghanistan. Those lessons and the country context are then applied to the current circumstances in Afghanistan based on the Afghan interview and focus group responses.

Data Management and Analysis:

Once all responses from both the telephone interviews and online surveys were collected, they were entered into an Excel spreadsheet for organization and analysis. The responses, originally provided in multiple languages, were translated into English to enable consistency in interpretation and thematic comparison.

Prior to analysis, the dataset underwent a thorough data-cleaning process to correct inconsistencies in spelling, ensure uniform formatting, and verify completeness. Responses were then categorized by gender, separating male and female participants, and further grouped according to ethnic background to allow for comparative insights across demographic lines.

To maintain the integrity and confidentiality of participants, all personally identifiable information—including names, phone numbers, and email addresses—was removed before analysis. The de-identified dataset was then used to conduct an unbiased examination of trends, themes, and patterns emerging from the participants' experiences and perspectives.

All 43 respondents living in Afghanistan were asked the following seven questions:

1. *How do you perceive respect for justice and human rights?*

2. *What sources of information do you use to understand how youth interests are being met? Which sources do you trust most?*

3. *Which interest groups, organizations, or individuals are currently effective in advocating for your interests?*

4. *What are your top three priorities for a future Afghanistan in the areas of governance, the economy, security, and social cohesion?*

5. *What role can youth play in addressing the top three priorities?*

6. *Who currently most represents your vision of the future, locally and nationally?*

7. *In 100 words or fewer, describe your vision for your ideal role in society and within your family over the next five years?*

For a full list of round two questions, FGD and diaspora youth, please refer to **Annex B**.

Response data were then translated, categorized, and analyzed thematically.

Survey Responses

Overview: Across the interviews and focus groups, Afghan youth expressed a remarkably consistent set of responses despite the geographic, gender and ethnic diversity of the respondents: as a cohort, Afghan youth are upset about current conditions in Afghanistan, do not feel represented in decisions about their lives, and are pessimistic about prospects for the future. Afghan youth have many needs, ranging from rights to jobs to unbiased information and political representation that are not being met. The most pervasive concerns are about employment and education. Favoritism, corruption and injustice were also frequently mentioned.

As described below, there are differences between demographic groups, but these are of degree more than substance. Generally, women are more marginalized and desperate. Pashtun men are more optimistic about their economic and political future. Hazaras and Tajiks are more politically alienated. Each of these trends can be explained by the overall political contours of political rule in Afghanistan, with the Taliban overwhelmingly made up of Pashtun leaders that have imposed draconian restrictions on women's rights and preside over a collapsed economy.

Amid widespread pessimism, youth respondents tended to feel more included at local levels. Universities, and university professors were cited as being places where youth feel more represented. Men expressed significantly more agency than women, but many are deeply concerned about what will happen to their sisters or daughters under prolonged Taliban rule. No one mentioned national political parties or the older generation of powerbrokers as meaningfully representing them.

Youth access information through a variety of sources and attempt to triangulate the truth of current affairs against a backdrop of censorship and fear. Personal networks are most trusted but have less information. Social media is widely followed. Youth found national media to be an important but unreliable source of information. International entities tended to have more credibility, including international organizations and the United Nations, and international news outlets. Afghanistan International, broadcasting outside the country and away from Taliban censors, was most often mentioned as a credible source of news.

Many respondents noted that fear prevent youth movements or leaders from coalescing or acting on the national stage. Those who advocate for something different from the current Taliban policies are silenced, including the media. That said, youth see themselves as important actors in Afghanistan's future, self-assessing that they are more tolerant of political, ethnic, and gender diversity and more capable of reaching compromises than older generations or, most acutely, than the Taliban.

This section summarizes responses to each of the seven questions and characterizes differences among gender, ethnic, and geographic groups.

1) Respondents express a consistent, modern understanding of human rights

Asked to define human rights and justice, respondents across the board provided similar answers that focused on equal treatment and equal opportunity regardless of one's position or politics. Across all responses, participants described justice and human rights as the foundation of a peaceful, healthy, and functioning society. They emphasized that justice requires fairness, equality under the law, and the protection of human dignity. Participants reported that these rights are currently neither protected nor evenly applied. Human rights were framed not as privileges but as inherent, covering freedoms such as

education, speech, work, movement, and safety. Respondents agreed that without justice and human rights, trust erodes, inequality grows, and society faces instability and oppression.

A major shared theme was the steep decline in justice and rights since the Taliban returned to power in 2021. Participants reported that women and girls have experienced the most profound losses: bans on secondary and higher education, restrictions on work, limited mobility, and exclusion from courts. Men and women frequently cited the Taliban's unequal treatment of women as the most prominent ongoing human rights violation. Respondents universally support women's right to education. Minorities and youth were described as frequent targets of discrimination, harassment, and structural inequality.

Several respondents gave more specific responses about the functioning of the justice system, with women noting their lack of access to the courts and a range of respondents complaining about corruption. Rights and justice were consistently referred to as two sides of the same coin: the Taliban should not have decrees and policies that discriminate among groups; but just as bad is a justice system that does not allow equal access or fair procedures to adjudicate ordinary laws. Many described a judicial system that is neither independent nor fair, often influenced by bribery, personal interests, or Taliban loyalty. Across the dataset, respondents said the enforcement of laws is inconsistent and discriminatory, affecting not only women but also minorities and those perceived as political opponents.

Demographic variations:

Women respondents had a consistent and comprehensive view of rights and justice, focusing on equality, access to courts, lack of corruption. Women across all ethnic groups provided detailed accounts of discrimination, exclusion, and fear—particularly regarding bans on education and work, harassment in courts, and restrictions on movement. Women described direct personal experiences of exclusion and humiliation within the justice system. They explained that women often cannot speak directly to judges, are told to "cover their face" before being addressed, or are denied entry into court buildings entirely. Some women emphasized that justice begins in the family, where women also face inequality. They also noted that fear of surveillance, arrest, and retaliation limits the ability of women and youth to speak openly or seek help.

Male participants also expressed deep concern about human rights violations, though their focus extended more broadly to institutional failures, lack of accountability, corruption, and the suppression of youth, media, and freedom of expression. Several men acknowledged the specific harms faced by women but framed these issues within a wider context of national instability and the erosion of equal treatment for all citizens. Some men, however, noted that the Taliban have provided certain basic services such as security or healthcare—points rarely mentioned by women.

Ethnic trends also emerged: Pashtun women highlighted gender discrimination and legal corruption; Tajik women emphasized contradictions between Islamic teachings and current practices; Hazara women stressed universal rights and moral equality; and some Uzbek women spoke about institutional integrity and public participation. Among men, Pashtuns tended to focus on fairness and equality, Tajiks highlighted ethnic and generational injustice, and Hazaras emphasized rule of law and equal treatment.

Regional differences reflected these demographic patterns. Southern and eastern provinces (Kandahar, Nangarhar, Paktia) largely focused on women's restricted rights and systemic unfairness, with occasional references to improved security. Northern provinces (Takhar, Balkh, Jawzjan, Faryab) highlighted ethnic discrimination and institutional decay, while central provinces (Bamyan, Daikundi, Parwan) expressed the highest levels of fear about surveillance and retaliation. Urban respondents from Kabul and Herat

stressed the disconnect between Islamic principles, modern legal standards, and current practices, while highlighting the frustration of youth and educated groups.

Many respondents, regardless of background, stressed that Islamic principles support justice, equality, and fairness, arguing that current practices contradict both Islamic values and international human rights standards. Respondents contrasted Islam as a source of rights or justice, with the Taliban's interpretation of Sharia being unjust. Across groups, there was strong agreement that rebuilding trust, promoting education, strengthening independent institutions, and ensuring equality for all—especially women, youth, and minorities—are essential to progress and social stability in Afghanistan.

Across all groups, respondents agreed that without justice and human rights Afghanistan cannot achieve stability, trust, or social progress. Many emphasized that both Islamic teachings and international norms support fairness, dignity, and equality, and that true reform requires strengthening institutions, promoting education, rebuilding trust across communities, and ensuring women and minorities can fully participate in society.

2) Increases in media censorship mean reliable news is hard to find

Asked about what news sources they trust, youth responded with a range of media that spoke to a robust but not necessarily reliable information landscape. Across all demographics, respondents described a media environment shaped by censorship, political influence, and restricted freedom of expression. As a result, the majority of participants rely heavily on social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, and WhatsApp, as their primary sources of information. Correspondingly, respondents expressed low trust in local Afghan media. Television and radio inside the country were perceived as restricted and unreliable, especially regarding youth issues, women's rights, political repression, and regional affairs. Many participants emphasized that domestic media either cannot report truthfully or actively avoid sensitive topics.

In contrast, international media and international organizations were consistently viewed as the most trustworthy sources. BBC, Afghanistan International, VOA, CNN, and Amu TV were cited as reliable because they operate outside Taliban control and publish verified information. Reports from UN agencies (UNAMA, UNICEF, UNDP), Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International were valued for being evidence-based, well-documented, and grounded in field research. These international sources were viewed as providing the most accurate reflections of youth realities. Among Afghan-run media sources, Afghanistan International was singled out by several respondents for trustworthiness — particularly from Tajik and Hazara respondents. Official government statistics were seen as reliable from some men.

Across the sample, many respondents emphasize the importance of firsthand experiences. Conversations with other youth, community meetings, and direct observation were seen as the most authentic and meaningful source of information.

<u>Demographic variations:</u>

Comparing across groups, women respondents tend to rely more on international media, NGOs, and personal experiences. Men, particularly Pashtun and Tajik men, more frequently cite official statistics, government reports, academic research, or surveys. Tajik and Hazara respondents expressed stronger fears regarding censorship and repression, while Uzbek and Tajik respondents emphasized scientific, field-based, and international research.

Regional differences show that southern and eastern areas rely more on social media, central highland regions depend on independent and UN reports, and northern regions prefer external media due to fear of targeted repression.

Overall, the findings reveal a deeply fragmented information ecosystem in which social media, international outlets, and firsthand testimony serve as the primary tools for understanding youth interests and are more reliable than official statements or independent media based in Afghanistan.

