



Taliban's Media Restrictions Aim to Erase Women

Introduction

The collapse of the Republic of Afghanistan and the subsequent takeover by the Taliban have had severe political and social consequences for the citizens and independent civil society groups in the country. The Taliban's policies have led to the closure of civic space and a reversal of the progress made in the past two decades, particularly in terms of women's rights and press freedoms. This report aims to examine the situation of women journalists in Afghanistan, from 2020 to the present day, shedding light on the challenges and threats they face under the Taliban's regime.

Threats to Women Journalists

The Taliban's policies have had a detrimental impact on the role of women in media, who were previously active as executives, reporters, producers, and anchors. The Taliban's edicts, numbering over 40, aim to erase women from public life, curbing their access to education, employment, free movement, and basic services. Under the Taliban, women journalists are threatened, harassed, and intimidated, and are even [barred](#) from attending press events.

The Taliban's targeted attacks on civil society and media began during the US-led peace negotiations, where journalists and activists were facing assassination, abduction, torture, imprisonment, and harassment. Despite the [Taliban's assurances that media outlets could operate freely](#) if they respected Islamic culture, the reality is far from it, as they have dismantled free media and continued to launch attacks on independent journalists across the country.

Critical Role of Women in the Media

In Afghanistan, where gender equality is not fully institutionalized, female journalists play a critical role in covering women's issues and highlighting the impact of discrimination and violence against women. Women in the media, particularly women journalists, should be viewed as advocates for women's rights because of the role they play in ensuring that women's experiences are covered in the news. As such, the Taliban's expulsion of women from the media is a fatal and irreparable blow to the decades-long struggle of Afghan women for equality and freedom.

Threats against women journalists increased considerably in the final year of the former Afghan government and after the start of negotiations between the United States and the Taliban. As violence against civil society intensified and security threats against women journalists escalated, many were forced to resign, and several were killed in terrorist attacks. Since the Taliban took power in Afghanistan, the number of women active in the media has dropped significantly, with only a handful still employed in various media outlets.

The Taliban's policies towards women journalists and the media in Afghanistan represent a significant challenge for the international community to uphold press freedom and women's rights. It is imperative that the international community takes immediate steps to ensure the safety of journalists and civil society activists in

Afghanistan and support independent media outlets to continue their crucial work. The expulsion of women from the media in Afghanistan is not just an attack on press freedom but a grave setback for gender equality in the country.

Women in Journalism in Afghanistan: A Look at the Lead Up to the Taliban Takeover

In the year preceding the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, the country became increasingly unsafe for women journalists working in different media outlets, despite the group's promise to observe a ceasefire during the US-led peace negotiations.

Afghanistan has been plagued by violence and terror for decades, but during this period, civil society activists, particularly women's groups, urged the Taliban to engage in dialogue and protect their rights and freedoms. Sadly, these pleas were ignored, and the Taliban's attacks against civil society members only intensified:

→ Murder and Assassination

In the year leading up to the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, civil society activists, including women journalists and media workers, were brutally targeted for assassinations. At least 11 journalists were killed, with five of them being women, in Kabul and other provinces across the country. The victims included [Fereshteh Kouhestani](#), a women's rights activist, Malala Maiwand, a presenter for Enikass TV, and three employees of the TV station, [Mursal Wahidi, Shahnaz Raufi, and Sadia Sadat](#). These horrific attacks have left many women journalists and media workers in a constant state of fear and uncertainty about their safety.

Fatima Roshanian, the editor-in-chief of Nimrokh Weekly, which focused on women's issues in Afghanistan, shared her experiences of living and working under such threats. She explained that leaving their houses each morning, women journalists did not know if they would return home at night. To avoid being detected, they had to change their patterns and take precautions such as changing clothes when going to the office or changing the times at which they left for work.

These targeted assassinations have had a devastating impact on Afghan civil society, particularly on women's rights activists and women journalists who were at the forefront of the struggle for a more equal and just society. The loss of their voices, experiences, and advocacy is a significant blow to efforts to build a more inclusive and democratic Afghanistan.

