

Preventive Responses to Secondary Victimization Arising from Violence Against Women in Afghanistan

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Violence against women in Afghanistan is not limited to the primary harm caused by the original act of violence; it may be intensified by the subsequent responses of legal institutions, implementing authorities, and the surrounding social environment. This study examines secondary victimization arising from violence against women in Afghanistan and identifies preventive legal, institutional, and social responses capable of reducing such harm. Using a descriptive-analytical approach based on documentary and library research, the study analyzes the relationship between the legal framework for protecting women and the practical functioning of institutions responsible for receiving complaints, investigating cases, prosecuting offenders, adjudicating disputes, and providing support services. The analysis distinguishes between the constitutional-republican period from 2004 to 2021, during which a formal protective framework existed but suffered from weak and inconsistent enforcement, and the post-2021 period, in which access to protective institutions and formal channels of recourse became significantly more restricted. The findings indicate that secondary victimization may arise through dismissive institutional treatment, delays, ineffective complaint processing, discriminatory credibility assessments, inadequate confidentiality, social stigma, geographic barriers, and institutional incapacity. These mechanisms can discourage victims from pursuing complaints, weaken trust in justice institutions, intensify social isolation, and reproduce the powerlessness created by the original violence. The study argues that preventive responses must differ according to the operative mechanism. Where institutions exist but function inadequately, prevention requires clearer legal standards, stronger institutional capacity, survivor-centered procedures, accountability, confidentiality, professional training, and coordinated legal and support services. Where protective mechanisms are absent or severely restricted, priority must be given to restoring accessible formal channels of protection and, where necessary, developing safe alternative mechanisms of legal aid, documentation, psychosocial support, and international protection. Effective prevention ultimately requires integration of law, institutional performance, social support, and respect for women's autonomy.

Keywords: *Afghanistan; secondary victimization; violence against women; preventive responses; access to justice; legal protection; institutional response*

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1. Introduction

Violence against women in Afghanistan is situated within a complex interaction of armed conflict, economic deprivation, patriarchal social structures, political instability, and institutional fragility. Its persistence cannot therefore be understood solely as a series of isolated acts committed by individual perpetrators. Available research indicates that Afghan women have been exposed to multiple forms of physical, sexual, psychological, economic, and social violence in both private and public spheres, while prolonged insecurity has continuously reproduced the circumstances in which such violence occurs (Alemi et al., 2022). Population-based evidence concerning intimate partner violence similarly demonstrates that violence within marriage has affected a substantial proportion of Afghan women and is associated with a range of individual, household, and social factors (Chauhan & Jungari, 2022). Conflict has intensified these vulnerabilities by destabilizing family structures, weakening access to public institutions, and increasing women's dependence on social environments in which their autonomy is often restricted (Ashraf & Kennedy-Pipe, 2022). Periods of acute crisis have further aggravated existing gender inequalities; the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, interacted with insecurity and social isolation in ways that intensified risks of gender-based violence in Afghanistan (Umarach et al., 2022). Violence against women must accordingly be approached not only as an interpersonal phenomenon but also as a legal and institutional problem whose consequences depend substantially on the manner in which public authorities, judicial institutions, families, communities, and support systems respond after the initial act of violence has occurred.

The distinction between primary and secondary victimization is particularly important in this context. Primary victimization refers to the direct harm suffered as a result of the original violent conduct. Physical assault, sexual violence, psychological abuse, forced marriage, coercive control, deprivation, and other forms of gender-based violence can independently produce severe physical, reproductive, emotional, and social consequences. Research concerning violence and pregnancy in Afghanistan, for instance, demonstrates the serious health consequences that may follow physical

and sexual violence against women (Rahman et al., 2021). Secondary victimization, however, refers to a different layer of harm. It arises when the victim, after the initial violence, encounters responses from formal institutions or the surrounding social environment that aggravate her suffering, undermine her credibility, deprive her of meaningful remedies, expose her to blame or stigma, or otherwise create an additional injury attributable to the process of seeking assistance or justice. The theory of victimization is useful for understanding this distinction because it directs attention beyond the immediate perpetrator toward the wider structures that influence the victim's vulnerability and opportunities for redress (Tariq et al., 2021). Studies conducted in other contexts have shown that insensitive, dismissive, or adversarial encounters with legal, medical, and mental-health institutions can intensify the psychological burden already experienced by survivors of sexual violence (Campbell, 2008). Earlier research likewise demonstrated that services intended to assist victims can either promote recovery or become an additional source of trauma depending on the manner in which survivors are treated (Campbell et al., 1999). The concept of secondary victimization is therefore especially relevant to Afghanistan, where the path from experiencing violence to obtaining protection has frequently passed through institutions constrained by weak capacity, competing normative systems, geographical inequality, insecurity, and social resistance. The problem becomes more pronounced when legal recognition of women's rights is compared with the practical conditions of their enforcement. Afghanistan developed, particularly during the constitutional-republican period, a formal legal framework in which constitutional guarantees, legislation concerning violence against women, and international commitments appeared to provide a foundation for protection. Yet the existence of legal rules did not automatically translate into meaningful access to justice. Legislative and institutional reforms designed to address violence against women were repeatedly limited by weaknesses in implementation, political commitment, institutional resources, and enforcement mechanisms (Zada, 2020). The Afghan experience therefore demonstrates the importance of distinguishing normative recognition from effective protection. A woman may possess a formally recognized right to complain, obtain protection,

or seek prosecution of an offender while simultaneously encountering police reluctance, prosecutorial delay, judicial inconsistency, geographical barriers, family pressure, or social condemnation. Research on help-seeking among Afghan women shows that stigma can be deeply embedded in women's everyday experiences and can shape decisions concerning whether and how to seek assistance after violence (Mukerji et al., 2023). Qualitative evidence concerning the lived experiences of Afghan women similarly indicates that domestic violence and armed conflict become intertwined with family expectations and broader social constraints, producing circumstances in which leaving violence or openly challenging it may itself create new risks (Mannell et al., 2021). Under such conditions, the justice-seeking process is not merely a neutral mechanism for correcting the initial wrong. It may become a separate site at which the woman is exposed to disbelief, neglect, delay, humiliation, exclusion, or renewed insecurity.

