



January 2026

Resisting the Taliban's
Repression:

**AFGHAN WOMEN'S
ACTIVISM AND
FEMINIST MOVEMENT
BUILDING**

A woman wearing a dark headscarf and an orange garment is looking out of a window. The window shows a view of a town with many small buildings and a hill in the background. The scene is dimly lit, with light coming from the window.

01

Introduction

Photo: UN Women/Habib Sayed Bidell.

In the four years since the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan, they have waged a ruthless and comprehensive attack on the human rights of women and girls. For years prior to their takeover, many Afghan women had voiced their fears about the Taliban's resurgence and the repercussions this would have for women's rights. They expressed these concerns throughout the US-led peace negotiations, and warned the international community about the consequences of a non-inclusive peace process. Unfortunately, their demands and pleas fell on deaf ears.

Regrettably, just as these women anticipated and feared, upon regaining power, the Taliban swiftly issued dozens of edicts effectively dismantling the rights that women had fought for and achieved over the years. The Taliban's return to power has had far-reaching effects on other aspects of Afghan society as well.

The international community's response to the situation in Afghanistan has been tepid at best. Attention quickly turned from the severe crisis brought about due to the seizure of power by the Taliban to the war in Ukraine, and subsequently to other wars and crises. However, women and girls in Afghanistan have had no choice but to endure life under the Taliban and the deepening human rights crisis. Their hardship has only been further compounded by natural disasters and other humanitarian emergencies.

Despite these grave challenges, Afghan women have refused to remain silent. Almost immediately after the Taliban took power, they began to protest. A new movement emerged across the country, one that is grassroots, wherein women are demanding "Bread, Work, Freedom." As anticipated, the Taliban responded to these protests harshly and violently. Yet, despite this, the women are persistent in their demands and activism, even as they are forced to seek new strategies for engagement and resistance. While women initially took to the streets to publicly protest the draconian measures the Taliban instituted against them, they have been forced to organize in different forms since, given the violent suppression of their protests.

This report begins with an overview of Afghanistan's current human rights landscape, then sheds light on the new movement of Afghan women, who have stepped up to fill a gap left behind by other civil society activists who were forced to leave Afghanistan after the fall of the country to the Taliban. The report explores the motivations and aspirations of women protesters who rose up - despite serious risks to themselves - to publicly counter the Taliban, outlining challenges they faced in defending civic space and asserting their human rights. The report further examines the new ways in which emerging women's groups are organizing and how the international community can support them as they build a new movement under difficult and vastly different circumstances than their predecessors. In addition to protests, Afghan women are resisting through other forms, including secret schools, advocacy groups, book clubs, small businesses, and sewing circles, creating resilient networks of empowerment and education under difficult circumstances.

Recognizing the persistent struggle of Afghan women against the systematic erasure of their voices, Femena seeks to amplify these voices. We aim to outline how international actors and current activists hope to learn from past mistakes, as they look forward. Finally, the report provides recommendations on how to support the emerging women's movement in the country.

These women are facing formidable challenges and yet receive minimal support – both within Afghanistan's borders and beyond. However, meaningful solidarity is required to sustain this struggle. Femena dedicates this brief report to each and every woman hoping to see a free Afghanistan someday.

02

Methodology

Photo: UN Women/Habib Sayed Bidell.

This report is based on in-depth interviews conducted by Femena researchers in two different phases. The first set of interviews was conducted with seventeen Afghan women, focusing on the period immediately following the Taliban takeover and the reaction to it. The participants were selected after extensive consideration of their role and engagement in either the recent peace negotiations or the emerging resistance to Taliban rule. Of the women interviewed, nine were protesters or activists engaged in emerging women's civil society groups, seven were politicians and activists in exile, and two were representatives of international NGOs. These semi-structured interviews entailed questionnaires specifically tailored for participants based on their experience and activities.

The second set of interviews involved five women currently active in Afghanistan, leading civic initiatives despite shrinking space for activism. From running small tailoring businesses to hosting secret schools and private gatherings, they continue their work discreetly within their homes and communities.