3) Few organizations or individuals represent youth

Asked which organizations or individuals represent youth interests, the most common answer was 'no one.' Across all respondents, there is strong agreement that advocacy inside Afghanistan has sharply weakened due to repression, censorship, and fear of persecution. Respondents noted that people living in Afghanistan were subject to Taliban retaliation if they spoke in ways that contrasted with government policies or were perceived as contradicting Taliban rule.

Most participants note that formal civil society structures, youth organizations, and media bodies that once supported young people and women have been silenced or severely restricted. As a result, many believe that only a small number of activists, journalists, youth leaders, and civil society actors continue to operate inside the country – but quietly and underground. The organizations that remain influential tend to be local NGOs, small women's networks, youth groups, teachers, community elders, and informal civil society actors as well as some journalists and some university professors. It was notable that no respondents cited political parties or the leaders of political parties as representing them.

Respondents highlighted the importance of both international organizations and Afghans in the diaspora to voice concerns of people within the country and advocate for their interests. Afghan diaspora groups, exiled activists, independent journalists abroad, and international NGOs (such as UNICEF, UNDP, NRC, Save the Children, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch) are cited as key actors. Female respondents in particular said that they need to travel outside of Afghanistan to have any voice or express themselves on social media. Many respondents also note that even international efforts have "limited impact" on conditions inside Afghanistan.

Respondents repeatedly expressed a sense of abandonment or lack of effective representation. Several men—especially Tajik respondents from Kabul, Herat, and Panjshir—express that "no one" truly advocates for youth anymore, noting that many advocates abroad speak only in words, not actions. In regions of greater repression, such as Panjshir and Bamyan, several said people are too afraid to speak publicly, and only hidden or anonymous networks continue to work quietly. Across all groups, the decline of government institutions and the absence of independent youth bodies is described as a major barrier to meaningful advocacy.

<u>Demographic variations:</u>

Women rely more heavily than men on international and diaspora advocacy, reflecting heightened risks they face and the near absence of formal protections. Many women describe self-advocacy efforts through small networks and NGOs as among the few spaces where they can meaningfully participate. Men, particularly Pashtun and Hazara respondents, identify local NGOs, teachers, community elders, and UN agencies as effective, while Tajik men were more disillusioned, expressing that no one truly advocates for youth in practice. Regionally, advocacy remains somewhat active in the south and east, is heavily restricted in the north and Panjshir, and persists cautiously in the central highlands.

Overall, the findings portray an advocacy landscape that has shifted outward—relying on diaspora activism, international NGOs, and independent media—while internal mechanisms remain weak or silenced. Respondents express a shared desire for stronger, coordinated, and more impactful advocacy that can overcome current restrictions and address the urgent needs of Afghan youth.

4) Top youth priorities include good governance, jobs, security, and social cohesion

Asked to identify three top priority issues facing the country, respondents across the board agreed that Afghanistan's progress depends on four interconnected pillars: i) transparent and inclusive governance, ii) a strong job-generating economy, iii) reliable security, and iv) solidarity among diverse ethnic groups. Respondents view governance as the foundation of national development, describing an urgent need for a representative system that respects human rights, reduces corruption, and serves citizens rather than ruling over them. Many stressed that a legitimate and people-centered government is essential for restoring public trust and ensuring equal treatment for all Afghans.

Economic development emerged as the second most common priority. Participants argued that Afghanistan must build a strong, job-generating economy that reduces poverty, increases employment, strengthens education, and provides opportunities for youth and women. Many linked economic problems to return migration, rising crime, hopelessness among youth, and the inability of families to support themselves. Respondents believe that a functioning economy depends on both improved governance and better security.

Security and personal safety were also named as a core pillar of Afghanistan's future. Security was cited as both a first step toward rebuilding the country and a condition that emerges from social unity and good governance. Respondents had a personal and local definition of security, linking it to school attendance and investment to family stability and women's mobility. Across the dataset, participants expressed a desire for a country where people live without fear, where extremist or criminal activity is reduced, and where security protects citizens rather than suppresses them.

Social cohesion, described as solidarity, unity, reconciliation, or mutual respect among ethnic groups, was another important priority. Respondents noted that Afghanistan's fragmentation, discrimination, and political manipulation of ethnicity have weakened the nation. Many stated that social unity is necessary to prevent conflict, build trust, and create national progress, and that youth can serve as a unifying force if supported. Several highlighted that ethnic discrimination, if unaddressed, will continue to undermine all other efforts toward development and peace.

Across demographic groups, youth saw themselves playing a central role in building a hopeful version of Afghanistan's future. Many see young people as the "engine" of national progress, a generation capable of rebuilding institutions, strengthening the economy, and healing social divides. Respondents emphasized that for youth to contribute meaningfully, Afghanistan must guarantee education, job opportunities, and inclusive political participation. The overarching message is that a positive future would be defined by accountable governance, a vibrant economy, improved security, and strong unity among the country's diverse communities.

<u>Demographic variations</u>

There was a strong consensus across Afghanistan's diverse regions and ethnic groups about these core, interlinked priorities. Respondents all expressed that good governance is the foundation upon which other forms of progress depend, including inclusivity, representation, transparency, accountability and equal treatment. Women, in particular, stressed the importance of allowing women to work, both for

economic stability and social well-being. Men tend to frame economic priorities in structural terms: skill development, industrial growth, agriculture, and long-term national economic planning.

All groups value security but sub-groups expressed that in different ways. Tajik and Hazara respondents —especially from Kabul, Panjshir, Bamyan, and Badakhshan—link security directly to protection from discrimination and political targeting, while Pashtun respondents more often frame security around crime reduction and stability.

On the issue of social cohesion, respondents across identities argue that national progress is impossible without reducing ethnic discrimination, rebuilding trust, and promoting unity. Women emphasized more the importance of dignity, respect, and inclusion across ethnic lines. Men often highlighted national unity as a requirement for lasting peace and a barrier to extremism. Across the country, youth are seen as a force capable of building bridges and strengthening inter-ethnic cooperation.

5. Youth are their own best advocates but need a foundation of education

Asked how they can best address their own top concerns, respondents saw themselves as important agents of change in today's Afghanistan – if they are given a chance. Participants consistently described young people as more technologically literate, globally aware, and open-minded than previous generations. Many participants describe youth as having "fresh ideas," "modern thinking," and "energy," which needs to be channeled through education, technology, civic engagement, and entrepreneurship to transform their communities. Their roles could span governance, the economy, security, and social unity, making them a key part of Afghanistan's long-term stability and development. This optimism has to be tempered, however, by their other responses indicating that bad governance, censorship, and lack of representation severely reduces the agency youth have in practice to make a difference in how Afghanistan is run. Youth have the capability but not the opportunity.

Education emerged as the most frequently cited driver of youth empowerment. Respondents emphasized that when young people expand their knowledge through school, university, online courses, or vocational training, they are better able to influence decisions, promote transparency, and challenge outdated or harmful practices. Women highlighted the critical importance of restoring access to girls' education, noting that educated youth can speak up for justice, equality, and good governance even in restrictive environments. Men also noted the importance of women's education.

On economic matters, participants underscored the role of entrepreneurship, innovation, and skill development in reducing poverty and creating hope. Youth are portrayed as capable of launching small businesses, applying modern technologies, and generating employment in ways that support families and communities. Respondents from Uzbek and northern regions emphasize economic creativity and trade, while Pashtun and southern respondents highlight the need for employment programs and government support. Again, these responses are aspirational when paired with universal concern about the present poor economy characterized by high unemployment and poverty levels.

Youth often saw themselves as peacebuilders. Respondents described young people as essential to raising awareness about nonviolence, countering extremism, and promoting critical thinking. Security was framed not only as protection from physical harm but also as relief from fear, social pressure, or censorship. Tajik and Hazara respondents especially emphasized the need for youth-led peace education and civic responsibility. Respondents noted that young people interact more freely across groups, value diversity, and oppose discrimination. They argued that youth-led dialogue, volunteerism, and responsible social media use can help rebuild trust among communities.

Demographic variations:

Across the dataset, there was little variation in response across sub groups. All respondents emphasized education and modern skills as the foundation of youth contribution. Women and men alike highlight the transformative potential of learning, whether through formal schooling, online platforms, vocational training, or self-directed study. Youth equipped with modern knowledge are seen as capable of influencing community decisions, participating in governance, advocating for rights, and promoting justice. Women, particularly from Tajik and Hazara areas, strongly emphasize the barriers girls face in accessing education and the urgent need to restore these opportunities.

There was also strong agreement across sub-groups that youth can be a source of unity; less imbued with ethnic prejudice and more likely to build bridges across different groups. Many highlighted how youth interaction through educational institutions, social media, volunteerism, and shared challenges fosters understanding and cooperation. Women describe youth solidarity as a way to overcome discrimination, while men frame unity as a path toward national stability and progress.

6) No national organizations or leaders represent youth; local networks offer hope

This question was interpreted by respondents in essentially the same way as question 3, which was intended to focus on individual and political leaders, whereas this question was intended to focus on institutions and organizations. In both cases, the answer was that there is very little representation of youth interests by anyone – and therefore the responses mirror each other. Many participants—women and men alike—stated directly that "no one represents us," "voices are silenced," or "speaking out is seen as opposition." The climate of fear, censorship, and political repression has severely constrained formal advocacy. As a result, respondents believe that active youth, small civil society groups, community elders, and a handful of courageous teachers, journalists, or activists—often working quietly or anonymously—are among the only remaining actors defending youth interests.

Another significant theme is that youth themselves are now the primary advocates for their own rights and hopes. Respondents describe youth as the "backbone of society," "the force for the country's future," or "the only ones who understand today's realities." They point to young people's modern education, technological literacy, exposure to global ideas, and energy as key tools for shaping Afghanistan's future. Even when political repression limits public action, youth continue to advocate quietly through community discussions, online platforms, social groups, volunteer work, and private networks. That said, there was agreement that space for youth advocacy is becoming more restricted, with increasing fear, censorship, arrests, and silencing. Respondents cite examples like workshops being shut down, professors arrested for speaking about women's rights, online sessions for girls cancelled, and youth activists threatened. In this environment, advocacy is fragmented, mostly underground, and heavily reliant on youth networks and international allies.