This institutional dimension is important because secondary victimization does not encompass every undesirable consequence that follows violence. The continuation of the initial abuse because an offender remains dangerous is not, by itself, secondary victimization. Nor should every weakness in public administration automatically be described as a second victimization. For the purposes of this study, secondary victimization requires an identifiable institutional or social response, including a meaningful omission where an institution is available but fails to act, together with an additional and non-trivial harm connected to that response. A police officer's refusal to register a complaint, a prosecutor's unjustified failure to pursue a case, an official's reproach of the complainant, a community's stigmatization of a woman for reporting violence, or a judicial practice that treats her testimony as inherently less credible may all create forms of added harm distinct from the original violence. The concept of testimonial injustice further illuminates one dimension of this problem. Fricker explains testimonial injustice as a credibility deficit imposed on a speaker because of prejudicial perceptions associated with the speaker's social identity (Fricker, 2007). A more deliberate form of this phenomenon may occur when a hearer knowingly discounts testimony despite having reasons to recognize its credibility (Hänel, 2025). In cases of violence against women, such processes are relevant because a victim's

account may be received through cultural assumptions concerning gender, family honour, sexuality, marital obedience, or appropriate female conduct. Nevertheless, documentary evidence cannot establish how frequently such credibility judgments occurred in individual Afghan cases. The present analysis therefore uses testimonial injustice as a conceptual lens while concentrating primarily on institutional arrangements and documented patterns that can be examined through legal and documentary materials.

Research concerning Afghanistan has extensively documented violence, discrimination, health consequences, social restrictions, and barriers to help-seeking, but the particular relationship between the law-implementation gap and secondary victimization remains less fully developed. Studies of Afghan women's experiences provide important evidence concerning psychosocial needs and barriers to assistance (Kaul et al., 2024), while studies of stigma explain how social attitudes may affect women's decisions to disclose violence and approach services (Mukerji et al., 2023). Legal research has examined deficiencies in the protection of women's rights in contexts of armed conflict (Bagherinezhad, 2024), and analyses of institutional reforms have demonstrated that protective legislation can remain ineffective where the necessary political and administrative support is absent (Zada, 2020). Other scholarship has considered gender-based violence as a problem associated with state denial and weak institutional responses (Basu, 2023). These contributions establish essential components of the problem, yet treating secondary victimization as a separate analytical category permits a more precise question to be asked: how can a system ostensibly designed to respond to the original violence itself become a source of additional harm, and how can that additional harm be prevented?

The objective of this study is therefore to analyze the principal legal, institutional, and social mechanisms through which responses to violence against women in Afghanistan may generate secondary victimization and to formulate preventive responses appropriate to those mechanisms. The analysis makes a fundamental distinction between two periods. During the constitutional-republican period from 2004 to 2021, a formal protective framework existed, but its operation was characterized by weak, uneven, and inconsistent

enforcement. Secondary victimization in that period can therefore be analyzed primarily as a consequence of the failure of institutions that formally existed and possessed responsibilities toward victimized women. The post-2021 period presents a different analytical problem. Restrictions on women's public participation, diminished access to established protective mechanisms, and the weakening of institutional channels have altered the conditions under which a victimized woman can seek assistance (Dutta, 2023). Analyses of women's circumstances under Taliban rule describe broader cultural and institutional restrictions that have affected women's presence in public life and their access to opportunities and protection (Innayah & Yulianti, 2025). Health-related commentary likewise indicates that the post-2021 environment has created serious concerns regarding Afghan women's access to essential services (Saboor et al., 2022). The difference is consequently not one of degree alone. Weak enforcement of an existing institution and the absence or severe restriction of an institution represent different mechanisms and require different preventive strategies.

Methodologically, the study adopts a descriptive-analytical and documentary approach. It examines the interaction between legal norms, institutional structures, documented patterns of enforcement, cultural obstacles, and women's experiences of help-seeking. The purpose is not to calculate the prevalence of secondary victimization or to establish a direct causal relationship between each institutional deficiency and every identified form of additional harm. Such claims would require field research involving victimized women, practitioners, police officers, prosecutors, judges, and service providers. Instead, the article identifies plausible pathways through which institutional and social responses can create additional harm and differentiates between relationships that are strongly supported by the literature and those that are inferential. This distinction is particularly important when discussing psychological consequences. Research outside Afghanistan demonstrates that harmful institutional encounters may worsen trauma (Campbell, 2008), whereas studies concerning Afghan women demonstrate substantial psychological vulnerability and complex processes of survival and post-traumatic adaptation (Taheri et al., 2025). The present study does not assume that the latter consequences were caused

specifically by secondary victimization. Rather, it asks whether the conditions documented in Afghanistan are capable of generating an additional form of harm beyond the original violence and how the justice and protection system might be designed to prevent that outcome. In this sense, prevention of secondary victimization is understood as requiring more than stronger punishment of primary offenders. It requires a legal and institutional environment in which the process of seeking protection does not itself reproduce vulnerability.

2. Conceptual and Legal Foundations of Secondary Victimization

Secondary victimization occupies a particular place within victimological analysis because it directs attention from the event that originally produced victim status toward the reactions that follow that event. In violence against women, the primary harm may consist of physical injury, sexual coercion, psychological domination, threats, forced marriage, economic deprivation, or other conduct attributable to the original perpetrator. Secondary victimization begins at a different point: it emerges when the response to that initial harm imposes an additional burden on the woman. The distinction matters because the source, mechanism, and preventive response are different. Primary prevention seeks to prevent violence from occurring, while prevention of secondary victimization seeks to ensure that institutions, procedures, officials, families, and communities do not aggravate the victim's suffering after violence has already occurred. Victimization theory emphasizes that vulnerability is shaped by the relationship between individuals and their wider social environment rather than being exhausted by the immediate conduct of an offender (Tariq et al., 2021). This perspective is especially important in Afghanistan, where formal justice, informal dispute resolution, kinship structures, religious and customary norms, geographic isolation, and political insecurity may simultaneously affect a woman's ability to respond to violence. Consequently, the woman who reports abuse does not simply enter a technical legal process. She enters a social and institutional environment capable of affirming her status as a rights-holder or, alternatively, reinforcing the power imbalance that enabled the violence in the first place.

A strict conceptual approach is required so that secondary victimization does not become an overly broad label for every hardship suffered by a victim. The additional harm must be analytically distinguishable from the original victimization. If a woman suffers injuries because her husband assaults her, those injuries belong to primary victimization. If she subsequently seeks police assistance and is blamed for provoking the assault, discouraged from making a complaint, or sent back to the abusive environment without meaningful assessment of her safety, the humiliation, discouragement, insecurity, or loss of confidence produced by that encounter may constitute secondary victimization. Similarly, if a formal complaint is accepted but remains indefinitely unprocessed because institutions lack capacity or because officials do not regard violence against women as sufficiently important, the resulting institutional abandonment may add a distinct dimension of harm. Evidence from research on sexual assault survivors demonstrates that interactions with criminal justice, medical, and mental-health institutions can significantly affect psychological well-being after the original violence (Campbell, 2008). Community services may therefore have a dual potential: they can facilitate recovery when they are respectful and supportive, but they may intensify trauma when victims experience disbelief, blame, intrusive treatment, or institutional insensitivity (Campbell et al., 1999). These findings do not prove that identical effects occur in every Afghan case, but they establish a theoretically and empirically grounded basis for examining institutional response as an independent source of harm.

