

## ***Challenges and choices: Afghan women's media use and preferences amidst restrictions***

BBC Media Action conducted research to understand Afghans' access to and usage of different media platforms and content, their trust in media, how disinformation is shared and ways to counter these. This shows how women are relying on media and have found creative ways to continue working in media in the face of restrictions imposed by the Taliban.

### **Context**

The media landscape in Afghanistan has changed a lot over the last few years, in line with the country's social, political, and technological changes. The increases in freedom of expression and the emergence of a vibrant free press were among the biggest achievements of the 2001-2021 period. The fall of Kabul to the Taliban on 15 August 2021, however, radically changed this. Since taking power, the de facto Taliban authorities have restricted media freedom and imposed harsh restrictions on female reporters and on media content and banned music and other content deemed by them as being un-Islamic.

### **The project**

This research was part of the Afghanistan Support Project (ASP) funded by Counterpart and USAID to support civil society organizations (CSOs), civic activists, human rights defenders,

and journalists in their efforts to protect and advance basic rights and freedoms that underpin the existence of civic space and a credible media. BBC Media Action delivers holistic media training and mentoring to community media outlets, including journalists, to help them continue their operations in the new context and produce content that addresses information needs of their audiences.

### **Research methodology**

A survey with 2,620 quantitative interviews was conducted with women and men across 34 provinces between August and September 2023 with Afghan adults (15 years and above). In addition, we conducted 15 focus group discussions, including two with Kuchis and one with internally displaced people (IDPs) in a camp in Herat provinces. Key informant interviews were also conducted with 5 media experts and 20 Afghan media content makers and broadcasters inside and outside the country.

*"We used to have reports produced by female presenters and journalists. After August 2021, the Taliban warned us not to have female voices in any of our programmes. The only thing I can do is to work from home. I prepare the reports and to not create trouble, my husband or one of our male colleagues now reads the report and we produce programs."*

Female media owner working in Afghanistan

## Key findings

### Media access and usage

- While most adult Afghans have access to some form of media platform, only around one in three have access to internet, with less than half of mobile users owning a smartphone.
- Men exhibit higher usage of radio and internet compared to women (52% male vs 43% female for radio and 36% vs 29% for internet). Use of TV, however, is nearly identical among men and women.
- Men predominantly use media in the evenings between 7 to 10 pm, while women use media during the day, with an increase in women's TV usage during daylight hours compared to findings from our previous survey (March 2021).
- With increased limitations on women's movement, work and education; media and the internet have become essential lifelines for women, serving as their main source of news and information.

*"I cannot spend my day without using my mobile phone as I use the internet and get information ... I also watch TV for news and important information."*

Woman, 19yrs, Badakhshan province

### Women continue working in media

- Despite restrictions, media outlets continue to employ women, who are finding creative ways to work, including behind the scenes as producers or editors.

### Media content currently accessed

- News is the most popular type of programme available on TV and radio.
- Echoing limitations by the Taliban on entertainment content, most respondents, particularly women, expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of entertainment content. Respondents said

there were not any/ enough movies (55%) or music (55%) or fashion programming (52%) available on Afghanistan media. As a result, female audiences find content on domestic media less relevant.

### Key implications

- It is important to support media outlets to produce programmes that meet the information needs of audiences.
- Media run by Afghan diaspora play an important role as a source of uncensored information and entertainment. Many audiences consider them as a trusted source as they operate outside Afghanistan and are not under the influence of the Taliban. However they are also noted, mainly by media owners inside the country, as a source of mis- disinformation. They should be supported to continue programming and to invest in accessible channels for in-country audiences.
- Women have been particularly hard hit by the changes to what is allowed in the media, both as contributors and as audiences. Continuing to support women's media that still produces content will greatly contribute to women's ability to access necessary information.
- Programming broadly labelled education is still allowed and being produced. This approach will be vital to provide women and girls with information they can use in their increasingly difficult daily lives.
- It is possible that the current difficult situation will deteriorate further. Decrees on women's rights are produced frequently and usually with no notice, media support programmes should pay special attention to the needs and context of women.

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