The interviewees were all informed of the purpose and voluntary nature of the interviews and consented to them. In addition, the sharing of quotations, audio, or video from the interviews was contingent on the consent of participants. Given the risks faced by participants, especially those who were interviewed while still in Afghanistan, Femena prioritized their safety above all else. Some participants identified for this report were in hiding at the time of research and unable to participate in interviews. However, Femena respected the use of aliases and anonymity for those who requested it. The interviews were conducted online, recording links were password-protected and accessible only to select Femena staff. The content of the interviews was analyzed by Femena staff to identify principal and recurrent themes relating to women's engagement in the political situation of Afghanistan.

This report also builds on the extensive knowledge Femena staff and researchers have gained in their work to support emerging women's groups on the ground. The report is also based on desk research – particularly the sections focusing on background and current country conditions. This involved a close study of news reports, as well as research reports produced by a range of international NGOs, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and International Crisis Group, as well as reports and briefings of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).

03

Afghanistan After the Fall

The Current Human Rights

Crisis



Taliban fighters stand guard as women protest in Kabul demanding education, jobs and political representation on December 16, 2021. © Wakil Kohsar, AFP/File

Overview

Since returning to power, the Taliban have reneged on promises they made during the Doha peace process and have [reverted to their oppressive policies from the 1990s](#). The human rights situation under Taliban rule has deteriorated severely, characterized by [floggings, extrajudicial killings, public executions, and stoning](#). Women's rights have been at the forefront of their attacks. [Women human rights defenders are subjected to arrests and violence](#), and their efforts to advocate for equality are silenced on a daily basis. Marginalized ethnic and religious groups, including the [Hazara community](#), have [faced targeted killings and forced displacement](#), eroding social cohesion. Civil society is [repressed, with activists arbitrarily arrested and imprisoned](#). Media outlets [critical of the Taliban face persecution](#), leading to self-censorship and an atmosphere of fear.

Women's Rights

Women's rights have been among the primary targets of the Taliban since their return to power in August 2021. With [134 edicts issued](#), the Taliban seek to erase women from public life, perpetuating fear and entrenching gender-based discrimination. These directives impose a stringent dress code on women. Additionally, the new edicts limit women's access to education, many fields of employment, health services, their ability to engage in public activities, and their artistic expression. In short, women are being erased from public view.

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In August 2024, Taliban leader Mullah Hebatullah Akhundzada issued new "vice and virtue" edicts requiring that women who appear in public be completely covered, including their faces. In addition, deeming women's voices to be instruments of temptation ("awrah"), the edicts ban women from reading aloud or singing in public. They also forbid women from interacting with unrelated men. In response, Afghan [women launched a campaign of singing and reciting poetry to defy the ban on their voices](#).

Reports indicate significant restrictions on women's access to education, employment, freedom of movement, and ability to have a presence in public life. Women human rights defenders (WHRDs) in Afghanistan are in a dire situation, enduring [arbitrary arrests, torture,](#)

and imprisonment under Taliban rule. Their peaceful protests have been met with violence, silencing their advocacy for human rights and equality. The Taliban's strict Mahram policy further limits women's freedom by requiring a male guardian for public activities, hindering their independence and participation in society. Following the Taliban's resurgence, women's education has suffered, with girls' schools above the primary level closed and a ban on women's university education. Access to employment for women has also been restricted, with limitations imposed by the Taliban in both public and private sectors. A ban on women's employment in international NGOs and the UN further diminishes women's participation in public life.

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 frequent arrests and imprisonment. Journalists and media professionals dedicated to reporting the truth are targeted with arrests, torture, and killings. Independent journalism is 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 the loss of jobs for 80% of women journalists.

40%

**media outlets
closed**

80%

**Women journalists
lost their jobs**

Minorities and Marginalized Ethnic and Religious Groups:

Minority and marginalized groups in Afghanistan face escalating attacks and discrimination under Taliban rule. The Hazara community, in particular, has borne the brunt of targeted killings and attacks. Such attacks persist in Hazara places of worship and educational institutions. Additionally, forced displacement of Tajiks, Uzbeks, and other non-Pashtun ethnic groups has been reported, resulting in significant upheaval. The Sikh community has also been subjected to a series of assaults at their places of worship, compelling many to flee the country. These actions violate the rights of minority groups while exacerbating social divisions that diminish inclusivity in Afghanistan.