The concept also requires attention to omission. Secondary victimization is often associated with an affirmative act, such as insulting a complainant or subjecting her to unnecessary repeated questioning, but institutional inaction may perform a similar function when an institution has undertaken responsibility for protection. A woman who reaches a police station, prosecution office, court, or support service and finds that her complaint is ignored or indefinitely delayed has encountered an institutional response even though the response takes the form of non-action. The distinction between such omission and complete institutional absence is important. During the 2004–2021 period, formal institutions and procedures existed, although access and performance varied considerably. Legal and

institutional reform in that period created specialized structures intended to combat violence against women, yet implementation remained inconsistent and politically vulnerable (Zada, 2020). A failure by an existing institution could therefore be evaluated against its recognized protective function. By contrast, where an effective complaint channel is absent altogether, the immediate problem is structural exclusion from justice. Structural exclusion may facilitate or intensify secondary victimization, but analytically it should not be treated as identical to an institution's mishandling of a complaint. This distinction prevents conceptual inflation and makes it possible to design responses that address the actual mechanism of harm.

The legal foundation of protection against secondary victimization rests on the proposition that recognizing rights in legislation is insufficient if procedures for exercising those rights expose the rights-holder to renewed harm. The protective function of law therefore contains both substantive and procedural dimensions. Substantive law must identify prohibited violence, recognize the rights of victims, provide remedies, and establish responsibility. Procedural law and institutional practice must then enable the victim to invoke those rights safely, confidentially, predictably, and without discrimination. Afghanistan's reforms relating to violence against women represented significant attempts to move from general principles toward specific legal protection, but their effectiveness depended upon institutional implementation (Zada, 2020). The difficulty was not simply that certain violent practices remained socially tolerated. It was also that statutory protection interacted with competing normative frameworks and with institutions whose ability to implement protective norms was uneven (Basu, 2023). This distinction between formal entitlement and practical enforceability is central to the concept of secondary victimization. A legal system may publicly condemn violence while creating a justice-seeking process so uncertain or socially dangerous that victims reasonably perceive reporting as an additional risk.

Afghanistan's plural normative environment makes this problem particularly significant. Statutory law has existed alongside Islamic jurisprudential principles, customary practices, local dispute-resolution structures, and entrenched family norms. Such pluralism does not

inevitably result in harm, but it can create uncertainty where the relationship among sources is unclear or where officials apply them inconsistently. The constitutional role of Islamic jurisprudence, particularly Article 130 of the 2004 Constitution, has generated legal debate concerning the conditions under which Hanafi jurisprudence could be used when statutory law did not provide a rule for the case. Detailed legal analysis of Article 130 demonstrates the importance of the principle of legality and the need for a unified interpretation that prevents jurisprudential gap-filling from becoming a basis for criminal liability where no statutory offence exists (Hashimi, 2017). This issue is directly relevant to women because uncertainty regarding the boundary between statutory rules and non-statutory normative sources can affect the predictability of their treatment by the legal system. When women cannot reasonably anticipate whether a complaint will be evaluated according to protective legislation, restrictive interpretations, or customary expectations, law loses part of its capacity to function as a secure route out of violence.

The social environment surrounding law is equally significant. Violence against women in conflict-affected societies may be sustained not only by individual aggression but also by cultural mechanisms that assign women subordinate roles within family and community structures (Mahendru, 2021). Under such conditions, reporting violence may be interpreted as challenging familial authority rather than exercising a legal right. Research concerning domestic violence stigma in Afghanistan indicates that stigma enters women's lives through social relationships and influences their help-seeking choices (Mukerji et al., 2023). Women may fear reputational damage, rejection, family retaliation, economic abandonment, or social isolation if violence becomes publicly known. The significance of stigma for secondary victimization lies in the fact that the woman can become the object of negative judgment precisely because she has disclosed the original victimization. The initial violence is thereby followed by a social reaction directed at the victim rather than the perpetrator. Qualitative research on Afghan women's experiences illustrates how conflict, domestic abuse, and restrictive social expectations intersect in ways that constrain women's practical choices (Mannell et al., 2021). Where institutional actors share similar attitudes, social stigma

can migrate into the formal justice system and affect how complaints are received, investigated, or evaluated.

This interaction between prejudice and institutional decision-making can also be understood through testimonial injustice. The credibility of a complainant is fundamental to nearly every justice process concerning interpersonal violence because such offences often occur in private settings where independent witnesses are unavailable. Fricker's concept of testimonial injustice explains how identity-based prejudice can cause a hearer to assign a speaker less credibility than her testimony warrants (Fricker, 2007). Applied cautiously to violence against women, the concept suggests that an official may discount a woman's description of abuse not because the available evidence justifies disbelief but because assumptions concerning female behaviour, family obligations, sexuality, or honour influence the credibility judgment. Hänel's formulation of willful testimonial injustice further highlights circumstances in which a hearer may consciously participate in an unjust credibility practice rather than merely reproducing an unconscious stereotype (Hänel, 2025). In Afghanistan, documentary evidence does not permit reliable measurement of the frequency of these mental processes, and they should therefore not be presented as empirically established features of every judicial encounter. Nonetheless, the framework clarifies why legal reform alone may be insufficient. Even where the substantive rule formally protects women, the individual official who interprets a statement, registers a complaint, decides whether to prosecute, or evaluates testimony may reproduce prejudicial hierarchies through discretionary judgment.

The concept of access to justice must consequently be understood in substantive rather than merely formal terms. Physical availability of a courthouse or police station does not establish genuine access if reaching the institution requires unaffordable travel, exposes the complainant to community scrutiny, or results in treatment that discourages further pursuit. Research conducted with female survivors of domestic violence in several Afghan provinces identifies significant psychosocial needs and practical difficulties in accessing support (Kaul et al., 2024). Geographical inequalities are especially relevant because specialized services historically tended to be more accessible in urban settings, whereas women in rural areas faced greater

practical obstacles. Help-seeking is further constrained when the social consequences of disclosure are severe (Mukerji et al., 2023). Effective legal protection must therefore be measured not simply by whether rules and institutions exist but by whether a woman can use them without being subjected to disproportionate additional danger or harm.