Respondents recognized a positive role played by activists, civil society organizations abroad, and independent journalists. Many respondents—especially women, Tajiks, and Uzbeks—say their interests are best represented by Afghan activists working from exile, human rights groups, diaspora scholars, and international organizations such as the United Nations, European Union, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch. These external actors are viewed as more capable of speaking freely, reporting abuses, and defending women's rights, education, and civic freedoms.

Several respondents also mention community-level actors, including local elders, community councils, and teachers. However, many emphasize that local councils are restricted by the authorities and are not allowed to raise critical issues such as women's rights or girls' education. A few Pashtun respondents in

Kandahar express rare trust in the current authorities or local structures—an outlier pattern in the dataset. In contrast, most respondents describe these local bodies as cautious, monitored, or unable to challenge injustice.

Demographic variations

There was not much variation among categories of respondents. All groups expressed that there are virtually no effective, trusted advocates for youth interests inside Afghanistan today. Women and men across provinces describe an environment of censorship, intimidation, and shrinking civic space in which speaking out is treated as opposition to authorities. As a result, respondents overwhelmingly state that they have no formal representatives and that public advocacy, particularly for women's rights, youth rights, and education, is heavily suppressed.

Women, especially Tajiks and Hazaras, express the highest levels of fear and silencing and rely most heavily on youth networks and diaspora advocacy. Tajik respondents report the harshest repression and the sharpest sense of political silencing. Hazara youth emphasize discrimination and cautiously organized local activism. Uzbek respondents lean strongly toward civil society and international advocates. Pashtun respondents are more likely to cite local leaders or councils, though many still highlight strict limitations on public speech. Some Pashtuns were the only ones to express trust in the current authorities, reflecting a slight regional-ethnic divergence.

7) A hopeful vision of the future: education, family, and society

Asked to summarize a positive vision for Afghanistan's future in '100 words or less,' the dominant theme was a desire for personal growth through education, economic independence, and support of family and society. Women and men alike imagine themselves becoming more educated, skilled, and financially stable over the next five years. Many respondents link education directly to dignity, empowerment, and the ability to support their families. Regardless of current restrictions or unemployment, nearly everyone describes education as the key to shaping their future and contributing positively to Afghanistan.

A second major theme is the aspiration to play a meaningful role within the family, often framed in terms of support, responsibility, and being a source of stability. Women more commonly emphasize supporting their siblings, children, and parents emotionally, financially, and through role-modeling. Men frequently articulated desires to become financial providers and to shape their families through ethical, cultural, or religious guidance. Both genders see family responsibility not as a constraint but as a platform from which they can influence society.

In terms of societal roles, respondents consistently emphasize service to community, including helping vulnerable groups, promoting justice, empowering women, teaching youth, improving the health sector, and fostering unity. Many imagine themselves as active participants in rebuilding Afghanistan: creating jobs, contributing to economic development, advocating for rights, or promoting peace. Several respondents, especially women, hope to become voices for justice and defenders of rights despite political restrictions.

A fourth theme is the hope for professional advancement and economic self-sufficiency. Women frequently mention pursuing careers in law, nursing, midwifery, education, psychology, journalism, or medicine—fields where they feel they can meaningfully serve society. Men emphasize starting businesses, improving their financial condition, advancing in their professions, or contributing to national development through entrepreneurship. Economic independence is strongly tied to self-respect, empowerment, and the ability to support others.

Demographic variations:

There were relatively few differences in the tenor or response across different sub groups. One distinction was that women, Tajik respondents from Kabul and Panjshir, and Hazara respondents from central regions, acknowledge deep uncertainty and fear due to current political restrictions. Women describe their futures as "unclear," "interrupted," or "imprisoned" if education and work remain banned. Still, despite constraints, they still imagine futures built on hope for a time when rights are restored, education is accessible, and youth can fulfill their roles in shaping Afghanistan's future.

Focus Group Discussions

On December 3rd, the Researchers conducted two separate focus group discussions with seven female and seven male youth participants from Kabul, Faryab, Takhar, Nangarhar, Daikundi, and Bamyan. Participants were randomly selected from a pre-developed list of females attending online courses and males studying in universities across the country. While both groups face severe restrictions under Taliban rule, their experiences, priorities, and emotional responses vary in meaningful ways. The following section outlines areas of overlap and divergence, providing a fuller picture of the challenges facing Afghan youth today.

Major Challenges Facing Youth

When discussing the biggest challenges affecting youth, female participants described a life of exclusion and restriction. They highlighted gender-based limits such as bans on girls' education, employment, and movement. Many spoke about the emotional pain of isolation, the increase in early and forced marriages, and the loss of future opportunities. They also emphasized how the *mahram* rule requiring a male 'guardian' for women to travel outside the home disrupts nearly every aspect of their lives.

Male participants focused on the psychological stress caused by economic decline, lack of employment opportunities, low motivation, and a lack of future prospects. Their tone reflected both frustration and fear. While they acknowledged gender discrimination, their primary concern was the broader stagnation affecting all of society. They pointed to limited job opportunities, the placement of unqualified individuals in government positions, and ideological changes in the education system that undermine critical learning.

Right of Education: In the area of education, women described an almost total loss of access. Girls are barred from school and university, pushed into early marriage, or confined to online or religious classes. Participants shared the emotional toll of seeing their dreams erased and their futures controlled by restrictive policies.

Men raised related concerns but from a different angle. They spoke about the poor quality of instruction, the ideological rewrite of the curriculum, and the loss of experienced university lecturers who have fled the country. Although boys and young men can still attend school, many feel their education is increasingly meaningless due to limited job prospects and the appointment of unqualified individuals—often from a single ethnic group—to influential roles.

Right to Employment: Women described widespread unemployment resulting directly from legal bans preventing them from working in most sectors. They noted the economic pressures pushing families to marry off girls at younger ages and the loss of female professionals, especially in sectors like health care where they are urgently needed.

Men, meanwhile, focused on the overall scarcity of professional opportunities for all youth. They criticized the appointment of unqualified civil servants and the shrinking space for merit-based employment. Many male participants said they intend to migrate after graduation, seeing no future for themselves under current conditions.

Freedom of movement: Women shared detailed accounts illustrating how the *mahram* policy affects their education, employment, and basic services. For example, one woman from Kabul needed copies of her university documents to apply for an online program. Because her brother was working in another province, she waited three months for him to accompany her, causing her to miss the application deadline.

Men described the secondary burden of this policy. A male participant from Nangarhar said he often misses his own classes to accompany female family members to health clinics, as women cannot receive services without a mahram. Both groups agreed that the *mahram* rule is restrictive, harmful, and damaging to society.

Access to Information: Women reported that they rely mostly on international media and Facebook news pages for information, although their ability to stay updated is often limited by heavy household responsibilities and frequent internet disruptions. Men also depend heavily on international media, explaining that domestic outlets are censored, conservative, and no longer trusted. Both groups view online analysts and diaspora voices as more reliable than state-controlled reporting.

When asked whether they read reports produced by the UN or other international organizations, all female participants—and two of the male participants—said they usually do not access these reports on their own. They only read them if someone shares the documents directly or if summaries appear on platforms such as Afghanistan International or Amu.

Local Leadership and Community Representation: When asked whether local leaders advocate for youth needs, both women and men said that most leaders are either powerless, silent, or openly aligned with the Taliban. Community elders often act only as intermediaries who relay Taliban instructions instead of representing citizens' concerns. Across provinces, council heads, mosque elders, and religious figures are widely seen as ineffective. In Takhar, many leaders are Taliban appointees focused on their salaries. In Faryab, mosque imams influence families to keep girls at home or only send them to madrasas. Religious sermons follow Taliban-approved scripts.

With provincial councils and parliament dissolved, people have no formal representatives to speak on their behalf. Participants also stressed that they themselves cannot approach authorities, largely due to fear of retaliation. Under the current environment, even peacefully demanding basic rights is often interpreted by the Taliban as challenging their logic, authority, or policies.

Social Trends and Shifts in Attitudes: Female participants noted troubling changes in societal attitudes. Many men have adapted to the restrictive environment and no longer object to the exclusion of girls from school or work. Mothers remain deeply concerned, but families increasingly struggle to justify the value of girls' education. Some send daughters abroad on scholarships, while others rely on online or religious programs. In areas like Daikundi, poverty has pushed families to marry off girls as young as 13. While men often recognize the importance of girls' education, fear prevents them from speaking out. Women, inside and outside the country, continue to show greater courage despite the risks.

Rising Extremism and Vulnerability of Youth: Both groups raised alarm about extremist ideology taught in many educational institutions, particularly madrasas. They urged the international community to hold the Taliban accountable for indoctrinating children and youth, warning that unchecked radicalization

poses long-term risks for Afghanistan and beyond. Participants also noted concerns about corporal punishment and sexual exploitation occurring under the guise of religious education, contributing to a heightened environment of vulnerability , abuse and insecurity.

Major Themes

Based on all responses to the initial seven survey questions and the two follow up focus group discussions, the following summary of six significant themes of youth responses over the entire survey project.

Theme 1: Deep erosion of rights, justice, and freedom under Taliban rule

Respondents across all demographics, especially women, describe a pervasive collapse of justice, human rights, and equitable governance. They see the current authorities as eliminating pathways for youth participation, suppressing dissent, and systematically stripping women and girls of basic freedoms. The loss of education, employment, and public presence creates a sense of suffocation, fear, and despair. Human rights violations are portrayed as both ideologically driven and rooted in older patriarchal norms, producing depression, migration pressure, and a belief that the current system is fundamentally illegitimate.

Examples and direct descriptions include:

- "Girls remain imprisoned within their homes" (Kabul Tajik woman).
- "Ethnic and political injustices prevent fair representation" (Panjshir Tajik).
- "speaking up…is seen as opposing the Taliban" and organizations being shut down (Takhar Tajik).

