BETWEEN REPRESSION AND EXILE:

The Fate of Afghan Women Protesters in a Cycle of Threats and Forced Return

2026



This investigative report was jointly prepared by Femena, RaviZan and the Afghanistan Women's Justice Movement.

Following the collapse of the Republic on 24 Asad 1400 (15 August 2021), much of Afghanistan's legal and protection infrastructure was transformed, and citizens' fundamental rights were severely restricted. Women became more vulnerable than others and were pushed out of public life and into the confines of their homes. Women and girls lost their rights to freedom, choice, self-determination, and many other fundamental rights. Even secondary education for girls was banned. This situation drove many women, who had grown up believing in human rights values and had worked in legal, political, and civil society structures, into the streets to protest. Afghanistan's major cities, including Kabul, Herat, and Balkh, witnessed many of these demonstrations.

This report examines what happened to women protesters after they opposed the Taliban's policies and the conditions in which those who fled to Iran and Pakistan to escape threats are now living.

For this report, seven women activists and protesters were interviewed. Four have experience living in Pakistan; one was returned to Afghanistan from Iran; one was recently relocated from Pakistan to a third country; and one continues to live in Afghanistan under Taliban threats.

Exile Without Safety

Threats from the Taliban against women activists and protesters have driven hundreds of women to seek safety in Iran and Pakistan since 2021. Facing multiple threats, some women were forced to flee Afghanistan in secret, crossing the border irregularly. Zarifa Salangi was one of them. In 2022, she crossed into Iran wearing a chadari a full-body covering that conceals the face, to hide her identity.

Interviews conducted for this report reveal that some women protesters were forced to flee with their children, making an already dangerous and difficult journey to Pakistan even more challenging.

Shahla Arefi, a women's rights activist and member of the leadership of the Afghanistan Women's Justice Movement, says that after she was released from a Taliban prison in Kabul, she spent some time under informal house arrest and was under constant surveillance. During one of the group's attacks, she says, *"I was seriously injured in the neck area and had to receive immediate medical care and stitches."*

The growing dangers and threats from the Taliban against Ms. Arefi and her family eventually forced her to leave Afghanistan in September 2023 and seek refuge in Pakistan, a country where she believed she would at least find temporary safety.

The accounts of the women in this report show that, even after fleeing Afghanistan, women protesters did not find the peace they had sought. Instead, violence continued in other forms in their lives. In Pakistan and Iran, because they lack residency documents, they live with the constant fear of arrest and spend their days and nights in anxiety. Some of the women interviewed have also experienced arrest, harassment, and violence at the hands of police in the countries where they sought refuge.

Lack of access to employment opportunities in their host countries has also placed women protesters under additional pressure and in severe financial hardship.

> *Shahla Arefi says: "My family of eight and I have no stable or reliable source of income. Because of the existing restrictions, accessing suitable employment opportunities is extremely difficult for us." As a result, meeting the high costs of rent, food, medical treatment, transportation, and other basic necessities has become an unbearable burden for her and her family.*

The difficulty of meeting her family's living expenses, which Ms. Arefi must bear alone, combined with her concerns for her husband's safety in Afghanistan, where he was recently deported, has placed her in a vulnerable situation. This has led to increased anxiety, depression, feelings of insecurity, and constant worry about her family's future.

Zarifa Salangi also describes her living conditions in Pakistan as unbearable. She says that not having a visa keeps her in constant fear of arrest and deportation to Afghanistan. During her interview with us, Ms. Salangi said:

> *"Just as I am answering your questions, we received news that the police are planning to search our house tomorrow. At midnight, we moved to another house, and I do not know whose house it is."*

Ms. Salangi has not gone outside for a long time, not even to buy bread. Instead, she relies on help from a housemate who has a visa.

Her fear of the consequences of deportation to Afghanistan has become so intense that whenever the police come to search the house, she hides inside a kitchen cabinet.

Arrest, Detention Camp, and Deportation

Three women interviewed for this report have experienced arrest by police in their host countries.

Khadija Haidari, who was arrested by Pakistani police in Peshawar Mor on 21 April 2025, says:

> *"It was not clear at all what their intention was. They kept saying, 'Just come to the camp.' They did not even let us take our belongings. They said, 'Leave your belongings here. You will come back and collect them again.'"*

During the 24 hours she spent in detention, Ms. Haidari was allowed to use her mobile phone for only five minutes. Even then, it *"had one percent battery left. I sent a message, and the phone switched off. Then they said, 'It's off now, go.'"*

When Ms. Haidari was arrested in Pakistan and transferred to a camp, she faced difficult conditions. She could not access edible food and was kept in poor sanitary conditions. She says: *"Bathing, washing our hands, washing clothes, and using the toilet all took place in the same area, which was extremely dirty and in very poor condition."*

The interviewees say they also faced violence from security forces in the camp.

On the second day of their detention, security personnel pushed Ms. Haidari's husband and punched him in front of her because he had come out of his room and asked for his phone. Interviews with women who experienced detention indicate that both male and female police officers took turns humiliating migrants.