The post-2021 situation illustrates why the conceptual distinction between institutional failure and institutional absence is necessary. The contraction of women's participation in education, employment, and public life has altered the environment in which protection against violence can operate (Dutta, 2023). Research on cultural violence under Taliban rule describes restrictions that reach beyond individual acts of interpersonal violence and affect women's broader social position (Innayah & Yulianti, 2025). Concerns regarding the deterioration of women's access to health and support services further demonstrate that structural restrictions can influence the practical resources available to women who experience violence (Saboor et al., 2022). These developments mean that a preventive model designed exclusively to improve the conduct of police officers, prosecutors, and judges is inadequate where the underlying channel through which a victim would reach those actors has itself become severely restricted. Prevention must therefore operate at two levels: reducing harmful responses within functioning institutions and creating or restoring safe channels where institutional protection is absent or inaccessible. This two-level approach supplies the conceptual foundation for analyzing Afghanistan's legal and institutional deficiencies and for differentiating the preventive responses appropriate to the two periods examined in this study.

3. Legal and Institutional Sources of Secondary Victimization in Afghanistan

The legal structure developed during Afghanistan's constitutional-republican period contained important formal commitments to equality and the protection of women, yet its effectiveness was limited by the relationship between constitutional principles, ordinary legislation, institutional practice, and competing normative sources. The 2004 constitutional framework recognized equality before the law and created a formal basis for the participation of women in public life, while

Afghanistan's international commitments placed women's rights within a broader human-rights framework. Legal reforms relating to violence against women were therefore not isolated developments but part of an effort to construct a protective structure in a society emerging from prolonged conflict. Zada's analysis of legislative, institutional, and policy reforms shows that Afghanistan adopted important measures intended to combat violence against women, while simultaneously facing substantial difficulties in translating those reforms into practice (Zada, 2020). International protection is also relevant beyond the domestic sphere, particularly because Afghan women and girls may qualify for forms of group-based protection in refugee law where the conditions for international protection are satisfied (Tan & Ineli-Ciger, 2023). Yet international commitment and constitutional recognition do not eliminate the domestic implementation problem. The effectiveness of rights depends on whether institutions can transform normative commitments into accessible remedies.

The Law on Elimination of Violence Against Women represented one of the most important legislative efforts of the republican period because it provided a specific legal vocabulary for conduct that had often been addressed through family, customary, or informal mechanisms. The law sought to identify and criminalize multiple forms of violence and thereby shift the treatment of such conduct from private accommodation toward public responsibility. Its significance, however, was accompanied by legal and political fragility. Zada demonstrates that the implementation of reforms concerning violence against women was affected by institutional limitations and political resistance (Zada, 2020). The legal framework therefore displayed a recurring contradiction: it recognized a woman as an individual rights-holder while operating within a social and institutional environment that could continue to prioritize family settlement, community expectations, or restrictive understandings of gender roles. Basu's analysis of gender-based violence in Afghanistan similarly emphasizes the failure of formal state structures to translate normative commitments into effective protection (Basu, 2023). In the context of secondary victimization, this contradiction matters because a woman may reasonably interpret the existence of protective law as an invitation to seek

justice, only to encounter an institutional response that does not consistently apply the protection the law appears to promise.

Normative conflict further complicated the operation of the legal framework. Afghan law did not function in a vacuum; formal statutes coexisted with religious interpretations and customary norms possessing significant authority within communities. The problem was not simply the existence of several normative traditions, but the absence of sufficiently predictable rules governing their practical interaction in sensitive cases involving women. Article 130 of the 2004 Constitution is illustrative. Its function was to permit recourse to Hanafi jurisprudence where the Constitution and other laws did not provide a rule for the case, rather than to authorize disregard of applicable statutory provisions. Hashimi's examination of Article 130 shows why a unified interpretation was necessary to protect legality and to prevent inappropriate extension of criminal liability through jurisprudential reasoning (Hashimi, 2017). For women seeking protection, uncertainty surrounding the application of normative sources could weaken confidence that their complaint would be decided according to stable legal standards. Where an official can move unpredictably between statutory protection and restrictive normative assumptions, legal protection becomes dependent on discretionary interpretation rather than on the consistent application of rights.

Customary practices constitute another important source of tension. In many communities, disputes involving marriage, family relations, and violence have historically been addressed through informal mechanisms designed to preserve familial or communal equilibrium. Such mechanisms may possess social legitimacy and practical accessibility, yet they can disadvantage women where collective interests are prioritized over individual rights. Mahendru's analysis of Afghan women and girls subjected to moral regulation demonstrates how gendered expectations can operate through institutions and social norms to restrict women's autonomy (Mahendru, 2021). Cultural violence can similarly become embedded in practices that normalize restrictions on women's participation, mobility, education, employment, or decision-making (Innayah & Yulianti, 2025). When a woman who has experienced violence is encouraged to return to an

abusive relationship for the sake of family unity, blamed for bringing dishonour upon relatives, or pressured to accept informal reconciliation without adequate protection, the response may create additional harm beyond the original abuse. The problem is therefore not that all customary mechanisms are inherently harmful, but that any process lacking meaningful consent, equality, safety assessment, and the ability to enforce the woman's rights can transform dispute resolution into a mechanism of secondary victimization.

Institutional design during the republican period included police, prosecutors, courts, and specialized mechanisms intended to address violence against women. The formal chain of protection could therefore encompass complaint registration, investigation, prosecution, adjudication, and support services. Yet each stage created a different potential point of failure. Police occupy a gatekeeping position because a complaint discouraged or rejected at first contact may never enter the formal justice process. Prosecutors influence whether a registered allegation advances, whether evidence is adequately gathered, and whether external pressure contributes to attrition. Courts determine both the formal outcome and the manner in which the woman experiences the judicial process. Support services affect whether she can safely participate in proceedings while coping with economic, psychological, and social consequences. Institutional reforms can therefore appear comprehensive while remaining ineffective if coordination among these stages is weak. Basu identifies institutional failures as a central component of the continuing problem of gender-based violence (Basu, 2023), while research on women's experiences of domestic violence emphasizes the importance of appropriate psychosocial and practical support in addition to formal legal processes (Kaul et al., 2024). Secondary victimization can arise at any point where the system places the cost of institutional weakness on the woman who has already experienced violence.