AP Photo/Ebrahim Noroozi

04

Afghan Women: Protests, Activism, & Human Rights Challenges



Photo: (Victor J. Blue/The New York Times)

The Taliban's return to power has plunged Afghanistan into turmoil and instability – echoing the challenges the country faced in the 1990s – but now confronting even greater uncertainty and challenges.

Despite this, driven by the determination to raise their voices and reclaim their rights in a country once again gripped by fundamentalism and patriarchy, women's resistance movements have emerged as a beacon of light.

This section of the report is based on Femena's interviews with Afghan women human rights defenders that have taken place over the course of the past two years. The initial interviews are intended to present a glimpse of the movement that emerged in the immediate aftermath of the Taliban takeover. Subsequent interviews were conducted with WHRDs following the Taliban's brutal suppression of the women's protests. Overall, these interviews aim to illustrate: (1) how and why these movements formed; (2) the transformations they have experienced over the last three years in response to realities on the ground; (3) the challenges WHRDs face in Afghanistan; and (4) women's vision for the future of their country.

A New Movement Emerges: Naan, Kar, Azadi (Bread, Work, Freedom!)

Phase 1: Public Protests, Shock and Awe at Heavy Price

Shortly after the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan, Afghan women took part in protests against the Taliban's illegitimate rule, demanding the preservation of rights for which they had fought over the past twenty years. The first protest took place in Herat on September 2, 2021, and focused on the right to education and employment. Subsequently, larger protests were organized in Kabul and Balkh on the 3rd and 4th of September. In addition to opposing the erasure of Afghan women from society, the protesters' demands also included the rights to political participation, elections, social justice, and equality.

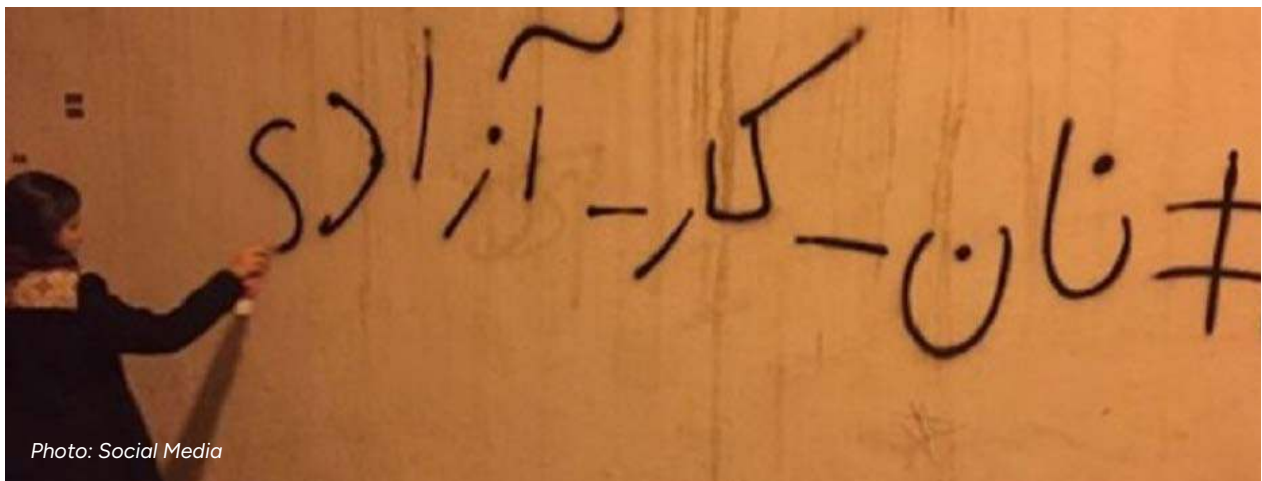


Photo: Social Media

Pictures emerging from these protests depicted groups of women, surrounded by Taliban men, holding rifles. The images shocked the world, which watched in awe the bravery of these largely unknown women in the landscape of Afghanistan's civic movements. They were putting their bodies on the line to defend not only their own rights but also the rights of other Afghan women, Afghan girls, and Afghan society as a whole.

One question posed to the activists concerned their motivations to protest. Considering the Taliban's violent past and clear indications that they would likely suppress the women's calls for rights and equality, what made these women overlook these concerns and their fears and join the call for protests?