→ Security Threats

A year before the Taliban came to power, many women journalists received threatening letters and faced constant pressures to leave their careers. Publishing a report or article against the Taliban and attributing assassinations and violent attacks against civil society to the Taliban could expose journalists to the group's revenge.

Mobina Saei, an Afghan journalist and civil activist, told Femena:

“A year before the Taliban came to power, the group had sought to make conditions unsafe for journalists, especially in and around major cities. The Taliban urged journalists not to publish reports against the group and sent threatening letters directly to journalists who wrote such reports.”

On the other hand, these security pressures and threats had led to increasing censorship for the journalists.

→ Forced Resignation

According to estimates by [Nai](#), Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan (SOMA), released in March 2021, 17 percent of media workers were women a year before the Taliban took office. In the year leading up to the re-emergence of the Taliban, the number of women working in the media had dropped from 1,900 to 1,700, and 200 women journalists have left their jobs as security threats against Afghan journalists increased.

→ Forced to Leave the Country

According to Nai, a year before the Taliban took office, 50 journalists, including 15 women, left Afghanistan due to security pressures and the shrinking space for media activity.

However, many continued to work despite assassinations, threats, and pressure on journalists and members of the media. Aniseh Shahid, a reporter for TOLONews, told Femena:

“Every morning when we woke up we wondered whose turn it was to be killed today. Under the pretext of a conference, a report, or various other excuses, women journalists were drawn to various places to be killed. Despite all these threats, we continued our work.”

In such circumstances, women journalists repeatedly called for the government of the time and responsible institutions to ensure their safety and that of other civil society activists. Yet, the government did not pay attention to such demands, and as Aniseh

Shahid states, the security department contacted media officials and asked them to provide security for women journalists.

Humira Saqib, a journalist, and director of the Afghan Women's News Agency told Femena:

“The government not only took no action to ensure the safety of women activists but also sought to discredit women activists, thereby creating a negative outlook among people about the presence of women in society. This paved the way for the appearance of Taliban ideology. Afghan civil society had no confidence in the National Directorate of Security. We could not complain to them because pro-Taliban members were also present inside the Afghan National Security Directorate.”

Situation of Women Journalists since the Return of Taliban to Power

→ Silenced Voices: Women Journalists in the Taliban Era

Almost two years since the Taliban came to power, media activity in Afghanistan has experienced a dramatic setback. One year after the Taliban takeover four of 10 media houses were forced to shut down. Since the Taliban take-over about half of the news media in Kabul have stopped operating and 60% of journalists have lost their jobs. Women journalists have been most impacted by Taliban's restrictions on media and civic space. 76.19% women journalists are now unemployed and many are forced out of the country.

Azita Nazimi, a woman journalist who served many media organizations in Afghanistan for 13 years as a reporter, producer, and anchor, is now living in exile in Pakistan with her future unknown. Because of her well-known media background, it was impossible for Azita to continue her life in Afghanistan under the Taliban. Like her, many other women journalists are seeking refuge in neighboring countries in fear of prosecution by the Taliban.

Last year, the [Afghanistan Telecom Regulatory Authority \(ATRA\)](#) released a statement to the interior ministry, urging the closure of media outlets that failed to renew their licenses. The announcement specifically listed over 100 audio-visual media outlets, citing their expired licenses.

Meanwhile, the majority of women's media outlets, which were not plentiful even before the Taliban's takeover, have been shuttered. Humira Saqib explained:

"The women's news agency in Herat has been closed. Radios have been shut down in Balkh. A few websites that continue to operate in the field of women no longer have as many employees as in the past. They continue to operate online and remotely with a very limited number of journalists."

→ Woman Journalist Force to Stay Home

After the Taliban takeover, the presence of women journalists in Afghanistan's media landscape rapidly diminished. Initially, media executives advised their female employees to stay home temporarily, leaving the media space devoid of women reporters. Aniseh Shahid, a women journalist, shared her experience of continuing her reporting until the Taliban entered Kabul:

"The day after the Taliban took over, women were told to stay at home due to the prevailing uncertainty. However, the situation worsened in the coming days, and now there are no women on the state television network."

However, the situation is even more complex for women journalists and small media outlets outside of Kabul and major cities. In 15 out of 34 provinces of Afghanistan, there are no women journalists working. This highlights the alarming extent of the suppression of women voices and perspectives in the Afghan media.