Geography substantially affects this institutional picture. Formal and specialized services have historically been easier to establish in urban centres than in remote areas, creating disparities between the legal protection formally available to all women and the protection practically accessible to particular communities. Research with survivors across Afghan provinces indicates that women's experiences of help-seeking vary

according to social environment, access to services, and available support networks (Kaul et al., 2024). Domestic-violence stigma can also intensify barriers because travel to a service provider or visible contact with authorities may itself expose a woman to community judgment (Mukerji et al., 2023). For a rural woman, access to justice may therefore require transportation, financial resources, permission or assistance to travel, and a willingness to risk public disclosure. These conditions demonstrate why geographical accessibility is part of secondary-victimization prevention. An institution that technically accepts complaints but can be reached only through a process that exposes the victim to serious social or economic costs provides incomplete protection. Institutional capacity represents another source of vulnerability. Protective legislation can function effectively only where police officers understand their duties, prosecutors possess sufficient resources and independence, courts are accessible and reasonably predictable, and support mechanisms have adequate staff and funding. Afghanistan's reforms repeatedly operated under conditions of political and administrative fragility (Zada, 2020). Prolonged armed conflict further weakened state capacity and diverted resources toward urgent security concerns (Ashraf & Kennedy-Pipe, 2022). Insecurity also affected the ability of institutions to maintain consistent services across territory and over time (Alemi et al., 2022). These structural limitations should not automatically be equated with secondary victimization, because an under-resourced institution may fail without intentionally harming the victim. Nevertheless, when resource deficiencies manifest themselves as repeated delays, unprocessed complaints, inaccessible services, or inability to provide protection against retaliation, they can generate an additional burden attributable to institutional response. The woman bears not only the consequences of violence but also the costs of a system unable to act upon her complaint.

Cultural attitudes within institutions may deepen these structural problems. Officials do not operate outside society; police officers, prosecutors, judges, health workers, and administrators may share the same gender norms that influence families and communities. Research concerning cultural violence in Afghanistan demonstrates that restrictive understandings of women's social position remain significant (Innayah &

Yulianti, 2025). Comparative discussion of psychological violence against women also underscores the importance of institutional awareness in recognizing forms of harm that may not produce immediately visible physical injuries (Sopacua, 2023). Where institutional actors regard domestic violence as a private family matter, interpret a woman's complaint as disobedience, or minimize psychological abuse because it lacks obvious physical evidence, the legal system can reproduce the social attitudes that protective legislation was intended to counteract. Such treatment is particularly likely to create secondary victimization because it directly communicates to the complainant that her experience does not merit institutional recognition.

Political instability constitutes a further dimension. Legal protection requires continuity: a victim must be able to expect that the institution she approaches will operate according to sufficiently stable rules regardless of changes in political leadership. Afghanistan's modern history has instead been marked by repeated political transitions and conflict, creating difficulties for sustained institutional development. The protective framework developed during the republican period remained dependent on political support that was not equally strong across institutions or regions (Zada, 2020). After 2021, the problem changed more fundamentally as restrictions affecting women's participation and institutional access intensified. Dutta describes the disappearance of Afghan women from significant parts of public life as part of a broader collapse of previously available rights and opportunities (Dutta, 2023). Niland likewise situates gendered violence within the post-transition political environment and emphasizes the structural conditions that have permitted its persistence (Niland, 2025). The reduction of public space available to women matters directly for victimization because a woman who cannot independently move, work, study, obtain information, or access services has fewer pathways through which to escape violence or seek assistance.

The post-2021 environment therefore cannot be analyzed merely as a continuation of weak implementation. During the republican period, the principal problem was that legal and institutional structures frequently failed to achieve their stated protective purposes. In the later period, some of the underlying premises of that system have themselves

been weakened. Cultural restrictions on women under Taliban rule have altered the context in which access to justice and public services must be understood (Innayah & Yulianti, 2025). Concerns regarding women's health and access to services demonstrate the broader effects of these restrictions on essential support networks (Saboor et al., 2022). Where meaningful formal recourse becomes severely restricted, a woman may face not simply an incompetent institution but an environment in which the institutional pathway that previously existed is no longer realistically available. This distinction has major preventive implications. Reforming police training, improving prosecution, or strengthening judicial coordination may address weak enforcement only where those institutions operate and women can access them. Where access itself is structurally curtailed, prevention must begin with restoration of channels of recourse or development of safe alternatives capable of functioning under restrictive conditions.

The social consequences of these institutional weaknesses reinforce one another. When women observe that complaints result in delay, stigma, family pressure, inadequate protection, or uncertain outcomes, distrust can spread beyond individual cases. One woman's negative institutional experience may become information that shapes another woman's decision not to report. Research concerning help-seeking shows that Afghan women's choices are profoundly influenced by anticipated social reactions (Mukerji et al., 2023). Lived-experience research likewise indicates that violence and conflict must be understood within dense networks of family and community relations rather than through an exclusively individual framework (Mannell et al., 2021). Institutional weakness therefore creates a feedback process: ineffective responses reduce confidence in formal mechanisms, reduced confidence discourages reporting, underreporting diminishes institutional visibility of violence, and limited visibility can reinforce the perception that violence is primarily a private matter. Preventing secondary victimization requires interrupting this process by making institutional responses reliable enough that seeking assistance does not become an additional source of risk.

4. Pathways of Secondary Victimization and Preventive Responses

Secondary victimization can arise at multiple stages of the justice-seeking process, and preventive responses must be matched to the particular stage at which additional harm occurs. The first critical stage is disclosure and initial reporting. For many women experiencing domestic or gender-based violence, disclosing abuse requires overcoming fear of retaliation, economic dependency, concern for children, family pressure, and anticipated social stigma. Research on domestic-violence stigma in Afghanistan demonstrates that survivors' help-seeking occurs within a social environment in which disclosure can affect reputation and relationships (Mukerji et al., 2023). A woman's first encounter with an institution is therefore especially consequential. If a police officer dismisses her allegation, treats violence as an ordinary marital disagreement, questions why she did not leave earlier, pressures her toward reconciliation, or otherwise communicates that pursuing the complaint is inappropriate, the institutional response can reproduce the very hierarchy the woman sought institutional assistance to overcome. The preventive principle at this stage is that first-contact institutions must function as genuine gateways to protection rather than filters that discourage claims. This requires clear duties regarding complaint registration, confidentiality, immediate safety assessment, referral, preservation of evidence, and respectful communication. Training should not be confined to memorization of substantive offences; it must address victim-centered interviewing, psychological trauma, coercive control, stigma, and the risks created by family or community retaliation.

The second pathway concerns investigation and prosecution. Even when an initial complaint is accepted, cases may fail through delay, poor evidence collection, inadequate coordination, external pressure, corruption, or loss of institutional interest. Weak implementation of reforms has historically been one of the central challenges in Afghanistan's response to violence against women (Zada, 2020). Basu's discussion of institutional denial similarly demonstrates how formal recognition of gender-based violence can coexist with state practices that fail to deliver effective remedies (Basu, 2023). From the perspective of secondary victimization, prolonged uncertainty can be damaging because the woman may

repeatedly recount traumatic events, remain exposed to the alleged perpetrator, confront family pressure to withdraw, or incur significant financial and social costs without receiving a meaningful institutional decision. Prevention therefore requires procedural timelines, effective case management, specialized prosecutorial competence, appropriate supervision, and mechanisms for reviewing unexplained discontinuation of cases. Institutional accountability is essential not because every unsuccessful prosecution represents victimization but because arbitrary, discriminatory, or unexplained attrition transfers the consequences of administrative weakness to the complainant.

