

# A REIGN OF TERROR

## Afghanistan's Human Rights Situation Two Years After the Taliban Takeover

Since the forceful takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban in August 2021, the country has plunged into one of the world's most severe human rights crises, grappling with a deteriorating humanitarian situation. Under the Taliban's oppressive rule, the people of Afghanistan have had their most basic rights violated, as the group has reverted to implementing policies similar to those from the 1990s.

Various vulnerable groups, including women, marginalized ethnic and religious communities, LGBTQ+ individuals, former government, military, and police officials, judges, lawyers, journalists, and civil society members, face persecution under the Taliban's reign. The situation in Afghanistan has been worsened by the increasing poverty rates, with over 28 million people depending on humanitarian assistance. However, the delivery of aid has been disrupted by the Taliban's interference and their restrictions on women's employment in international aid agencies.

Two years into their rule, the Taliban have taken extreme measures to erase women from society entirely, severely impacting the livelihoods and dignity of the Afghan people. The country continues to face numerous challenges as it struggles to cope with the harsh realities imposed by the Taliban's rule.

### Women's Rights

Since August 2021, we have witnessed serious regression in terms of women's rights, and women in Afghanistan have encountered notable difficulties and pressures as a result of the Taliban takeover of the country. Numerous reports by international [human rights organizations](#), [the UN](#), and the media suggest that women in Afghanistan face stringent constraints and barriers, which severely limit their opportunities for education, employment, freedom of movement, and participation in public life. Following his recent visit to Afghanistan in May 2023, Afghanistan's UN SR Richard Bennett stated that the [Taliban's edicts are suffocating women and girls in the country](#). In a [report](#) by Amnesty International, the situation of women in Afghanistan is described as "death in slow motion."

### Situation of Woman Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs)

WHRDs (Women Human Rights Defenders) in Afghanistan are currently confronting [a severe and distressing situation](#) under the rule of the Taliban. These brave women, who courageously champion human rights and equality, are facing [arbitrary arrests, brutal torture, and imprisonments](#). The Taliban's [violent response](#) to their peaceful protests shows a deliberate attempt to suppress their voices and activism.

## Freedom of Movement

The implementation of the [Mahram policy](#) by the Taliban has imposed severe constraints on the freedom of movement and independence of women in Afghanistan. This policy mandates that women must have a male guardian (Mahram) accompany them in public spaces, thereby limiting their ability to travel or participate in activities without the presence of a male relative. Unfortunately, the consequences of this policy have extended even to women's access to basic healthcare services. In some regions, the Taliban has [instructed healthcare workers not to treat women](#) unless they are accompanied by male minders.

Additionally, female health workers have been [verbally instructed](#) by the Taliban to be accompanied by a male guardian while carrying out their work. These restrictions further limit women's ability to seek medical assistance and hinder the participation of women in the healthcare workforce. The situation poses significant challenges to women's health and well-being, as well as their professional opportunities in the healthcare sector.

Furthermore, the Taliban have [banned women from traveling outside the country](#) without a male guardian unless they have a legitimate reason for their travel.

## Access to Education

Since the Taliban's takeover, women in Afghanistan have faced severe limitations on their access to formal education. Initially, the Taliban [banned secondary and high schools](#) for girls, and later, they imposed [gender segregation](#) in university classes and [prohibited](#) women professors from teaching in Kabul university. Ultimately, the Taliban banned [university-level education for women altogether](#), effectively eliminating most forms of formal education for women in the country. This has made Afghanistan the only country where women are deprived of education by its rulers.

## Employment

Following the Taliban's resurgence to power, access to employment opportunities for women in Afghanistan has become a significant challenge. While certain sectors, such as health and education, still permit women to work in limited capacity, they are mostly eliminated from the workforce due to the Taliban's imposed restrictions. In some cases, women civil servants [have been explicitly instructed to remain at home until further notice](#), further limiting their participation [in public and private sectors](#).

Furthermore, the Taliban recently implemented [a ban on women's employment in international non-governmental organizations \(NGOs\) and the United Nations \(UN\)](#). This restriction severely curtails women's engagement in crucial humanitarian and development work, significantly reducing their ability to contribute to their communities and society as a whole.