Their answers revealed that it was precisely the brutality of the Taliban, the women's haunting memories of the dark days of the 1990s, the pain of witnessing their achievements taken away, their fear for their future and that of their children, and their deep sense of disappointment and betrayal by the international community that propelled them into activism with one common stated goal: to establish a sustained, unified, nationwide resistance movement in Afghanistan against the Taliban's oppression.

Munisa Mubariz (now exiled), a woman protester, initially harbored hopes that it might be possible to constructively engage with the Taliban. However, the aggressive stance that the Taliban took as soon as they seized power, followed by the protest that took place in Herat on September 2nd, compelled her and some colleagues to stage a demonstration in Kabul on the 4th of September 2021:

"In our minds, we held this violent image of the Taliban, associated with violence and beheadings, which instilled fear in us regarding a repeat of such events. The initial protest in Herat inspired us greatly; it acted as a catalyst. Subsequently, a WhatsApp group was established, revealing a wealth of inspiration and motivation to stand up for ourselves and against the Taliban. Thus, we began organizing, and our efforts persist to this day."

Mubariz joined the protest despite her family's objections and her own weakened physical state following recent surgery. She recounted the violence of the Taliban as they attempted to disperse the crowd. In one instance, the Taliban struck a protester in the head, causing them to bleed. This incident only strengthened Mubariz's resolve to build a movement to defeat the Taliban.

Nayera Kohistani, (now exiled) another woman protester, recounted the incident that pushed her to join the protests. Her initial response after the Taliban took over was extreme fear, leading her to burn her books and documents and keep her distance from other women and the protests. However, one day while at the post office, a Taliban member assaulted her with a cable. This act of violence pushed her to join the resistance:

"Something awakened inside me. I knew I had to stand up against these people. I was the first to arrive at the protest. The Taliban were already there, so we had to share secret codes among women protesters to change our location. We even had to change our clothes to stay safe because the Taliban were tracking us. However, it was incredibly emotional to confront the Taliban's guns and shout at them. I found courage in pain, disappointment, and fear. We didn't know each other personally, but we were united in our determination to confront the injustices plaguing our country and people. That's why this movement is spontaneous, and I'm a part of it."

Another common factor that motivated many of the women interviewed to join protests was the fact that women's rights to education and employment were among the first targets of the Taliban's repressive measures.

Deebah Farahmand, a member of the "Women's Revolutionary Movement," emphasized that the Taliban's stance on education only increased her determination to resist. Farahmand understood that the ideological and fundamental perspective of the Taliban would require that women human rights defenders remain diligent and continue their advocacy and demands.

"Imagine if we limit our resistance and demands to the reopening of schools and universities. Who can guarantee that the curriculum would not be influenced by fundamentalism? This is a fundamentalist group, and it will impact the curriculum and the education system. We do not want terrorists ruling our country. We demand a government free from terrorists and ultimately seek an inclusive government that upholds women's rights and equality."

Zholia Parsi (now exiled), a member of the "Spontaneous Movement of Women," stated that her daughters were her motivation for joining the protests. Stressing the significance of solidarity and unity among women, she explained:

"A friend of mine once said that if we want to be subjugated by the Taliban and allow them to dominate us, we should just stay at home. However, if we refuse to live a life of slavery, we must step out, protest, and ensure that the Taliban sees us and recognizes that they cannot overlook us. Thus, we reached out to other women, urging them to come out and be present so that the Taliban could not ignore us."

In sum, the profound impact of mutual suffering united the activists Femena interviewed. In the words of **Mursal Ayar** (now exiled), a member of the “Afghan Women Supporters of Justice Movement,”

“The Taliban deprived us of our most fundamental rights as citizens. This deprivation has become our source of strength for resistance.”

Phase 2: Reducing Risks, Building and Sustaining a New Movement

The protesters who took to the streets immediately following the Taliban takeover faced violent crackdowns and repression, including abductions and imprisonment. Femena has published a [report](#) documenting the Taliban's systemic mistreatment and torture of twelve Afghan women activists in detention, highlighting the physical and psychological abuse they endured while imprisoned. As the Taliban intensified their attacks and suppression, many women protesters were forced out of the country, and those who remained had to adapt their strategies. Their activities and efforts are necessarily taking a more informal and clandestine form, given the serious risks of open and public engagement.