→ Imposing Restrictions on Professional Activity

The small number of women journalists who still work in Afghanistan continue to face severe restrictions. Many TV shows hosted by women have been shut down, and women journalists are not able to appear in the city to prepare news reports. Furthermore, no Taliban official is willing to talk to them. Aniseh Shahid explains:

"Men and women cannot perform alongside each other, and if a woman is hosting a program, the guest must be a woman as well. The Taliban are not willing to talk to women or conduct interviews with them. If a woman journalist goes to prepare a report, she will be reprimanded for not having a male colleague, or if they call the Taliban for an interview, they will not answer."

According to Mobina Saei:

"The few women journalists who are still working in Afghanistan's media outlets are not allowed to talk to people face-to-face, and most of them are not allowed in newsrooms. Instead, they work from home and publish their reports online."

Fatima Roshanian, whose weekly magazine was one of the publications that has been shut down in Afghanistan, explains:

"Before the fall of Kabul, we used to publish our magazine. After that, we had to continue our work online because our weekly was an important and leading publication in the field of women, and its positions against the Taliban were well-known."

→ Threatening and Beating Journalists

Journalists in Afghanistan face increasing violence and threats from the Taliban. The Taliban's presence in news studios creates an environment of terror and censorship, causing journalists to self-censor. According to Aniseh Shahid, since August 15, over 85 journalists have been arrested and beaten. In fact, reporting on Taliban bans has [led to the arrest of media workers](#). Journalists and media activists in small towns far from the center face even greater threats as their arrests and torture receive less media coverage and international attention.

Fatema Roshanian explains that the situation in Kabul and other major cities is better than in other provinces, as there are reports of arrests and confrontations with media reporters. However, in other provinces, news of violence is not heard, and families whose members are arrested fear speaking out. Journalists who criticize the Taliban on social media are also threatened, harassed, and arrested, but their families are too afraid to speak out.

Statistics on violence against women journalists and media workers are not available due to fear, taboo, and rejection. However, it is evident that the Taliban's atmosphere of terror has silenced many women journalists as well as those citizen journalists who want to raise issues and problems related to women's rights violations on social media.

→ Imposing Widespread Censorship

Since the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, news coverage has been subject to extensive restrictions and bans, and journalists are no longer able to cover current affairs. Reporting on protests, arrests, bombings, targeted assassinations, popular protests, rising food prices, and anything that portrays the Taliban in a negative light and damages their government's image on the international stage is prohibited. Journalists who violate these new rules are subject to arrest, imprisonment, and torture.

The Taliban's [11 journalism rules](#) require the media to exercise caution in publishing "issues whose accuracy has not been approved by the authorities" and "matters which adversely affect public opinion or disturb the public spirit." Based on [these rules](#), journalists are required to submit the content of their reports to the Taliban's Information and Culture Department before publication. Taliban intelligence officials regularly hold meetings with media officials and journalists to inform them of the new rules and closely monitor the content produced.

For a live interview, journalists must inform Taliban officials of the subject and content in advance and obtain permission. A gunman must also be present with the reporter to monitor the interview's content.

Aniseh Shahid explains:

"Every person or official who came to TOLONews for an interview in the past, whether they or their bodyguards were armed, had to hand over their weapons upon entering the street where the television network was located. But now, two or three times a week, Taliban intelligence soldiers go to TOLONews with weapons and interrogate reporters as to why a report has been broadcasted."

The Taliban has also banned many cultural programs and music broadcasts due what they claim to be a conflict with Islamic values. [Human Rights Watch](#) reports that on March 28, 2022, security officers from the Taliban General Directorate of Intelligence raided the offices of four radio stations south of Kandahar for violating the music ban, detaining six journalists. They were released after promising not to broadcast music again.

These restrictions and the arrest and beating of journalists who violate the rules have forced many journalists to resort to self-censorship and cover only Taliban statements and major city events. In such a situation, news concerning women and the widespread violation of their rights are among the many issues that are excluded from media coverage for a variety of reasons, including because that coverage would amount to presenting a negative image of the Taliban.