## Edicts Targeting Women's Rights

Over the past two years, the Taliban [has issued 64 formal and informal edicts](#), with a clear intention to exclude women from public life in Afghanistan. The directives impose stringent restrictions on multiple facets of women's lives, encompassing their attire, employment, education, participation in sports, presence in media, involvement in art and music, freedom of movement, public presence, and even access to essential healthcare services.

Most recently, the Taliban's actions included the closure of women's beauty parlors, resulting in the [loss of jobs for around 60,000 women](#). The consequences of these edicts have had a significant impact on women's livelihoods, aspirations, and overall mental and physical well-being, further exacerbating the challenges they face in the wake of the Taliban's takeover.

## Minorities and Marginalized Ethnic and Religious Groups

Minorities and marginalized groups in Afghanistan have become targets of attacks and discrimination under Taliban rule. The Hazara community has been particularly affected, with [targeted killings and acts of violence](#) against them. The forced displacement of [Tajiks, Uzbeks, and other non-Pashtun ethnic groups](#) has also been reported, leading to significant upheaval and displacement. The Sikh community has faced a series of attacks on their places of worship, resulting in [their forced exodus from the country](#). These actions not only violate the rights of these marginalized groups but also contribute to the erosion of social cohesion and inclusivity in Afghanistan.

## Detentions and Extra Judicial Killings

The Taliban have been implicated in numerous extrajudicial killings targeting former government and military officials. According to [reports](#) from the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), between August 15, 2021, and June 15, 2022, at least 160 such killings were recorded. These extrajudicial killings represent a flagrant violation of human rights and disregard for due process. The targeted victims, who served in various capacities within the previous Afghan government and security forces, have been subjected to violence and execution without any legal proceedings.

Presently, [there are 12,000 prisoners](#), including women and children, held in Taliban prisons. Due to the absence of a proper legal system, there is significant uncertainty surrounding the reasons for their imprisonment, the prospects for their future, and the conditions under which they are being detained.

## Media and Civil Society

Under Taliban rule in Afghanistan, civil society and media have faced severe repression and intimidation. The collapse of most formal civil society structures and the forced exile of their leaders have left a void in organized advocacy and activism. Informal and grassroots civil society groups operate under constant fear and intimidation, with arrests and imprisonment being common.

Journalists and media professionals, dedicated to reporting the truth have been targeted [with arrests, torture, and even killings](#). Independent journalism has been severely curtailed due to increased censorship and restrictions on freedom of expression. Media outlets critical of the Taliban face targeted attacks, resulting in self-censorship and a pervasive climate of fear. These assaults on journalists not only violate their human rights but also undermine the public's access

to reliable information. The Taliban's crackdown on civil society and media has led to the closure of [40% of media outlets](#), and loss of jobs for [80% of women](#) journalists.

## Recommendations for Urgent Action

Amidst the deeply concerning human rights violations and the worsening conditions in Afghanistan under Taliban rule, urgent action must be taken by key stakeholders, including the United Nations, the United States, NATO Allies, and regional and Islamic countries, to address the pressing challenges faced by the Afghan people. The following recommendations are aimed at holding the Taliban accountable for their human rights obligations, ensuring the protection of human rights and civic spaces, and respecting the rights and lives of marginalized groups. It is crucial that immediate measures are taken to promote accountability, safeguard fundamental rights, and prioritize the well-being of all individuals affected by the situation in Afghanistan.

### All Key International Stakeholders

- Refrain from any normalization or recognition of the Taliban and refuse unconditional engagement. Take a strong and unwavering stance against their gross violations of human rights and demand full accountability for their actions.
- Apply relentless and sustained pressure on the Taliban to establish an inclusive government that genuinely reflects the diverse ethnic composition of Afghanistan and ensures meaningful participation of women. The current all-male, predominantly Pashtun cabinet fails to represent the true diversity of the nation.
- Emphasize that the protection of human rights, particularly those of women and marginalized communities, must be an absolute priority in any future governance arrangements in Afghanistan. This commitment should be non-negotiable and central to the principles guiding the country's future.