The judicial stage creates another set of risks. Court proceedings can expose victims to public scrutiny, adversarial questioning, repeated narration of violence, and credibility assessments influenced by assumptions concerning gender or sexual conduct. Testimonial injustice provides a useful conceptual explanation for the danger that a woman's testimony may be assigned reduced credibility because of prejudicial stereotypes (Fricker, 2007). Where a decision-maker deliberately discounts testimony through entrenched gendered assumptions, the injustice may be even more pronounced (Hänel, 2025). Judicial prevention must consequently combine procedural safeguards with interpretive discipline. Judges should distinguish legally relevant credibility considerations from assumptions about how an "ideal victim" should behave. Delay in reporting, continued contact with an abusive partner, reluctance to disclose sexual violence, inconsistent emotional presentation, or withdrawal and later renewal of a complaint should not automatically be interpreted through stereotypes about truthfulness. Training can assist, but training alone cannot eliminate structural incentives or social attitudes. Clear rules of evidence, reasoned decisions, appellate review, judicial independence, and institutional monitoring are required so that the protection of victims does not depend excessively on the personal beliefs of individual adjudicators.

Access to justice also requires mechanisms beyond criminal prosecution. Violence against women frequently generates immediate needs involving shelter, health care, psychological assistance, economic support, family arrangements, documentation, and personal security. A criminal case that proceeds successfully may

still fail to protect the woman if she has nowhere safe to live, no independent resources, and no confidential access to support. Interviews with Afghan survivors of domestic violence indicate that psychosocial needs are deeply connected with the practical conditions in which women seek help (Kaul et al., 2024). The consequences of violence can also become intertwined with social isolation and family conflict (Mannell et al., 2021). Preventive policy must therefore integrate legal and non-legal services. A woman should not have to navigate unrelated institutions repeatedly, disclose the same violence to multiple actors without necessity, or choose between criminal justice and essential social support. Coordinated referral systems, confidential case management, and informed consent can reduce the likelihood that seeking one form of assistance unintentionally exposes her to other risks.

Confidentiality is particularly important in the Afghan context because disclosure may generate stigma or retaliation. Research concerning help-seeking demonstrates that fear of social judgment can significantly influence survivors' behaviour (Mukerji et al., 2023). Expanding services without appropriate privacy safeguards may therefore produce unintended harm. A specialized office located in a visibly identifiable place, for example, might increase access in formal terms while simultaneously making it easier for relatives or community members to infer that a woman has reported violence. Prevention requires confidential entry points, careful information-sharing rules, secure record keeping, consent-based referrals, and assessment of whether contacting family members may expose the victim to further danger. These principles apply equally to state agencies and non-state support providers. Documentation should never become an end in itself where collecting information exposes a woman to greater risk than the prospective benefit of the documentation.

Social stigma requires a preventive response distinct from legal reform. The continued influence of family and community expectations means that institutional improvement alone may not prevent secondary harm occurring outside official proceedings. Cultural violence can reinforce the notion that women who challenge prescribed social roles are responsible for the consequences they experience (Innayah & Yulianti, 2025). Mahendru's examination of the treatment of

women and girls within Afghanistan illustrates how moral regulation can itself become a mechanism of control (Mahendru, 2021). Long-term prevention therefore requires public engagement capable of altering attitudes toward victimhood, disclosure, family honour, and women's autonomy. Such engagement should avoid presenting reform as a simple opposition between law and culture, because reforms perceived as wholly external to local social frameworks may encounter resistance. Instead, protective principles should be connected to legally recognized dignity, protection from violence, community responsibility, and interpretations capable of supporting women's safety. Community leaders, educators, legal professionals, health workers, women's organizations, and religious authorities can all influence whether the social response to disclosure is supportive or punitive.

The distinction between the 2004–2021 and post-2021 periods requires preventive responses to be differentiated. During the constitutional-republican period, the main challenge was improving institutions that already existed. Legislative prevention would have required greater coherence among protective norms, stronger legal certainty, and clearer resolution of ambiguities capable of generating inconsistent application. The legal controversy surrounding Article 130 illustrates why predictability and fidelity to the principle of legality are essential (Hashimi, 2017). Where statutory rules provide protection, officials should not circumvent them by relying on non-statutory norms; where genuine legal gaps exist, their resolution must remain consistent with constitutional safeguards and fundamental legal principles. Strengthening legislative protection also requires ensuring that prohibitions of violence are accompanied by procedures, remedies, and defined institutional responsibilities. A right that identifies prohibited conduct but does not specify how a victim can safely invoke protection remains vulnerable to ineffective implementation.

Institutional prevention in the same period would have required sustained investment in police, prosecution, courts, and victim-support services. Zada's analysis makes clear that institutional and policy reform cannot succeed without effective implementation structures (Zada, 2020). Specialized units should therefore be geographically accessible rather than concentrated primarily in major urban centres, and staff should

possess both legal competence and training concerning trauma and gender-based violence. Coordination is equally important. A police complaint should connect predictably to prosecutorial review, safety services, health care, and where necessary confidential shelter or legal aid. Case tracking can prevent disappearance of complaints within bureaucratic systems, while supervisory mechanisms can identify patterns of unjustified delay or dismissal. Independence from family, local political, or other improper pressure is central because a protection system loses credibility if outcomes are determined by the influence surrounding a case rather than its evidence.

Institutional sensitization should also be conceived as an ongoing professional obligation rather than a one-time training exercise. Comparative analysis of psychological violence demonstrates the difficulty institutions may have in recognizing forms of harm that are less visible than physical injury (Sopacua, 2023). Police, prosecutors, judges, and support workers require guidance on coercion, psychological abuse, sexual violence, economic control, trauma responses, and the social pressures affecting disclosure. The objective is not to presume that every allegation is true, but to ensure that evaluation occurs through legally relevant evidence rather than stereotypes. Survivor-centered practice must coexist with procedural fairness. Preventing secondary victimization does not require abandoning evidentiary standards; it requires ensuring that those standards are administered without unnecessary humiliation, discriminatory credibility judgments, or procedures unrelated to legitimate fact-finding.

Preventive policy must also acknowledge the psychological implications of institutional response. Studies of survivors outside Afghanistan show that interactions with legal and medical systems can either facilitate recovery or compound trauma (Campbell, 2008). Earlier evidence similarly demonstrates that community-service experiences can affect post-assault well-being (Campbell et al., 1999). These findings justify adopting trauma-informed principles in Afghan protective mechanisms while avoiding the unsupported assumption that identical psychological effects occur in every Afghan survivor. Afghan women exposed to conflict and displacement demonstrate complex patterns of trauma, survival, identity, and growth (Taheri et al., 2025). A trauma-informed system should therefore

avoid reducing women to passive victims. Respect for autonomy is central: protection should expand the woman's available choices rather than substituting institutional control for the control exercised by the original perpetrator. Informed consent, confidentiality, participation in decisions, and the ability to decline non-essential services are therefore substantive components of prevention.