To address this, Shamayel Tawana, a woman journalist, has started her own online media platform, Farkhunda News, to share news and stories about women's lives across Afghanistan. However, the Taliban's increasing attacks on the media and the lack of financial and operational resources have made it challenging for her to keep the platform running. Shamayel is unable to pay her eight journalists, making it difficult to produce at least two reports focused on women's rights on a daily basis.

The lack of formal women-led media structures means that the donor community does not recognize and support small media platforms such as Farkhunda, which may be the only outlet attempting to cover the situation of women under the rule of the Taliban.

Eliminating women from the media, as journalists and news subjects, facilitates the Taliban's plan for outright exclusion of women from the public sphere and forces them to stay at home. This widespread elimination intensifies the discriminatory living conditions for women living in smaller and more remote provinces and exposes them to more systematic violence.

→ Gendered Silencing: Restricting Women's News Coverage

Since the Taliban's takeover, coverage of women-related issues has been restricted or completely banned, and even the reporting of women's protests has been prohibited. Reporters Without Borders reports that at least 80 people have been detained by the Taliban for various periods, while 30 journalists have been subjected to physical violence, and three journalists have been imprisoned. These actions have had a chilling effect on the media, further silencing women's voices and suppressing dissenting views.

The lack of diverse voices in the media has allowed the Taliban's ideology and view of women to become the dominant narrative, with little opportunity to challenge or question their narrative. This has led to an environment in which women's issues are neglected, and women's voices are systematically excluded from public discourse.

→ The Oppression of Women in the Media: The Taliban's Imposed Dress Codes

The issue of women's clothing has been a contentious topic since the beginning of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. In the early days of their rise to power, women activists voiced their concerns and held protests against the possibility of being forced to wear a full long veil or "chador." The spokesperson for the Taliban's Ministry of Vice and Virtue, Mohammad Sadeq Akef Mohajer, commented that the goal was for a woman's body to be fully covered, regardless of the type of hijab she wore, be it a burqa, Arabic hijab, or a large chador.

In February 2022, the Ministry of "Vice and Virtue" issued an order to various ministries and organizations, mandating that women must wear the Islamic hijab, and those who did not comply with the law would be terminated from their jobs. The regulation also stipulated that women must work separately from men and that those without hijab

would not be allowed to enter ministries. These restrictions have been particularly onerous for women working in the media.

Women journalists and reporters who are still visible in the media must conform to Taliban ideology and thinking, from their appearance to the content of their speech. The absence of different voices and opinions has created a void where the Taliban's attitude toward women is reflected as the official and dominant view, leaving little room for dissent or challenge. Consequently, the voices of women are being suppressed and silenced.

Recommendations

- ❖ Oblige the Taliban to respect freedom of expression, the press, and the media, and to remove restrictions on the work of women journalists. The international community must take action against the violation of the rights of journalists, especially women journalists, and the imposed restrictions on the media, through legal solutions available in international mechanisms to hold the Taliban accountable.
- ❖ Support journalists who remain in the country, especially women journalists, and put pressure on the Taliban to ensure their safety. These institutions must also help endangered journalists to leave the country as soon as possible and be transferred to safer countries.
- ❖ Financially and otherwise support members of the media who are committed to covering human rights and women's issues, and have adhered to this commitment in these difficult circumstances. International institutions must also provide conditions for journalists to be economically supported in times of unemployment and economic collapse.
- ❖ Support and recognize small independent groups formed in the current context of disintegration and the weakening of civil society and the media after the Taliban. These groups, by recognizing and committing to women's issues, play an important role in safeguarding the achievements of human rights, freedom of expression, and women's rights and can fill the current information gap. International and regional organizations and institutions should prioritize the education of women citizen-journalists so that they can cover women's rights issues, especially in Afghanistan's more remote provinces. Prioritize training Afghan journalists and women journalists in physical and cyber security.



Femena supports Woman Human Rights Defenders, their organizations and feminist movements through analysis of trends and policy, documentation, fostering development of regional communities of practice and advocacy.

Femena's work is primarily focused on contexts of shrinking or closed civic space and contexts complicated by growing extremism and conflict.

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