### United Nations and Member States

- Significantly strengthen and ensure the full implementation of UNAMA's monitoring, protection and public reporting mandate, including the meticulous and comprehensive documentation of all egregious human rights violations in Afghanistan, placing utmost emphasis on targeted attacks against marginalized and ethnic religious groups, the heinous extrajudicial killings of former government officials and acts of systematic persecution and targeting of women and their rights.
- Renew the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, ensuring the allocation of substantial additional resources to effectively confront the alarming magnitude of the human rights crisis.
- Establish an independent international accountability mechanism of utmost importance to secure unequivocal justice for the widespread human rights violations committed by the Taliban.
- Explicitly recognize the Taliban regime for its true nature as an oppressor implementing a deeply entrenched system of gender apartheid, and let this stark recognition decisively shape the interactions and engagements of the UN with the Taliban.
- Provide unwavering and robust support to Afghan human rights defenders and civic communities, leaving no room for compromise, including the implementation of

resettlement schemes for those in imminent danger, the provision of resolute political and financial assistance to Afghan civil society both within and beyond the country's borders, and unwavering engagement with a broad spectrum of courageous civic actors opposing the Taliban's oppressive rule.

### United States and NATO Allies

- Exert pressure on the Taliban to ensure the safe passage and evacuation of Afghans who wish to leave the country, including marginalized ethnic groups, women human rights defenders, LGBTQI+ individuals, and vulnerable army personnel.
- Continue evacuation efforts for NATO allies from Afghanistan and establish a special visa category to offer protection to individuals facing threats, such as female army and police members, human rights lawyers, marginalized ethnic and religious groups, journalists, women's rights defenders, and LGBTQI+ individuals.
- Provide substantial financial and logistical support to Afghan human rights activists and civic actors in exile as well as those who remain on the ground, enabling them to continue their struggle for human rights and democracy.
- Coordinate humanitarian aid efforts with local communities and women's organizations to ensure that the needs of vulnerable populations are effectively addressed in an inclusive manner.

### Regional and Muslim Majority Countries

- Hold the Taliban accountable for their treatment of women and marginalized ethnic and religious groups.
- Condition engagement, trade, and diplomatic relations on their commitment to respecting human rights, especially the rights of women and minority groups.

## Femena's Afghanistan Program

Femena has been actively engaged in addressing the human rights situation in Afghanistan since the US-led Doha Peace process in 2021. We have worked closely with women human rights defenders, striving to amplify their voices and demands. During the peace process, we [organized advocacy events, conducted interviews, and advocated](#) for the meaningful inclusion of women and marginalized groups in discussions.

When the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, Femena played a crucial role in providing evacuation and relief support. We facilitated the evacuation of women human rights defenders and journalists at risk and provided financial assistance to those fleeing oppression. We remain dedicated to supporting women human rights defenders both inside and outside Afghanistan.

Currently, Femena implements various activities to support Afghan women human rights defenders. We provide capacity strengthening through training and mentoring, advocate for their rights through reports and statements, and facilitate their relocation and provide urgent financial support. Additionally, we support the economic empowerment of Afghan women and foster regional cross-learning and knowledge sharing for women human rights defenders.

Through these efforts, Femena aims to empower Afghan women human rights defenders, elevate their voices and demands, and foster collaboration and solidarity among women across the region. Our work is driven by a commitment to promoting human rights and creating a supportive network that transcends borders.

### About Femena

Femena promotes gender equality, inclusion, peace and democracy and supports women human rights defenders (WHRDs), women's organizations and feminist movements in MENA and Asia regions (SWANA), with a focus on contexts of closed civic space and other complex contexts impacted by conflict and extremism. Femena works with partners to promote gender equality, empower women, expand civic space, elevate the work of WHRDs and progressive movements, and ensure the resilience of women and WHRDs.

### *Femena works to achieve its aims through four interlinked approaches:*

1. Analysis of Trends and Policy
2. Documentation
3. Fostering the Development of Communities of Practice—through south-south convening, training, technical assistance, psycho-social wellbeing and other supports
4. Advocacy

### Femena on Social Media

[Website](#)

[YARA WHRD CENTER](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Instagram](#)