It is important to understand that after the Taliban took control of the country, formal Afghan civil society organizations collapsed. The heads of many CSOs fled the country, leading their organizations to suspend activities out of fear of Taliban reprisals. Once resettled abroad, these leaders began to revive their organizations in exile, adapting their mandates and staffing. Now, many focus primarily on humanitarian needs, with management roles shifted to men at the Taliban's demand. Due to fears of retaliation, they can no longer operate as registered human rights organizations.



Photo: AP

Consequently, this phase of the movement, which follows the mass exodus of CSO leaders and more prominent activists, must operate in a space that is radically different than the pre-Taliban era. The civil society organizations that are still operational on the ground – which include both larger but also medium and smaller NGOS – are engaged in humanitarian work. This is primarily because their operational licenses do not allow them to engage in human rights advocacy or awareness raising, but less on the promotion of women's rights. Some of the NGOs engaged in humanitarian work had registered and been operational prior to the Taliban takeover, but some have registered since then. Whether the newly registered NGOs are aligned with Taliban ideology is unclear, but what is clear is that they are not willing to lose their operational licenses by crossing red lines and focusing on human rights and women's rights promotion.

This, however, does not mean that human rights and women's rights organizations are not operating in Afghanistan, but rather that circumstances have forced them to take a more informal and clandestine approach. This section of the report is based on Femena's interviews with a number of activists now operating in this highly closed, repressive, and precarious context.

Despite the dangers and the fact that many activists have been forced into exile, new initiatives have emerged, and many Afghan women have refused to sit by idly and in silence. Some have begun organizing in informal groups that connect primarily through online platforms. These underground initiatives aim to unite women and adapt their approaches in response to the Taliban's increasing attacks. Their activities are essential, as they engage in feminist learning, read and educate themselves, support informal schools, and promote employment generation.

Femena conducted interviews with three activists who are running secret schools. These activists, who had been teachers prior to the Taliban takeover, told us that they could not abide the fact that this most fundamental human right had been taken away from girls. Despite the huge risks involved, they run these secret schools at great risk and with much trouble. For example, in some cases, the students who come to class carry bolts of fabric and other sewing materials to look as though they are going to learn to sew, since that is an activity that is acceptable to the Taliban. Also, the location of the secret schools has to change frequently to evade discovery. Classes are sometimes held in private homes, sometimes in basements of buildings, or other discrete, hidden locations that are revealed to the students just prior to class.

"Once, a local cleric suspected that a school was running and informed a community member, warning that the Taliban were monitoring the area. This forced me to relocate. I have received multiple threats and warnings from people, but I continue teaching under different disguises and pretexts." Secret School Teacher

In addition, Femena interviewed activists who are operating small, underground businesses to provide some women with a much-needed source of income. Since the Taliban imposed sweeping restrictions on women's right to work in public spaces, and women who had been previously employed as civil servants or with international NGOs or UN agencies lost their jobs, alternative ways of earning a living are essential.

Lastly, Femena conducted interviews with activists engaged in advocacy efforts, which is exceedingly difficult in the current context. One activist stated that she has formed a network that includes 300 women to whom she has provided trainings on women's rights, gender-based violence, peace, and conflict management. Her group has held indoor protests, which they film and then share with women's groups outside Afghanistan to post on social media. Of course, this is done at great risk, since if discovered, the Taliban would raid their meetings and arrest them.

Obviously, all the activists interviewed are keenly aware of the risks inherent in what they do, but to remain on the margins is unthinkable for them. These informal groups are striving to protect civic space, advocate for human rights, and raise awareness about the human rights situation in Afghanistan. Strengthening and supporting these women-led informal human rights groups and civic actors is crucial for advancing this underground movement, fostering positive change in the long term, and keeping them alive.

05

Challenges Faced by the Emerging Women's Movement in Afghanistan



Photo: Wakil Kohsar/AFP, 28 May 2022

The activists shared the formidable challenges they face as they advocate for their rights. Significantly, the same challenges and obstacles were identified by both sets of activists Femena interviewed, those who had taken part in the earliest protests against Taliban rule, and those interviewed more recently.