The post-2021 environment requires a different strategy because reforming an institution presupposes that the institution exists, retains an appropriate mandate, and remains accessible to women. Restrictions affecting women's public participation have reduced the space in which earlier protective mechanisms could operate (Dutta, 2023). Cultural and institutional restrictions documented under Taliban rule further demonstrate that the contemporary problem concerns not only weak performance but the environment governing women's ability to obtain assistance (Innayah & Yulianti, 2025). Niland's analysis of gendered violence in Afghanistan underscores the broader structural dimension of the current situation (Niland, 2025). Preventive responses under these circumstances must therefore begin with restoration or establishment of credible legal-institutional channels through which women can safely report violence, obtain protection, and seek adjudication. Without such channels, conventional recommendations regarding better prosecution or judicial training remain largely aspirational.

Where restoration of domestic mechanisms is not immediately achievable, alternative channels of support acquire greater importance. Non-state organizations, humanitarian actors, diaspora networks, legal-aid providers, and international mechanisms may be able to provide certain forms of documentation, advice, referral, psychosocial assistance, or emergency support. These mechanisms, however, must be described realistically. They cannot substitute fully for a functioning domestic justice system because they often lack coercive authority, territorial access, and the ability to enforce criminal or civil remedies. Documentation of violence may preserve information for future accountability, but the safety of the woman must take precedence over evidentiary collection. Secure communications, informed consent, anonymization where appropriate, controlled information-sharing, and careful assessment of digital and physical risks are necessary to prevent an

ostensibly protective intervention from becoming another source of exposure.

International protection constitutes an additional pathway for women who leave Afghanistan or are able to reach another jurisdiction. The application of the Refugee Convention to Afghan women and girls has been analyzed in terms of group-based protection, particularly in light of systematic gender-related restrictions (Tan & Ineli-Ciger, 2023). Such protection can be crucial for those who can access it, but it is inherently limited as a preventive response to domestic secondary victimization because it depends on the woman's ability to cross borders, reach a receiving state, and navigate asylum or protection procedures. It cannot protect the much larger population of women who remain inside Afghanistan. Receiving-state procedures themselves must also avoid reproducing secondary victimization through unnecessary disbelief, repeated traumatic interviewing, or failure to recognize gender-related persecution. The principle underlying domestic prevention therefore applies internationally as well: the procedure designed to provide protection should not unnecessarily reproduce the harm from which protection is sought.

A comprehensive preventive model must finally connect law, institutions, and social context rather than treating any one of them as sufficient. Legislative reform without institutional capacity produces symbolic protection. Institutional capacity without gender-sensitive practice can create efficient administration that still reproduces prejudice. Professional training without accountability may have little effect on persistent patterns of misconduct. Social awareness without accessible remedies may encourage women to disclose violence without providing them with meaningful protection. International support without domestic institutions cannot deliver comprehensive justice within Afghanistan. Prevention of secondary victimization therefore requires a layered model based on legal certainty, accessible complaint channels, institutional competence, respectful treatment, confidentiality, accountability, social support, and restoration of women's ability to participate in decisions affecting their own safety. The precise institutional arrangement may vary according to political conditions, but the normative test remains stable: a woman who seeks assistance after violence should not emerge from the protection process

carrying a new burden created by the very system that was supposed to respond to the original harm.

5. Conclusion

Secondary victimization arising from violence against women in Afghanistan is best understood as a distinct layer of harm that may occur after the original act of violence and through the response of institutions or the surrounding social environment. The distinction between primary and secondary victimization is fundamental because the two forms of harm arise from different actors, mechanisms, and stages. Primary victimization originates in the violent conduct itself. Secondary victimization arises when the woman encounters refusal, indifference, delay, humiliation, blame, discriminatory treatment, exclusion, or other institutional and social reactions that add a new burden to the consequences of the original violence. Not every failure to prevent continuing abuse constitutes secondary victimization, and not every weakness in public administration should automatically be placed within this category. The analytical value of the concept depends on identifying a response or meaningful omission and an additional harm attributable to that response. This approach provides a more precise foundation for understanding how a justice or support system can itself become part of the victimization process.

The Afghan experience demonstrates that the effectiveness of women's legal protection cannot be measured by the existence of legislation alone. During the constitutional-republican period, a recognizable legal and institutional framework existed for addressing violence against women. Constitutional principles, specific legislation, judicial and prosecutorial structures, police mechanisms, and support institutions established a formal architecture within which a victimized woman could seek protection. Yet the practical effectiveness of this structure was weakened by normative uncertainty, inconsistent enforcement, inadequate resources, limited geographical reach, political instability, cultural resistance, social stigma, and problems of institutional coordination. The crucial deficiency was therefore a gap between formal protection and actual experience. The system recognized rights but did not always create the institutional conditions necessary for women to exercise them safely and effectively.

That gap could generate secondary victimization through several pathways. At the stage of initial disclosure, dismissive or blaming treatment could discourage a woman from continuing her complaint. At the investigative and prosecutorial stages, unexplained delay, failure to gather evidence, or improper external pressure could transform the justice process into an extended period of uncertainty. At the judicial stage, credibility judgments influenced by gendered expectations could undermine confidence in the impartiality of proceedings. Outside formal institutions, stigma and pressure from family or community could impose additional costs on women who disclosed violence. Geographic inequality could make access to protection dependent on residence and financial capacity, while insufficient confidentiality could expose complainants to retaliation or social exclusion. These mechanisms demonstrate that secondary victimization is produced not by a single institutional defect but by the interaction of legal, administrative, cultural, and social conditions.

The analysis also demonstrates the necessity of distinguishing the constitutional-republican period from the post-2021 period. The first period was predominantly characterized by weak enforcement of an existing protective framework. Institutions existed and formally possessed responsibilities, but they frequently lacked sufficient capacity, consistency, independence, accessibility, or political backing. Preventive policy under such circumstances logically concentrates on institutional improvement. The later period presents a qualitatively different problem because women's access to public life and previously available protective channels has been severely restricted. Where the institutional route itself is absent, weakened, or inaccessible, the problem cannot adequately be described as ordinary implementation failure. Prevention must instead concern the restoration of protective institutions or the creation of credible alternative channels through which women can obtain assistance.