Overall, participants describe the government as oppressive, unjust, unaccountable, ideologically driven rather than service-oriented, and uninterested in women's or youth needs.

Theme 2: High levels of hopelessness, fear, censorship, and lack of representation

Respondents overwhelmingly state that no existing institution represents their interests. Youth feel politically silenced, excluded from decision-making, and unable to advocate without risking retaliation. Across all identities, there is deep distrust of Taliban-run institutions, including courts, media, and public services. Domestic media are widely viewed as censored or propaganda tools, reinforcing the desire for unbiased international information. These conditions intensify anxiety, depression, and migration pressures.

Examples and direct descriptions include:

- Helmand Pashtun men report being barred from raising girls' education in councils.
- "No institution or individual fully represents my vision" (Herat Tajik woman).
- Many families who once championed girls' education now say they no longer see value in it. (Uzbek woman, Faryab)

- A growing number are trying to leave the country in search of safety, opportunity, and dignity. (Kabul, Pashtun)

Youth characterize daily life with uncertainty, emotional distress, and an overwhelming lack of opportunity, leading many to view migration as their only viable future.

Theme 3: Education as a central pillar of hope, aspiration, and potential mobilization

Education is the strongest cross-cutting priority across genders and ethnicities. Respondents view education as the foundation for rights, economic stability, national development, critical thinking, social cohesion, and peace. For women, restoring education is existential, directly tied to dignity and empowerment. With domestic barriers intensifying, female youth increasingly pursue online learning or seek opportunities abroad. Education is widely believed to unlock both personal futures and national recovery.

Examples and direct descriptions include:

- "my biggest dream is for girls to be allowed to study" (Faryab Uzbek woman).
- Education is "the foundation of all progress" (multiple Nangarhar Pashtun men).

Education is thus both an aspiration and a potential mobilizing force—one of the few topics uniting youth across all identities.

Theme 4: Economic hardship and unemployment pressures

Widespread unemployment, especially among educated youth, is a defining feature of respondents' lives. Economic collapse fuels hopelessness, forces migration, and disproportionately affects women who are legally barred from most work. Young men too are suffering from the lack of employment opportunities. Respondents consistently rank job creation, entrepreneurship, and economic reform as high priorities. Many directly link economic deterioration to political exclusion and discriminatory policies.

Examples and direct descriptions include:

- Youth repeatedly call for job creation, economic growth, and small-business opportunities.
- Lack of work "forces youth to migrate" when jobs are eliminated or inaccessible.

Economic insecurity is therefore both a symptom of governance failure and a catalyst for social fragmentation, brain drain, and despair.

Theme 5: Lack of effective youth representation

Across all identities, young people describe a persistent generational disconnect. Elders retain authority due to tradition rather than merit, while youth—who bear the greatest consequences of current policies—are excluded from meaningful decision-making. This exclusion undermines trust and prevents youth from shaping the future they envision.

Examples and direct descriptions include:

- Elders hold authority by tradition, not capability.
- Traditional community and shura elders are now in Taliban's payroll, making them more loyal to the authorities than to the people they are supposed to represent.
- Youth repeatedly state that "respect" for elders does not justify unequal rights or representation.

Despite this exclusion, youth imagine themselves contributing through education, awareness campaigns, justice and human-rights advocacy, economic initiatives, and community support.

Theme 6: Desire for social cohesion, interethnic respect, and national unity

Respondents across regions emphasize unity and interethnic cooperation as essential for Afghanistan's stability and progress. Youth in particular see themselves as less divided than older generations and more capable of bridging social and ethnic divides. Social cohesion is framed as not only desirable but necessary to overcome conflict, extremist ideology, and systemic injustice. Despite repression, youth remain active—often quietly—in efforts that support awareness, peacebuilding, women's rights, and community resilience.

Examples and direct descriptions include:

- "Without mutual understanding and respect…our country cannot progress." (Uzbek, Faryab)
- Kandahar Pashtun youth note they can "challenge hate speech, encourage dialogue, connect people."

Youth envision contributing through education, justice promotion, unity-building activities, poverty reduction, and support for women and girls. They identify concrete requirements: safety, educational access, economic opportunities, freedom of expression, and technical support. Youth see themselves as a capable but unsupported resource for national renewal.

Demographic Differences

In addition to common themes the interviews revealed differences between different demographic groups within the survey cohort. These should not be viewed as determinative of the broader national groups because of the relatively small number of members. But contrasting trends among groups provides a snapshot of viewpoint diversity that surely exists across the country and provides hypotheses that can be explored in more in-depth studies. Gender, ethnic and regional differences are summarized below and captured more comprehensively in the table below.

Gender Differences

Women's responses overwhelmingly focus on rights, justice, and the profound emotional impact of repression. Their descriptions of daily life are heavy with terms such as imprisonment, hopelessness, and unacceptability, revealing how restrictions on education, movement, and work shape their sense of identity and future possibility. Women frequently highlight the psychological toll of these constraints and frame their aspirations around restoring dignity—both personally and collectively. Many articulate clear advocacy goals, including supporting underground education, promoting women's rights, and addressing

mental health needs. They also provide more concrete examples of discrimination, suggesting a sharper immediacy and urgency in their experiences.

Men, by contrast, focus more on economic hardship, unemployment, and their exclusion from civic life. Their narratives highlight the struggle to secure livelihoods in a collapsing economy and the frustration of being unable to contribute meaningfully to society. Some men reference tradition, religion, or community expectations more often than women, reflecting a closer engagement with local norms. They also express a notable trust in personal networks—especially among those of shared identity—which they rely on for information and opportunity. Compared to women, men are more likely to envision themselves in future leadership or community roles, even within a constrained political environment.

Ethnic Differences

Tajik respondents express some of the strongest concerns about political repression, human rights violations, and the erosion of rule of law. Their testimonies convey deep fear and disillusionment with the Taliban, alongside a powerful emphasis on dignity and justice. Many reflect a near-total loss of trust in current authorities.

Hazara participants highlight themes of equality, discrimination, and the right to education. Their responses show acute awareness of how marginalized groups are disproportionately affected by current policies. They emphasize both community resilience and the struggle for basic rights under intensified repression, highlighting collective survival rather than individual advancement.

Uzbek respondents frequently discuss conservative cultural norms, particularly restrictions on women's roles. Uzbek respondents place a high value on formal education. Their accounts often portray severe limitations on mobility, schooling, and public participation.

Pashtun respondents remain critical of the Taliban, but their critiques more often incorporate cultural or religious language. While concerns about justice and rights appear, there is slightly greater attention to economic opportunity and local development. In some southern and eastern communities, a few respondents acknowledge social norms that reinforce male privilege, even when they personally oppose these practices.

Regional Differences

In the southern provinces (Kandahar and Helmand), tradition and patriarchal norms are strong. Women describe some of the strictest restrictions in the country, while men highlight security priorities and the need for economic stability. Youth aspirations often revolve around regaining basic freedoms and opportunities.

Across the eastern region (Nangarhar, Paktia), young people express hopeful ambition about future leadership roles, but operate under fear. Notable use of VPNs illustrates both a desire to stay informed and a willingness to take risks in doing so. Education, employment, and migration pressures dominate their concerns, with many looking outward for survival and advancement.

In the northern provinces (Takhar, Balkh, Jawzjan, Faryab), respondents emphasized political repression, discrimination, and shrinking civil space. Youth appeared more engaged in underground activism and international digital networks, but they also cited significant censorship and information blocks.

The Central Highlands, home to many Hazara communities (Bamyan, Daikundi), consistently value equality, justice, and empowerment. Respondents criticize both Taliban restrictions and traditional elder-centered social structures. Despite barriers, educational aspirations remain strong, showing a commitment to learning as a path to empowerment.

Finally, urban centers (Kabul and Herat) reveal the highest levels of political awareness and analytical critique. Youth in these areas articulate the need for skills, networks, and professional opportunities, while simultaneously expressing profound despair about the country's direction. Many balance a desire to rebuild Afghanistan with a growing sense of displacement and uncertainty.

Table: Comparative views by Gender, Ethnicity, and Region

Comparison by Gender

Group	Key Themes	Unique Concerns	Representative Insights
Women	- Severe restrictions on education & employment - Loss of rights, autonomy, mobility - Desire for justice, equality & dignity - Strong aspirations to be role models & community supporters	- Being "imprisoned" at home - Fear of surveillance & punishment - Inability to plan futures - Gender-based exclusion from councils and work	*"Afghan girls may remain imprisoned…like prisoners serving life sentences." "My biggest dream is for girls to be allowed to study."*
Men	- Governance reform, anti-corruption - Economics: jobs, entrepreneurship, stability - Security as foundation for progress - Civic participation	- Fear of being silenced or punished for criticism - Frustration with unemployment despite education	*"Speaking up is seen as opposing the Taliban." "Security is the foundation of all progress."*

Comparison by Ethnicity

Ethnicity	Key Themes	Distinctive Patterns
Tajik	Justice, equal representation, education, protection from retaliation	- Strong concerns about suppression of dissent - High emphasis on transparent governance - Frequent reports of Taliban retaliation against civic gatherings
Hazara	Equality, safety, economic opportunity, women's rights	- Direct references to discrimination - Strong desire for inclusive, elected government - Greater fear of ethnic violence and marginalization
Uzbek	Social cohesion, respect across ethnic lines, economic development	- Emphasis on multiethnic unity - Highlight local poverty in Faryab/Jawzjan - Strong focus on factories, jobs, and stability

Pashtun	Education, modern skills, technology, local governance concerns	- Diverse views: some trust local authorities, others do not - More references to traditional elder councils - Emphasis on youth potential and entrepreneurship

Comparison by Region

Region	Key Themes	Distinctive Patterns
Central Highlands (Bamyan, Daikundi)	Women's rights, justice, education	- Highest fear of surveillance - Strong aspiration for civic participation - Frequent mention of discrimination
Northern Provinces (Takhar, Badakhshan, Faryab, Jawzjan)	Ethnic equality, economic hardship, unity	- Urgent calls for jobs, factories, investment - Strong multiethnic unity messages
Eastern & Southern Provinces (Kandahar, Nangarhar, Paktia, Helmand)	Technology, entrepreneurship, conservative councils	- Elders dominate councils; youth excluded from decisions - Focus on modern skills as path for progress
Urban Kabul	Loss of opportunity, rights restrictions, fear of expression	- Educated youth express severe frustration - Sharp sense of being "silenced" or "imprisoned"

Perspectives of Afghan Youth in Exile

Afghan youth living in exile continue to carry a deep emotional, cultural, and intellectual connection to their homeland. Despite physical distance, they remain closely engaged with developments inside Afghanistan, particularly as the country faces ongoing restrictions on rights, instability, and worsening conditions for women and girls. This section summarizes insights from 15 (10 females, 5 males) young Afghans currently living in the US, UK, Germany, Canada, India, Tajikistan, and Turkey reflecting on how they stay informed about their country, how exile shapes their understanding, and what they hope for Afghanistan's future.