The most significant challenges identified were the risks and dangers from the repressive measures of the Taliban, which include threats, harassment, violence, arrest, detention, inhumane treatment, torture, and the risk of extrajudicial killing. Next, the activists discussed the difficulty of having to confront unsupportive families or community members, and a more general lack of support from Afghan men. In some instances, the families' lack of support grows out of concern for the safety of the activists, but in others, they grapple with family members who are opposed to their actions. The interviewees also discussed the immense difficulties posed by the economic situation in Afghanistan and the constraints they face due to limited resources and capacities as a result. Finally, the lack of media attention and the withdrawal of the international community pose many logistical challenges for activists attempting to organize and build a movement.

These challenges are discussed in more length below.

1- Security risks: Abductions, imprisonment, torture, and other violent and repressive measures

It is impossible to overstate the gravity of the security risks that women in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan face. In January 2022, the Taliban conducted raids on the homes of female activists, shortly after using [pepper spray to disperse a peaceful protest of 20 women](#). As a result, three activists and members of women protesters groups, **[Tamana Zaryab Paryani](#)**, **[Zarmena Zaryab Paryani](#)**, and **[Parwana Ibrahimkhel](#)**, were abducted, and Tamana Zaryab Paryani shared a distressing video on social media before her arrest. After their release, all activists [revealed the abuse and torture they experienced in Taliban prisons](#). In November 2022, the Taliban raided a press conference and abducted **[Zarifa Yaqoobi](#)**, a Hazara activist, who then spent more than a month in Taliban prisons. In September 2023, the Taliban abducted woman protester **[Zholia Parsi](#)** founder of Zan Library and an underground protesting group, from her home and did not release her until December. Zholia was interviewed for this report.

These incidents, along with the [tragic murder of activist **Frozan Safi** in November 2021](#), exemplify the increasingly dangerous conditions faced by civil society activists in Afghanistan.

The activists Femena interviewed recounted harrowing tales of abduction, imprisonment, and torture. Some were so traumatized by their experience that they could not share the details. These repressive tactics are deployed to punish women for their activism, suppress their voices, and deter others from joining the movement.

Nayera Kohistani shared some details about her experience in detention:

"The Taliban found me in the 7th location where I had sought shelter and detained me with other protesters. They deprived us of water and food, receiving sustenance only when a foreign citizen monitored the prison cell – a move seemingly orchestrated to portray a positive image to foreign countries. They even denied us access to restrooms, responding to my pleas with instructions to "pee in your pants." What broke my heart was their refusal to allow my little daughter to use the restroom. In their prison, my daughter became silent and motionless, like a living statue. One of their cruel tactics involved forcing us to listen to the screams of others being tortured in the basement, accompanied by chilling threats of digging graves to bury us alive."

Some of the women interviewed were detained for shorter periods after community elders intervened in their cases, and also with the promise that they would not participate in future protests. Zarifa Yaqoubi (now exiled) had to sign such a statement after being held for six hours while she was threatened by her interrogators, and her phone was confiscated.

The challenges of this extremely securitized context forced many activists to continually adapt and modify their strategies for gathering. **Deebah Farahmand** recalls:

"Whenever one of us was detained, it meant all of us had to change our location. There were times when I couldn't even remember my home address after receiving warnings that the Taliban were approaching our protest site. Sometimes, I had to relocate so quickly that I didn't have time to pack enough clothes for my children. I can only say that we not only lack a safe physical home in Afghanistan but have also lost the very sense of home and security."

Despite the trauma and fear, women have continued their fight against oppression on their own, often adapting their approaches or adopting measures designed to ensure greater safety. Their courage and resilience in the face of such immense challenges underscore their unwavering commitment to freedom and equality.

2- Lack of support from family and general public, especially Afghan men

While the bravery of women protesters has been praised widely, including from men, women human rights defenders stepping up to challenge the Taliban rule received little practical support and solidarity from men or from their families. These women seek solidarity from others in Afghanistan, particularly Afghan men, to stand alongside women and against the injustices perpetrated by the Taliban.

[Afghanistan's Women Protesters Movement Coalition](#) continues to call on all sectors of society, particularly men, to join their fight against the Taliban. In media interviews, women protesters emphasize the importance of male solidarity in their efforts.

3- Economic challenges

[According to the UNDP](#) the Afghan economy contracted by 27% following the fall of the country to the Taliban, doubling unemployment, and the collapse of the finance sector. In fact, the economic crisis that accompanied the withdrawal of the international community from Afghanistan, the consequent loss of livelihoods for many, and the lack of financial support and funding have also been a significant challenges for activists. Activists in Afghanistan face difficulties meeting basic needs, such as transportation costs. The situation is especially dire for women activists, given the bans that exist on their employment.