This distinction produces two corresponding groups of preventive responses. Where a functioning but ineffective legal-institutional system exists, prevention requires strengthening rather than replacing that system. Legal rules must be coherent, predictable, and sufficiently precise to prevent discriminatory or

contradictory application. Institutional responsibilities must be clearly allocated. Police, prosecution offices, courts, legal-aid services, health institutions, and support organizations must operate as interconnected parts of a protection pathway rather than as isolated agencies. Procedures for registering complaints must be accessible and confidential. Cases must be managed within reasonable periods, and unexplained attrition must be subject to review. Officials who interact with victimized women require continuing professional education concerning gender-based violence, coercive control, trauma, stigma, and respectful interviewing. Such training must be accompanied by supervision and accountability so that institutional standards influence actual practice.

Preventive measures must also extend beyond the formal criminal justice process. Women experiencing violence may require safe accommodation, medical assistance, legal advice, psychological support, economic assistance, and protection against retaliation. A fragmented system that forces a woman repeatedly to disclose violence to separate institutions may itself become burdensome. Integrated referral and case-management mechanisms can reduce this burden while allowing the woman to retain control over decisions concerning her case. Confidentiality is indispensable because inappropriate disclosure can expose a woman to family pressure or community stigma. Information should therefore be collected only where necessary, shared only for legitimate protective purposes, and handled with the informed consent of the woman whenever circumstances allow.

At the social level, prevention requires addressing victim-blaming and the stigma associated with disclosure. The objective should not be to replace one coercive framework with another but to create conditions in which women can seek assistance without being treated as responsible for the violence committed against them. Community engagement, public education, professional ethics, and culturally informed dialogue can contribute to gradual change, but these strategies should not be used as substitutes for legal protection. Social transformation is a long-term process, whereas a woman currently facing violence may require immediate intervention. Effective prevention must therefore combine long-term changes in social attitudes with

short-term mechanisms capable of providing safety and justice.

The post-2021 context requires more fundamental preventive measures. Where established protective mechanisms no longer operate effectively or are inaccessible to women, restoration of a legal and institutional framework capable of receiving complaints, investigating violence, providing protection, and delivering remedies becomes a primary requirement. Such restoration cannot be reduced to the formal re-establishment of offices or legal texts. Institutions must be practically accessible to women, possess qualified personnel, operate according to predictable standards, and provide remedies without exposing complainants to discriminatory treatment. A nominal institution that women cannot safely approach does not resolve the problem of structural exclusion.

Until effective domestic mechanisms are available, alternative channels may provide limited forms of protection. Civil-society organizations, humanitarian actors, legal-aid networks, international institutions, and diaspora-based organizations may assist with confidential advice, documentation, psychosocial support, referral, and in certain circumstances pathways toward international protection. These mechanisms should be understood as supplementary and provisional because they generally lack the enforcement authority of domestic police, prosecutors, and courts. Their operation must also be governed by strict safety principles. Documentation should never be pursued in a manner that increases the risk to the woman. Confidentiality, secure communication, informed consent, minimization of identifying information, and the woman's continuing right to withdraw from a process are essential safeguards.

For women who are able to leave Afghanistan, international protection may become an important component of the response, but it cannot constitute a comprehensive solution. Most victimized women cannot simply relocate internationally, and protection systems that depend on leaving the country reach only a limited part of the affected population. Moreover, asylum and protection procedures must themselves avoid unnecessarily reproducing the dynamics of secondary victimization. Repeated questioning, inappropriate credibility assessments, insensitive interviewing, and disregard for trauma can create new harms even within

systems designed to provide refuge. The general principle identified in the domestic context therefore applies equally to international protection: institutional procedures should facilitate recovery and legal protection rather than replicate the victim's previous experience of disbelief and powerlessness.

The findings ultimately indicate that prevention of secondary victimization requires a shift in the way protection against violence is conceptualized. Success cannot be measured exclusively by the number of offences criminalized, institutions established, complaints registered, or perpetrators prosecuted. These remain important indicators, but a victim-centered evaluation must also ask what happens to the woman while she moves through the system. It must examine whether she is heard respectfully, whether her safety is protected, whether her information remains confidential, whether she can understand the process, whether she participates meaningfully in decisions, whether services are practically accessible, and whether institutional intervention expands rather than restricts her choices. In this respect, preventing secondary victimization is not an additional or optional feature of a system for combating violence against women. It is part of the substantive meaning of effective protection itself. The central conclusion of this study is therefore that Afghanistan's problem cannot be reduced either to inadequate legislation or to cultural attitudes considered in isolation. Secondary victimization emerges from the interaction between legal rules, institutional performance, political conditions, social norms, and the practical position of the victimized woman. During the period in which protective institutions existed, prevention required narrowing the gap between law and implementation. Under conditions in which those institutions have been weakened or access to them has been substantially restricted, prevention additionally requires restoring or creating channels through which women can safely seek protection. The two circumstances cannot be addressed through an identical policy formula.

At the same time, the limits of the available evidence must be recognized. The present analysis is documentary rather than field-based. It identifies patterns and mechanisms supported by legal materials and existing scholarship but does not measure the prevalence of secondary victimization among Afghan

women. In many instances, the existence of an institutional barrier is better documented than the precise additional psychological or social harm attributable to it. The post-2021 evidence base is also more limited than that available for the preceding period. The conclusions should therefore be understood as an analytically grounded account of mechanisms through which secondary victimization may occur, rather than as a statistical estimate of its frequency.

Future research should examine these mechanisms through confidential empirical studies involving women who have sought assistance after violence, while adopting rigorous safeguards against exposing participants to renewed risk. Research with practitioners could also clarify how police, prosecutors, judges, legal-aid providers, health professionals, and community actors understand their responsibilities toward victimized women. Comparative analysis with other conflict-affected and post-conflict societies could help identify which institutional safeguards remain effective under conditions of political instability and limited state capacity. Particular attention should be given to rural women and other groups whose experiences are insufficiently represented in the available evidence. Such research would make it possible to distinguish more precisely between the consequences of the original violence, the consequences of general social deprivation, and the additional harm specifically produced by institutional and social responses.

Ultimately, the prevention of secondary victimization depends on recognizing the victimized woman not merely as an object of protection but as a rights-holder and participant in the justice process. A system that responds to violence by diminishing her autonomy, discounting her testimony, exposing her private information, pressuring her into unwanted decisions, or leaving her indefinitely without an answer can reproduce important features of the powerlessness created by the initial violence. An effective preventive framework must operate according to the opposite principle. It must increase access to reliable remedies, preserve dignity, protect confidentiality, strengthen meaningful choice, and ensure that seeking justice does not itself become another source of suffering. Only through the integration of legal protection, institutional capacity, accountable procedure, social support, and respect for women's agency can the response to violence

cease to reproduce victimization and begin to function as a genuine pathway toward protection and justice.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

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In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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