Afghan youth abroad describe a constant, enduring link to home, maintained through multiple channels of communication. Most remain in daily or weekly contact with parents, siblings, and relatives through WhatsApp, regular phone calls, Instagram, Facebook, and other social media platforms. For many, these conversations are a vital source of reassurance and emotional grounding. Beyond personal communication, youth also actively follow online news, human rights reports, and social media updates to stay informed about the political, social, and humanitarian situation.

For some, such as those working in refugee shelters or supporting newly arrived migrants, Afghanistan's crisis remains an unavoidable part of everyday life. Discussions with fellow Afghans, colleagues, and community members bring the issue into daily conversations, reminding them of the continued struggles of Afghan families. Cultural practices—music, food, language, and gatherings—further strengthen their connection and keep Afghanistan present in their thoughts.

Across responses, youth expressed deep distress over the total loss of women's rights in Afghanistan, especially the ban on girls' education. Many described these restrictions as pushing women "back into the Middle Ages," stripping an entire generation of their future. They also highlighted indoctrination of youth inside the country and the collapse of education systems.

Those living abroad face their own challenges, including stigma and prejudice. Some noted that Pashtuns who reject the Taliban are still stereotyped as supporters, while young Afghan men are often misjudged as disrespectful toward women—assumptions that do not reflect reality. These external pressures add to the psychological burden they already carry from worrying about Afghanistan.

Young Afghans emphasized the urgent need for comprehensive support for youth inside Afghanistan. They called for:

- Access to quality education for boys and girls as the foundation for long-term progress.
- Psychological support programs in schools to help youth cope with trauma, stress, and uncertainty.
- Platforms for self-expression, such as digital storytelling tools, to allow young people to share their experiences safely and creatively.
- Online events bringing Afghan youth from across the globe and Afghanistan to exchange views.

Many also stressed that the international community has a responsibility to provide protection, particularly for the small number of women who continue to protest despite extreme risks. They believe that without external support, these voices may be silenced entirely.

In discussing their hopes for Afghanistan's future, Afghan youth expressed that even amid trauma, fear, and deep pessimism they continue to hold strong and diverse aspirations for their country. They envision an Afghanistan that is peaceful, just, and grounded in respect for human rights and equality. Central to their hopes is the return of girls and women to schools, workplaces, and public life without fear or restrictions. They dream of a country with stable governance, functioning institutions, and meaningful opportunities that allow young people to grow, contribute, and realize their full potential.

They also hope for an economic environment where families can meet their basic needs and rebuild their lives with dignity. For many, genuine and lasting progress feels impossible under current conditions, leading them to express a clear desire for political change and the eventual removal of the Taliban from power. Above all, they long for an Afghanistan where young people are free not only to survive but to dream, plan, and thrive.

Regarding their commitment and contribution to positive change in Afghanistan, youth in exile expressed a strong desire to support Afghanistan's future, even if their contributions begin modestly. Their aspirations include:

- Advocating for Afghan women and youth.
- Supporting educational initiatives and youth programs.
- Sharing stories and raising awareness globally.
- Providing psychological support.
- Fundraising for vulnerable families.
- Building professional skills they can one day bring back to Afghanistan.

For some young people, their commitment to helping Afghanistan is very personal, arising from feelings of responsibility, guilt, and love for their country. Others hope to take on bigger roles in the future, including leadership positions that can help rebuild the government and bring back security.

At the heart of expatriate responses is a belief in the resilience and strength of Afghan youth and women. Even in exile, they are committed to remain connected, to speak out, and to contribute to a more hopeful and inclusive Afghanistan.

Comparative Youth Activism Cases

To provide additional perspective on youth empowerment and representation in fragile or transitional political contexts, the Researchers conducted a desk review and spoke to experts and youth leaders involved with youth engagement in peace or political transition processes in Bangladesh, Colombia, Madagascar, and Syria. Each transition is different, and the contexts are distinct from the present situation in Afghanistan. But identifying contextual factors and describing mechanisms and capacities that either helped or hindered other youth movements' attempts to influence future governance in periods of transition can be useful in informing options for Afghan engagement and empowerment. Each case is briefly contextualized below, along with salient actions or mechanisms that affected youth in each country to meaningfully participate in structuring their countries' political futures. The lessons from the case are then compared to Afghanistan based on the Researchers' understanding of the Afghan context and the responses youth gave to the questions in this study.

Bangladesh: Youth protests catalyze a political sea change

Bangladesh is one of the most stark examples of how youth mobilization can lead to transformative political change. A growing youth bulge and economic stresses that were exacerbated by COVID created mounting disapproval from youth cohort that the government was not addressing their economic needs. At the same time Sheikh Hasina, a leader who was freely and fairly elected in 2009, was resorting to increasingly authoritarian tactics that alienated some constituencies. Hasina was re-elected in early 2024, which put off hopes for progressive governance reforms for another five years.

After re-election, Hasina reversed a promise to open up government civil service jobs to more groups and instead retained/reimposed a quota system that favored the Muktijuddhas — descendants of the freedom fighters who won Bangladeshi independence in 1971, This move sparked protests on university campuses, and then in public spaces more generally, over a policy that restricted jobs for youth at a time when young Bangladeshis were already stressed about jobs and future careers. Students effectively mobilized tens of thousands of protesters for weeks, giving the government a black eye and capturing national attention. Students Against Discrimination (SAD) served as a loose umbrella organization helping to coordinate protests and provide services and support to those who were killed, injured, or arrested. Nahid Islam emerged as a youth leader of the movement, which helped provide a focal point, spokesperson, and rallying point for domestic and international support.

The tipping point came in July when government soldiers fired on protesters, killing over 250 in different incidents. One youth protester in particular was killed on camera with his arms outstretched showing he had no weapons. The violence against unarmed protesters catalyzed a range of grievances different groups had against Hasina's government and the protest transformed from a narrow complaint against civil service job quotas to a national movement against Hasina's continued rule. On August 1, diverse civil society groups joined in general protests calling for Hasina's ouster. Momentum grew and ultimately the Army declined to oppose the mass movement and Hasina resigned. This momentous decision was eased by youth groups' advocacy for Nobel Peace Prize winner Mohammed Younus to take over as an interim president, which made it more palatable for mainstream groups to accede to Hasina's fall.

The key structural elements of student leaders' success include:

- A long history of protest movements and a strong system of public and university education that has made university campuses an accepted source of social and political dynamism.

- Democratic traditions that were eroding under Hasina, but which created a muscle memory of legitimate, popular rule that many constituencies wanted to recover.

- Economic grievances that were most acute for college graduates who saw potential jobs going to patronage not merit, but affected broader swathes of society in the wake of the Covid 19 recession.

- A system of of organizing mass mobilizations for earlier protests, including in 2013 and 2018.

- Digital literacy — students an other civic groups were able to adapt and respond to government crackdowns through their fluency with encrypted chats, broadcast lists, and and location mapping.

- These underlying conditions were then leveraged by specific dynamics of the events in 2024, namely:

- A overly militarized response to peaceful protests that generated a catalytic moment of violence when protesters were unnecessarily killed and violence captured on camera outraged broad

populations.

- Savvy youth leadership that a) was prepared to expand their demands from jobs to a new government when the opportunity arose and b) created an inclusive movement that welcomed different political and religious factions that normally were political rivals but could unite behind opposition to Hasina.

- The public choice of a unifying leader in Mohammed Younus shored up the big-tent approach and gave fence-sitters like the military the comfort then needed to get rid of Hasina without fearing a more radical or untested youth leader taking her place.

Application to Afghanistan:

The Bangladesh case presents an optimistic scenario where youth became the center of a national movement that brought about a rapid and fundamental change in Bangladesh's government. However, many of the underlying factors of that movement's success are absent in the current Afghanistan context. While Afghan universities have been a source of political movements — notably the communist parties in the 1970s; many Mujaheddin resistance leaders in the 1980s; some ISIS leaders in the 2010s — Afghanistan has much smaller university populations than Bangladesh and the current University system is severely constrained by the Taliban. Additionally, Afghanistan has a weak and short-lived democratic tradition and current Taliban rule is completely intolerant of protests that directly criticize their rule. While civil society groups and humanitarian networks have experience in mobilizing broad networks, it has not been 'combat tested' as it was in Bangladesh and much organizational talent in Afghanistan now lives abroad.

On the positive side, the youth survey conducted for this paper demonstrates Afghanistan has many of the same political and economic resentments that fueled the Bangladesh protests — only to a more acute degree. Unemployment is a key concern for youth as is political and ethnic favoritism and a broad based concern that the Taliban are bad at governance and increasingly corrupt. While Taliban oppression exceeds that of Hasina's government, the grievances also exceed those in Bangladesh. A key question is what will it take to have a catalytic moment where Afghans are willing to take the significant risks to life and freedom that Bangladeshi youth did to defy Taliban forces and unite in large enough numbers to criticize the Taliban's governance. As in Bangladesh, a successful scenario is more likely to start with a dramatic but apolitical spark and then spread to broader grievances if diverse constituencies can be brought together behind common goals.