Financial issues also pose a hardship in paying for the internet, a tool that many WHRDs have come to rely on not only for their connections with activists in the diaspora, for their efforts to build their own capacities through participation in online trainings or for efforts to connect with fellow activists inside the country or to carry out training and awareness activities.

Economic hardships also negatively impact the preparation of materials for events. This is in addition to the fact that, due to security risks, some places refuse to produce materials, including banners and posters, for their events and protests. This not only impedes their ability to communicate their message effectively but also underscores how deeply and systemically the Taliban's oppression operates.

4- Lack of media coverage on women's issues and women's resistance to oppressive Taliban policies

As the world's attention has turned away from Afghanistan to tend to other crises, the media coverage focused on the plight of Afghan women has also waned. Nationally, the assaults on journalists, the expelling of women from the media, and the imposition of censorship 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 the [loss of jobs for 80% of women journalists](#), making it almost impossible to obtain reliable information about the plight of women.

Munisa Mubariz (now exiled), expressed concern about the fact that women in provinces other than Kabul received very little to no media attention or coverage, leaving them even more vulnerable and with less community support or opportunities for fellow activists to assist them:

"We constantly need to change our strategies and tactics. As a result, we've shifted most of our organizing efforts indoors, using alternative methods of protest. We've also altered the online platforms used for organizing street protests as a security measure, reduced the duration of each protest to prevent mistreatment or violence from the Taliban against women protesters, and ceased inviting media and press to our protests. Instead, we document these protests ourselves and then share the footage with the media for publication."

Wahida Amiri (now exiled) explained that the Taliban's suppression had forced them to adapt to the situation by, for example, holding smaller protests that are not covered by the media, to avoid attracting attention. The protest is documented by the activists themselves who then share the content on social media.

A few online publications, working with journalists, including anonymous citizen journalists inside the country, have tried to keep a light on the situation of women. These are however, small outlets that should be supported, especially if they are working with a network of women journalists inside the country who can provide information about the lives of women and the impact of Taliban policies on them.

Additionally, women human rights defenders have identified other strategies, especially a reliance on social media, to shed light on their activism and their objections to the situation of women, which are less risky but also garner less attention. Amplifying their voices and ensuring they have access to the internet and social media outlets where they can communicate their concerns is critical.

5- Lack of international support

For the past four years, the international community's response has predominantly consisted of issuing conditional statements, lacking substantive pressure on the Taliban, which falls far short of what is necessary to ensure improvements in the human rights situation of the country. In certain instances, the international community's appeasement of the Taliban has inadvertently conferred their legitimacy, exacerbating the challenges faced in addressing the situation effectively.

It is important to note that key stakeholders such as US government special envoys, diplomatic missions in Afghanistan, EU special envoys, the UN Security Council, the UN Human Rights Council, and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) with its mandate to monitor and report on human rights violations, continue to

monitor or remain involved in the situation in Afghanistan. However, concrete actions to hold the Taliban accountable have been lacking.

High-level delegation visits to Afghanistan, inviting Taliban officials to European capitals, photo ops, and praising the Taliban for their so-called security across the country by a variety of international actors have inadvertently empowered the Taliban to continue their human rights violations with impunity.

By engaging in such actions, international actors have given de facto recognition to the Taliban's regime, providing them with a platform to project a false image of stability and control.

The international community's continual engagement with the Taliban under the guise of humanitarian aid has undermined Afghan women's resistance and worsened the suffering of the Afghan people under their rule. While humanitarian aid is undoubtedly crucial, it must be delivered in a fair, equal, and principled manner, without excluding women and marginalized ethnic and religious groups. Some international organizations, including the UN, have appeased the Taliban under the pretext of delivering humanitarian aid, forsaking their human rights principles in the process. For women in Afghanistan, the assistance provided by humanitarian organizations comes at a steep price, given that the distribution is controlled by the Taliban, which leaves many without access. Afghans often rely on social networks for support since the aid does not reach everyone. Unfortunately, the aid has not been sufficient or inclusive enough to serve as a lifeline, emphasizing the urgent need to prioritize human rights.