One key lesson from the Bangladesh case for Afghan youth is the value of communication, networking, and strategic planning to capitalize on brief moments of opportunity. The more diverse groups can be in contact with each other to build a degree of trust and operational coordination, the more likely they will be able to mobilize a strong response to grievances that affect a broader population. It is also important to have strategic plans in place. Bangladeshi youth benefitted from periodic national protest movements to build experience, observe sessions, and plan for future movements. Afghan youth have not mobilized in the recent past in the same way. Figuring out how to use Afghan networks, including tribal, humanitarian, and military to advance common civic goals that youth clearly expressed in our interviews, will be a key to future success.

Colombia: Institutionalized Youth Activism

Colombia presents another positive picture of how youth activism can play an instrumental role in

transformational political change. While youth were not formal negotiators in peace talks that took place over several years in Havana, their activism significantly influenced public debate over the revision of the peace accord after the failed plebiscite. Youth also have played an active role in pushing for the peace agreement's implementation.

Colombian youth groups organized as part of Colombia's broader civil society to engage with the peace process that played out over many years between the Colombian government and the FARC. Talks that were convened in Havana were relatively closed to civil society input – despite UN and Norwegian calls for an inclusive process. Even without a seat at the negotiation table, however, youth were able to exercise agency in the national political debate and particularly were instrumental in converting an initial "no" in the national referendum to approve the initial peace deal into national approval of a slightly modified peace deal.

Youth organizations filled a political vacuum when the peace accord became polarized and trust in institutions was low. By leading peaceful mass demonstrations, organizing public forums, and building coalitions across universities and social movements, youth helped maintain pressure on elites to return to negotiations after the initial agreement was rejected. Colombian youth operated through a combination of institutional mechanisms (e.g., local participatory bodies, truth and memory initiatives) and informal channels such as street mobilization, social media campaigns, and university activism. This multi-channel engagement allowed them to shape both elite political debates and grassroots attitudes toward reconciliation. Also, Digital literacy among Colombian youth enabled them to translate technical negotiation language into accessible narratives, mobilize demonstrations rapidly, and counter misinformation about the peace agreement. Youth also benefitted from international support and encouragement – although outside of the formal peace negotiation process.

The key <u>structural elements</u> of student leaders' success include:

- Colombia's relatively strong democratic traditions, including constitutional reform in 1991 that expanded mechanisms for civic participation in government, including local development councils that involve youth.

- A history of student-led protest movements in the decades prior to the peace agreement referendums build muscle memory for and social acceptability of youth engagement in national political matters.

- Youth and broader civil society monitoring of the official peace process and engagement with community groups and media about the process.

- Digital media savvy for ease of organization and mass communication – enabled rapid mobilization of mass demonstrations to pressure political elites to get a deal done after the "no" referendum.

- PDETs (rural development plans) and transitional justice provisions in the peace agreement create formal roles for youth and civil society engagement in implementation.

<u>Application to Afghanistan</u>

The Colombia youth experience in the peace process has limited application to present day Afghanistan but offers a best-practice vision of how youth might be involved in future inclusive peace and governance negotiations if there is an opening following Taliban rule. Colombia is a fundamentally more developed, educated, and democratic country than Afghanistan – all factors that make it easier for youth

to assert themselves on the national political stage. Colombia also has subnational governance structures that enable youth to exert influence at local levels – a feature missing from Afghanistan's more tribal and hierarchical local governance structures.

Colombian youth demonstrated, however, that it is possible for youth to mass mobilize on an issue of unique and foundational importance to them. In the Colombia case, youth as a broad and diverse cohort did not want their future held back by a lingering conflict when peace was so near. One cannot easily imagine the Taliban would allow broad protests against one of their policies, such as the ban on girls education (even though it is a universally galvanizing issue among youth). But if, in the future, the Taliban are forced to cede power to an inclusive or democratic process youth would be well advised to study Colombia's youth organization techniques. That education and training can start now to be learned for a time when an opportunity may suddenly arise.

Syria: Failed youth and international engagement

The Syrian conflict was a complex civil war with multiple ethnic and political factions fighting against Bashar Al Assad's dictatorial rule. The Syria context aligns more closely with Afghanistan in that youth and civil society were organizing against an authoritarian regime with no democratic institutions. Syrian youth first organized to protest Assad's rule in 2011 following the wave of Arab Spring democracy protests. Youth cohorts were active in leading peaceful protests, forming Local Coordination Committees, and documenting Assad's abuses. Youth leveraged the technology of the time to send messages across local groups and to video and broadcast abuses that rallied additional support. Assad reacted with extreme violence, however, using the Syrian army to quell the democratic uprisings with force that included atrocity crimes and set off a complex, destructive civil war.

During the armed conflict phase, multiple factions emerged, including the Free Syrian Army, the al Nusra Front (an affiliate of al Qaeda), a Kurdish faction, and then ISIS. Amid this multi-vector civil war, youth and civil society's role receded. Youth-led and civil society networks shifted to focus more on humanitarian work, education, local service provision, and supporting internally displaced populations. Youth networks also became targets of repression by both the Assad regime and extremist armed groups.

Youth and civil society were largely excluded from the formal negotiating tracks that were established by the United Nations in Geneva and Astana to try to stop the internationalized civil war, which included Iranian and Russian support for the Assad regime and limited U.S. and Western support of some rebel factions. The United Nations sought to give youth an input role by establishing the Civil Society Support Room, which offered symbolic consultation but limited decision-making power. These mechanisms had limited influence over core political decisions, which remained dominated by state and armed-group actors. Overall, the peace process talks were unable to achieve a ceasefire.

In the end, the war between Israel and Gaza set off an unexpected series of military dominos that weakened Iran's support of the Assad regime at the same time Russia's support for Assad was limited by its own war in Ukraine. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a merger of several Islamist extremist groups, launched a lightning offensive against Assad's forces that took the capitol and forced Assad to flee in a matter of weeks – reminiscent of the Taliban's rapid takeover of Afghanistan in 2021. While al-Sharaa is youthful himself (he is 43 years old), his ability to take over the whole country by force obviated a role for civil society oriented youth actors that had started the conflict 15 years earlier with their pro-democracy protests. There is optimism, however, among youth that their paramount goal of deposing the Assad regime has been achieved and the new government is being populated by younger leaders,

including ones that were involved in the earlier protest movement or are seen as allies. It is too early to assess the outcome of the latest transition on youth interests but there is potential for greater inclusion.

Key structural elements

- Syria was a much more educated and prosperous state before the Arab Spring than Afghanistan and, which Assad ruled as a dictator, the security situation was stable.

- Youth movements had to develop locally to avoid regime censorship and prohibitions on opposition political movements.

- Youth were able to organize by capitalizing on cell phone communications and digital media.

- There were no democratic institutions or traditions to serve as a backbone. There was, however, a foundation of civic participation to address local needs. Universities were also a haven for youth organization.

- The key factor in the initial protests was the ability of organizers to link and leverage different local groups into a coherent national movement.

- Street mobilization that was sustained over time and in the fact of violent government opposition gave the movement attention and momentum

Once the civil war began, civic minded youth factions shifted focus to more immediate and practical survival needs. On questions of politics and governance, youth groups had to rely on international mechanisms that attempted to bring the parties to the table for peace talks. Youth participation in these forums was seen as largely ineffective. While efforts were made by the international community to create consultative mechanisms, youth interests had lower priority than the interests of armed factions whose consent to a ceasefire was being sought. Youth were more active on the battlefield than at the peace talks.

Application to Afghanistan

Afghanistan under Taliban rule is similar to Syria under Assad in that both are totalitarian, minority led governments that do not allow poetical opposition. Afghan youth have articulated greater freedom of organization at local levels, which is how the Arab Spring protests build a foundation. Syrian youth also had to contend with a restricted, state-run media environment. Afghan youth as well have described a censored media landscape and a fear of government surveillance, which will need to be overcome through encrypted digital communications. The most daunting similarity is the penchant for regime violence against civilians that the Taliban and Assad regime share. Initially successful Arab Spring protests were brutally repressed, with sparked and even more brutal civil war. Syria had been relatively peaceful for decades before the recent civil war, whereas Afghanistan has been characterized by war fatigue after 50 years of insurgencies and counter-insurgencies. It is therefore relevant to ask whether there is a different pain tolerance for youth protesters in Afghanistan to risk armed attacks to assert their national priorities or a new round of civil war.

Madagascar: Youth protests as a catalyst for regime change

Madagascar provides **a** very recent example of a successful youth-led political transformation in the face

of a regime that was failing to provide adequate services to the population and had high levels of corruption, cronyism, and income inequality. Madagascar has been a fragile democracy since its independence from France in 1960. In 2009, President Andry Rajoelina took power from his predecessor on the back of popular protests following a contested election. In September, 2025, youth protests against water and electricity shortages channeled a broader frustration over a lack of opportunity. Youth organized under a “Generation Z" banner and started small demonstrations that quickly grew into a national movement. Violent clashes with government police increased anger at the government and led to calls for Rajoelina to resign. In a surprise move, an elite unit of the national military, the Army Personnel Administration Center (CAPSAT), sided with the protesters against the police. With their backing, Parliament voted to impeach Rajoelina on October 14, and Rajoelina then fled the country. A new transitions government was formed with CAPSAT colonel Michaël Randrianirina as its head.

The Madagascar case follows similar patters of youth frustration finding an outlet in local protests that provided a spark to light broad based frustrations about poverty and income inequality. The Generation Z coalition was explicitly a generational movement that was angered by dimming future prospects under a corrupt government. But success relied on the youth movement being joined by political opposition parties that shared grievances agains the current government. Deft use of social media was also important in mobilizing protesters and helping them to spread from the Capital to provincial cities. At the end of the day, however, it was the military that provided the power needed to force Rajoelina from power — and the military elites rather than youth may be the biggest beneficiaries in the short term. It remains to be seen how much the transitional government acknowledges their debt to youth by prioritizing youth leaders or their interests.