Furthermore, the international community, including the UN, has regrettably ignored widespread calls from the women of Afghanistan to place pressure on the Taliban by promoting equitable distribution of aid and inclusion of women in crucial conversations.

Despite the urgent pleas from the women of Afghanistan, they continue to be excluded from crucial conversations regarding the future that belongs to them. For example, a special envoys meeting convened by UNSG António Guterres excluded the voices of the people of Afghanistan, despite their demands for inclusion in May 2023 and again in February 2024.

Such exclusion undermines the principles of inclusivity and representation and fails to recognize the crucial role that women play in shaping a just society in Afghanistan. It is vital that the international community actively support the participation and representation of all Afghans, including women, in decision-making processes that will profoundly impact their lives.

As stated above, the dangers associated with public protests and gatherings significantly impact the ability of women to meet and organize. They struggle to find suitable venues, often resorting to small, private spaces and friends' homes.

Maryam Khaleda Sadaat also described the way she and fellow activists were forced to frequently change their protest sites and strategies:

"Sometimes, we even had to delete our chat groups and create new ones, verifying everyone's identity to ensure our safety and the continuity of our plans without interference from the Taliban and their undercover agents."

Sadaat added that the founder of their local collective, Parisa Mubariz, along with her brother and five other members, were arrested by the Taliban. They endured torture and were deprived of food for days.



Photo: (Ahmad Halabisaz/AP)

06

Recommendations



Image credit: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/21/world/asia/afghan-judges-women-taliban.html>

The following six recommendations call for urgent, concrete action by the United Nations, governments with feminist foreign policies, human rights institutions, and donor agencies to uphold Afghan women's rights, support Afghan women human rights defenders (WHRDs) in sustaining their activism, and ensure accountability for Taliban crimes.

Strengthen International Accountability Mechanisms

To: UN Member States, donor governments, international human rights organizations:

- Support and advance international accountability for Taliban crimes through the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ). The ICC has [issued arrest warrants](#) against Taliban leaders, and several countries are pursuing a [case against the Taliban for violating the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women \(CEDAW\)](#)
- Ensure full resourcing and political backing for the UN Human Rights Council's [new investigative mechanism on Afghanistan](#), and elevate Afghan-led accountability initiatives like the People's Tribunal for Afghan Women.

Enforce Non-Recognition and Non-Normalization of the Taliban

To: Governments, UN, regional bodies:

Maintain a clear stance of non-recognition of the Taliban and reject any normalization until the full spectrum of women's rights are restored. Condition all diplomatic engagement on measurable progress toward ending gender persecution and human rights abuses.

Resource and Sustain Women-Led Civic Initiatives

To: Donor governments, UN agencies:

Facilitate direct, flexible funding including small grants to women-led informal civic and community initiatives protecting civic space, providing education, and sustaining social resilience. Prioritize initiatives led by Afghan women inside the country and in exile.

Ensure Safe Passage and Protection for Women Human Rights Defenders

To: Governments offering humanitarian visas, UNHCR, human rights networks

Guarantee safe evacuation, asylum pathways, and emergency humanitarian relief for women human rights defenders (WHRDs) targeted by the Taliban. Ensure dedicated protection funds and relocation mechanisms in coordination with civil society partners.

Embed Meaningful Solidarity and Inclusion of Afghan Women in Decision-Making

To: UN, governments:

As a matter of principle, ensure Afghan women's direct participation in all discussions on Afghanistan's future within the UN, diplomatic negotiations, and donor forums. Women must be recognized as equal stakeholders shaping the country's path toward justice and peace, to prevent the mistakes of the past.

Support and Fund Documentation and Evidence Collection

To: Human rights organizations, donor agencies:

Provide sustained funding and technical support to Afghan and international organizations documenting Taliban atrocities.



Femena supports women human rights defenders, their organizations and feminist movements in the Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) region. Femena's work is particularly focused on contexts where civic space is shrinking or closed, as well as contexts impacted by authoritarianism, conflict, extremism and fascism. Femena aims to raise awareness about the impact of these trends on women, feminist movements and civic organizing. Femena's country and regional reports provide analysis about trends in the region, especially those that pushback on women's rights and target feminist movements. These reports also provide recommendations on how to support women's rights, women human rights defenders at risk and protect civic space, while strengthening feminist movements.