<u>Key structural elements</u>

- Madagascar had democratic institutions that functioned poorly but allowed for relatively free media and freedom to organize and assemble.

- Poverty is widespread and few people have access to basic services, which created a common pool of grievances across a wide population.

- Madagascar has a high youth population with a median age of 20.

- Youth protests were part of a transition in 1972 and there was a pattern of contested elections and opposition boycots/military interventions that provided both precedent and muscle memory for organized political protest.

<u>Application to Afghanistan</u>

The Madagascar case is similar to Afghanistan in terms of youth demographics — both have large and growing youth population percentages. In a general sense, grievances are similar in terms of poverty, poor services, corruption, and lack of opportunity. Afghanistan experiences these problems on a much more acute scale, although Afghan expectations of services are lower. Madagascar youth have several advantages over Afghan youth in expressing their grievances. Madagascar is a fundamentally more free and democratic society with opposition groups and relative freedom of information.

Perhaps the most instructive element of the Madagascar transition is the way in which youth energy and grievances catalyzed a broader movement that was quickly joined by more traditional power centers including established political parties and ultimately the military. In Afghanistan the Taliban have

focused on building unity within the movement that reduced risks of regime defections while at the same time fully disempowering traditional sources of political opposition. The lesson from Afghan youth may still be that for a reform movement to succeed, you need to quickly build momentum by attracting non-youth political allies that will together lead to profound change (not unlike the Taliban's final push to take over the Afghan Republic as U.S. forces left).

POLICY IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the survey responses, focus groups, and comparative case analysis, it will take time, organization, and risk for youth to play more of a role in Afghanistan's future and contribute to improved rights and inclusion. Youth describe a severely repressive environment under Taliban rule, with heavy media censorship, severe restrictions on women's movement, and searches and arrests of people who are suspected of political opposition to the Taliban. Youth reported more ability to organize and engage at local levels as well as at universities (for men). Youth also reported relatively strong solidarity across gender and ethnic divisions on issues including equal education, health, job training and employment.

Therefore, a promising approach to youth engagement would be to focus on grass roots organizing at the community level around local issues that are relatively apolitical but build community resilience. Local groups can then build networks that link diverse communities around similar concerns or issues. It would be helpful for international actors — including international aid organizations and the Afghan global diaspora — to provide resources and training to facilitate community engagement and national networks.

For such organization to have impact at a national level, however, much greater leverage will need to be generated than presently exists. The Taliban have near total security control and are not politically accountable to the Afghan people through any democratic mechanisms. International pressure for more inclusive governance has been in place for four years with little effect. The Taliban do appear to care about the economy but also have high tolerance levels for extreme poverty. Therefore it is likely that combination of pressures from inside and outside Afghanistan will need to converge with unique moments of opportunity to effect a fundamental change in how much voice Afghan youth will have in national affairs. A goal should be to build capacity and organization to be ready which such a moment occurs.

The following recommendations would help to empower youth and build agency and organization over time, as well as link to international efforts got support greater Afghan rights and stability:

Youth support within Afghanistan:

Build capacity for youth organization and networking: Youth have high motivation to be active in Afghanistan's future but little experiences in strategic planning, organization, and strategic communications, including in a censorship environment. Discrete, online training to build skills and teach techniques for organizing in repressive environments could enhance effectiveness of youth leadership at local levels and enable peer-to-peer networks to form across regions and interest groups. Training programs can also link Afghan youth to youth leaders in other transitional or fragile environments to provide comparative lessons and peer mentorship.

Build and support existing youth advocacy networks: Local youth activism gains power for influencing national affairs if it can be linked with other groups across the country. There are both cost and security risk obstacles to effective national networking. Quiet international support, including money and

training, for secure communications, local convening, and digital media tools support can amplify the impact of otherwise disparate local efforts.

Incorporate youth engagement and empowerment into international assistance programs: Youth highlighted the need for economic and humanitarian assistance and expressed a desire to be part of making Afghanistan more economically healthy and prosperous. International assistance programs are currently limited to basic needs; but these activities can be used to build organization, consultation, and planning skills that will be useful for political organization when opportunities arise. Syria is one example where youth leaders shifted from political activism to humanitarian assistance during the war years, and now are shifting to governance after Assad's ouster.

Fund local leadership initiatives that include youth: Where there is space and opportunity for safe, local level youth leadership, small amounts of donor funding could go a long way. Special attention should be paid to funding youth organizations or involving youth in funded activities. Universities may be an area of special focus as they were mentioned as relatively forward leaning venues for youth issues and by definition involve youth.

E**ngage credible voices within the diaspora to youth activists within Afghanistan:** This could include youth and middle aged Afghans from diverse ethnic backgrounds and respected figures from different fields such as arts and culture, human rights, justice, and social activism. These individuals, who are trusted and popular among young people in Afghanistan, can help reconnect with youth inside the country and serve as mentors, role models, and agents of positive social change.

International engagement with Youth:

Convene Regular Youth Events and Conferences: Organize regular regional and international events—both online and in person—that bring together youth from Afghanistan, the diaspora, and other countries facing similar challenges. These forums should create safe spaces for dialogue among youth from different backgrounds to build trust, exchange ideas, and develop shared initiatives. Engagement can begin with less politically sensitive topics, such as economic opportunities, skills development, entrepreneurship, and livelihoods, before gradually expanding to more complex social and civic issues.

Establish a Global Youth Solidarity Network: Create a safe and inclusive international platform that connects youth from Afghanistan with young people from other countries facing conflict, repression, or systemic exclusion. This network should enable regular dialogue, peer support, and collective problem-solving and critical thinking across borders.

Facilitate Peer-to-Peer Learning and Exchange: Support structured exchanges where youth can share lessons learned and observed from lived experience, including coping strategies, community organizing, education under restriction, digital safety, and peaceful resistance. Learning from peers who have faced similar challenges can strengthen resilience and hope.

Support Safe Digital Spaces for Engagement: Invest in secure online platforms that allow youth to communicate safely from across the country. Digital safety, privacy, and accessibility should be core principles of all engagement efforts.

Encourage Joint Youth Initiatives and Campaigns: Enable Afghan youth from within Afghanistan and those in exile. to collaborate on shared initiatives, such as awareness campaigns, cultural projects,

research, or advocacy efforts. Joint action helps build a sense of belonging and amplifies youth voices internationally.

Provide Safe Channels for Youth Voice in International Policy Dialogues: Youth at the local level have limited or no direct access to international representatives and are fearful of communicating with internationals without trusted and secure communication links. Therefore it is important to establish trusted and security lines of communication with international actors, including UN Special Rapporteur Richard Bennett, and youth representatives. Regular check ins over time handled securely and protecting anonymity would build trust and enable a more accurate reflection of youth needs in international policy discussions

Include Afghan youth in international policy forums: The international community should consider youth (men and women, of different ethnicities) as an important constituency and seek to have their voices heard in international forums, including the UN Doha Process and UN General Assembly meetings. The Taliban should be asked to account for youth interests in during international dialogues and engagements to emphasize the importance of better governance for future generations.

Convene an international Youth Dialogue: Given the limited, local and atomized nature of youth activism in Afghanistan described by respondents, there would be significant value in convening a broader, more open dialogue among Afghan youth to articulate priorities and organize strategies to achieve them. Currently, youth lack the basic institutional architecture or the safety within Afghanistan to share concerns or collaborate with each other. A national dialogue would need to be structured outside the country in a way that links to Afghans within the country but addresses the security risks Afghan youth identified with free expression and organization. A broader, more public and inclusive dialogue would better legitimize and validate youth interests and provide an authoritative reference for the international community base its own advocacy and assistance around.

Maintain pressure and sanctions on the Taliban over women's education restrictions and extremism: Women called for sustained global advocacy, strong protection of women's rights, and continued international pressure on the Taliban. They warned that silence or disengagement from the international community would signal acceptance of women's erasure from public life. Women and men both emphasized that the Taliban are indoctrinating a new generation of radicalized youth that are riper for recruitment into international terrorist networks.

<u>Improving youth livelihoods:</u>

Redouble efforts to provide sound, modern education to secondary and college age students, including girls: Youth's number one grievance was about the lack of educational opportunity — especially for girls. They emphasized the need for more resrouces an international support for basic, vocational and higher education and noted that universities are spaces where (male) youth feel some degree of representation. It would therefore benefit youth across the board if international funding and diplomacy is directed toward:

- Mainaining international pressure on the Taliban to re-open schools for girls.
- Scaling up online learning, digital literacy, VPN provision.
- Expanding support for home-based learning, micro-schools, and safe learning hubs.
- Providing scholarships and visas for regional and international programs.

Expand Livelihood and Economic Support: Youth also despair at the lack of employment opportunities and crave means to acquire skills that will help them find meaningful work. It is therefore important to

- fund entrepreneurship programs, establish micro-grants for starting or expanding a business, and providing more skill-building activities.
- Increase remote work options within Afghanistan and global digital employment, particularly for women.

Support broadcast and online access to independent media sources in Afghanistan, including international news, INGO information, and foreign broadcast Afghan channels. Youth repeatedly noted the censorship of domestic news channels and highlighted the struggle to get objective news about what is really happening in the country. News sources outside Afghanistan were seen as more trustworthy, but require technology to access. To ensure youth (and all Afghans) have access to reliable information on which to assess priorities and interests, it is important to:

- Expand understanding of and access to secure communication tools including VPN access and digital safety training.
- Support Afghan media in exile that can broadcast or stream to Afghan audiences.

Strengthen Youth Mental Health and Psychosocial Support: Youth all expressed despair for the future if current Taliban policies continue, and women are desperate for relief from educational and social restrictions. Respondents in all regions describe widespread depression, hopelessness, and trauma. Hit is therefore important for youth to have access to:

- Confidential counseling services.
- Peer support and youth resilience programs.

Conclusion

Across all seven survey questions and follow-up focus groups, Afghan youth describe a landscape defined by rapidly eroding rights, deepening fear, and the collapse of justice and opportunity under Taliban rule. Both male and female participants expressed profound hopelessness about the future and a strong desire to leave Afghanistan in search of better opportunities. Their experiences differ—women face gender-specific restrictions on education, mobility, and employment, while men confront systemic collapse, economic stagnation, and diminishing civic space. Both groups see online education as one of the few remaining avenues for learning and view migration as the most realistic path to a stable future.

Despite these negative conditions, youth also express a persistent commitment to education, social cohesion, and national renewal. Women face uniquely severe restrictions, while all youth report censorship, lack of representation, unemployment, and exclusion from decision-making, generating widespread despair and migration pressure. Education remains the most unifying source of hope and the primary tool through which youth imagine reclaiming their futures. Traditional power structures reinforced by Taliban control have sidelined youth voices. Yet, across gender, ethnicity, and region, young Afghans consistently articulate a desire for unity, mutual respect, and constructive roles in rebuilding their communities, reflecting both the fragility of their current reality and the resilience of their long-term aspirations. This is a generation that wants to lead but does not have the opportunity.

Annex A: Demographic Profiles of Respondents

In-Country Female Respondents' Profile

ID	Age	Province	Ethnicity	Education	Employment Status
F-AF.1	27	Nangarhar	Pashtun	Law student	Teacher
F-AF.2	30	Kandahar	Pashtun	Political Science	Unemployed
F-AF.3	25	Paktia	Pashtun	Nurse	Nurse
F-AF.4	23	Helmand	Pashtun	15th year	Nurse
F-AF.5	20	Kandahar	Pashtun	College-Midwife	Employed
F-AF.6	30	Takhar	Tajik	Teacher	Employed
F-AF.7	28	Herat	Tajik	Law	AWCCI
F-AF.8	26	Kabul	Tajik	Law	NGO
F-AF.9	25	Panjshir	Tajik	Law & PS	Unemployed
F-AF.10	24	Kabul	Tajik	Law & Political Science	Unemployed
F-AF.11	23	Kapisa	Tajik	Sharia	Unemployed
F-AF.12	23	Takhar	Tajik	Law	Unemployed
F-AF.13	28	Parwan	Tajik	English Literature	Unemployed
F-AF.14	22	Badakhshan	Tajik	Law & PS	Unemployed
F-AF.15	25	Bamyan	Hazara	Law & PS	Unemployed
F-AF.16	24	Daikundi	Hazara	Psychology	Counselor
F-AF.17	27	Bamyan	Hazara	Engineering	Unemployed
F-AF.18	26	Jawzjan	Uzbek	Journalism	Unemployed
F-AF.19	23	Faryab	Uzbek	Sharia	Unemployed
F-AF.20	23	Faryab	Uzbek	Sharia	Unemployed
F-AF.21	27	Parwan	Uzbek	Sharia	Unemployed

In-Country Male Respondents' Profile

ID	Age	Province	Ethnicity	Education	Employment Status
M-AF.1	28	Kandahar	Pashtun	Public Admin	Employed
M-AF.2	27	Kabul	Pashtun	IT, Sales and Marketing	Employed
M-AF.3	26	Helmand	Pashtun	Political Science	Unemployed
M-AF.4	29	Kandahar	Pashtun	Environmental Engineering	Employed
M-AF.5	19	Nangarhar	Pashtun	High School	Unemployed
M-AF.6	22	Nangarhar	Pashtun	Computer Science	Unemployed
M-AF.7	22	Nangarhar	Pashtun	Economy	Unemployed
M-AF.8	28	Paktia	Pashtun	English literature	Employed
M-AF.9	24	Kandahar	Pashtun	Business Management	Employed
M-AF.10	28	Kandahar	Pashtun	Humanitarian Aid	Employed

M-AF.11	21	Nangarhar	Pashtun	Computer Science	Unemployed
M-AF.12	24	Nangarhar	Pashtun	Economy	Unemployed
M-AF.13	20	Nangarhar	Pashtun	High School	Employed
M-AF.14	20	Nangarhar	Pashtun	Computer Science	Unemployed
M-AF.15	19	Nangarhar	Pashtun	High School	Unemployed
M-AF.16	24	Balkh	Tajik	Law and PS	Employed
M-AF.17	19	Herat	Tajik	High school	Unemployed
M-AF.18	28	Kabul	Tajik	Medicine	Employed
M-AF.19	27	Takhar	Tajik	Medical doctor	Employed
M-AF.20	22	Panjshir	Tajik	Computer Science	Unemployed
M-AF.21	29	Bamyan	Hazara	English Literature	Employed
M-AF.22	24	Bamyan	Hazara	English Literature	Employed
M-AF.23	21	Bamyan	Hazara	Student-Economy	Unemployed

In-Country FGD Participants' Profile

Unique ID	Age	Province	Ethnicity	Education	Employment Status
F-FGD-1	26	Kabul	Tajik	4th yr Law Student in 2021	Unemployed
F-FGD-2	30	Takhar	Tajik	Online Study	Home-based income generation

F-FGD-3	29	Faryab	Uzbek	Journalism	Home-based tailoring
F-FGD-4	30	Faryab	Uzbek	Former Law	Home-based tailoring
F-FGD-5	22	Daikundi	Hazara	Former Law	Home-based tailoring
F-FGD-6	28	Nangarhar	Pashtun	Economy	Home-based income generation
M-FGD-1	28	Faryab	Uzbek	-	
M-FGD-2	26	Takhar	Tajik	University	
M-FGD-6	27	Kabul	Tajik	University	
M-FGD-3	22	Daikundi	Hazara	University	
M-FGD-4	25	Bamyan	Hazara	-	
M-FGD-5	24	Bamyan	Hazara	University	
M-FGD-6		Helmand	Pashtun	-	
M-FGD-7	23	Nangarhar	Pashtun	University Student	

Afghan Diaspora Profile

ID	Age	Country of Residence	Ethnicity	Education	Employment Status
F1-USA	28	US	Tajik	Law	Employed
F2-GMNY	26	US	Hazara	Dentistry	Employed
F3-IND	27	India	Tajik	Arts	Unemployed
F4-GMNY	18	Germany	Pashtun	High School	Unemployed
F5-GMNY	21	Germany	Tajik	College Student	Unemployed
F6-PRTIRCO	21	-	Tajik	Arts	-

F8-GMNY	23	Germany	Pashtun	College Student	Unemployed
F9-GMNY	26	Germany	Pashtun	College Student-Social Work	Unemployed
F9-CNDA	30	Canada	Tajik	Former Islamic law	Unemployed
F10-TKY	29	Turkey	Tajik	Former Law/ PSC	Employed
M3-UK	30	-	Pashtun	Economy	Employed
M2-TJKSTN	27	-	-	Business Administration	
M1-IND	29	-	-	Business Administration	

Annex B: Survey Questions

A. Survey Questions (round one):

1. How do you perceive respect for justice and human rights?
2. What sources of information do you use to understand how youth interests are being met? Which sources do you trust most?
3. Which interest groups, organizations, or individuals are currently effective in advocating for your interests?
4. What are your top three priorities for a future Afghanistan in the areas of governance, the economy, security, and social cohesion?
5. What role can youth play in addressing the top three priorities?
6. Who currently most represents your vision of the future, locally and nationally?
7. In 100 words or fewer, describe your vision for your ideal role in society and within your family over the next five years?

B. Survey Questions (round two)

1. Are there examples of when women and men should have different rights, or different access to services? What about issues like modesty and access to public spaces? Access to certain jobs? or differences in education?
2. How does the Taliban's vision of human rights and justice compare to the Republic?
3. What is practical for Afghanistan in 5 years, versus the ideal?
4. What is the relationship between human rights/justice and conflict? Does the Taliban's justification of suppressing rights to first establish peace, security, and non-corruption hold water?
5. Do you perceive differences in rights between youth and middle aged or elder groups? Do Afghans gain more rights as they get older?

C. Diaspora Youth Questions

1. How do you stay informed about what is happening in Afghanistan? (e.g., news outlets, social media, friends and family, community networks, online forums)
2. How do you maintain communication and connection with youth and peers inside Afghanistan? (What platforms or methods do you use, and how often do you connect?)
3. What issues in Afghanistan concern you the most right now, and why? (Human rights, education, security, women's rights, economic instability, etc.)
4. From your perspective, what are the biggest challenges facing Afghan youth today, both inside and outside the country?
5. How has being outside Afghanistan shaped your understanding of the situation back home? (Has it changed your views, increased your worries, or broadened your perspective?)

6. What kind of support do you believe youth inside Afghanistan need most at this time? (Educational opportunities, psychological support, safety, platforms for expression, etc.)
7. What do you feel the international community should prioritize when addressing Afghanistan's current challenges?
8. In your daily life outside Afghanistan, what reminds you of or connects you to the situation back home?
9. What are your hopes for the future of Afghanistan, especially for young people and women?
10. How would you like to contribute, now or in the future, to positive change in Afghanistan? (Through advocacy, education, community efforts, professional skills, storytelling, etc.)

D. Focused Group Discussions' Questions

Section 1: Understanding Youth Priorities and Challenges

1. From your perspective, what are the biggest challenges facing Afghan youth today?
2. What issues do you think particularly affect young people that advocates outside the country should be addressing?
3. Do you agree with the advocacy efforts by Afghans outside the country? What would you change if you were asked to advise them?

Section 2: Access to Information and Communication

3. How do you usually get information about what is happening in Afghanistan?
4. Do you feel safe using communication tools such as WhatsApp, Signal, or social media platforms (Twitter/X, Facebook, Instagram)? Why or why not?

Section 3: Education, Employment, and Gendered Barriers

5. Is limited access to education and employment something that affects only women, or do you see it impacting others in your community as well? How?
6. How has the requirement to be accompanied by a mahram affected your daily life?
    - Can you share examples—for instance, times when you or a family member needed urgent healthcare or services but could not access them because a mahram was not available?

Section 4: Community Roles and Responsibilities

7. What do you think community leaders and elders should be doing—especially regarding access to education for youth—that they are not doing now?

Section 5: International Community Priorities

8. What do you believe the international community should prioritize when responding to Afghanistan's current challenges?