On the second night at the camp, a female police officer entered the room where Ms. Haidari was being held, shouting as she conducted body searches of everyone in the room. She searched the detainees' belongings to make sure no one had brought a phone. The officer even searched Ms. Haidari's bra and shouted at her, asking what she was hiding underneath it. When she found money, she left her alone.

Accounts from special camps for migrants in Iran describe similar conditions. Maryam Azizi, one of the interviewees in this report, says that after visiting the relevant offices in Iran to follow up on her residency status, she received a deportation notice from the police and was told to leave Iran within a specified period.

Ms. Azizi was also subjected to mistreatment. She says:

> *"We were not treated with respect or human dignity, and the circumstances made us feel afraid, helpless, and unsafe. Harsh verbal treatment and inappropriate psychological conduct placed us under tremendous pressure."*

During her arrest and detention in the camp, Maryam Azizi's mobile phone was confiscated, and she had no access to means of communication. As a result, she could not contact friends, family members, or a lawyer. Her family also did not know where she was being held.

The conditions in the detention facility were unsuitable for Ms. Azizi. She says:

> *"Detainees were not provided with sufficient or appropriate food, and hygiene standards were extremely poor. Overcrowding made the problems twice as severe. There was no sense of safety in the detention centre, and people were constantly worried about their health and security."*

Ms. Azizi was given no opportunity to challenge the deportation decision or request asylum. She was unable to effectively explain her security concerns and the reasons why returning to Afghanistan would put her at risk to the camp authorities.

The Risks of Forced Return

The women interviewed for this report who are currently in Pakistan say that their advocacy for women's rights and protests against the Taliban's repressive policies have exposed them to growing threats in Afghanistan. If they return to the country, they fear they will face arrest, imprisonment, torture, and death.

Zarifa Salangi says:

> *"Because I participated in demonstrations and have been protesting against the Taliban for nearly five years, if I am returned to Afghanistan, the Taliban will arrest me on charges of apostasy, undermining the Islamic system, improper hijab, and other offences."*

Salangi adds that, based on her knowledge of the Taliban's conduct, she knows that if she returns to Afghanistan, she will be arrested and face a sentence of flogging and stoning, and will be killed.

> *"Without a doubt, my punishment will be death. Even so, I am not afraid of the Taliban. The Taliban should be afraid of me. But it pains me to think that I might be killed by a terrorist group."*

Despite this, Ms. Salangi continues to live in Pakistan every day with the fear of arrest, constant anxiety, difficulty sleeping, and unrelenting nightmares.

Shahla Arefi describes a similar situation. She says that if she is returned to Afghanistan, her history of human rights work, civil society activities, and advocacy for women's rights would put her at risk of arrest, torture, and death. Living under these conditions has had

a damaging psychological impact on women protesters. Arefi says:

> *"These circumstances have had profound effects on my physical and mental health and on the health of my family members."*

Farahnaz Ebrahimi (a pseudonym) is another protester who opposed the Taliban's repressive policies. In July 2022, after being released from a Taliban prison, she travelled to Pakistan with her four-year-old child. She says that returning to Afghanistan could once again expose her to the risk of arrest and imprisonment.

After the Taliban took control of Kabul in 1400 (2021) and began imposing restrictions on women and girls, Ms. Ebrahimi joined other women protesters and took to the streets to demand justice and defend women's rights. This exposed her to direct threats from the Taliban. After participating in several gatherings and protest marches, she and her four-year-old child were arrested and imprisoned by the Taliban. She was also beaten while in prison.

Like several other women protesters, Ms. Ebrahimi was forced to confess to a crime she had not committed as a condition of her release from prison. She was also made to pledge that she would refrain from any further activities opposing the Taliban.

Ms. Ebrahimi says that after her release from prison, however, she resumed her human rights activities and continued protesting against the Taliban's repressive policies.

Currently living in Pakistan without regularized immigration status, Ms. Ebrahimi fears being forcibly returned to Afghanistan. She explains:

> *"If I am deported to Afghanistan, my son and I will be in serious danger. I fear that I will face arrest and serious threats again. If the Taliban arrest me again, this time they will bury me alive or subject me to a summary trial."*

Ms. Ebrahimi's concerns are shared by all women protesters who, because they lack official residency documents, face the risk of arrest and deportation from Pakistan.

The History of Threats and Persecution

The women's fear of return is rooted in their experiences of threats and persecution after protesting against Taliban policies. Shahla Arefi, who worked for the Ministry of Women's Affairs during the Republic, says:

> *"I continued my work as an active member and leader of the Afghanistan Women's Justice Movement. I played a role in organizing, coordinating, and leading more than forty protest movements and civil society activities in Kabul and several provinces."*

Ms. Arefi describes the purpose of these activities as defending women's fundamental rights, including the right to education, the right to work, fundamental freedoms, and human equality.

Their advocacy has come at a heavy price: the women describe threats, arrest, imprisonment, and torture.

Ms. Arefi has also repeatedly been threatened, intimidated, and harassed by Taliban intelligence forces. She has received repeated warnings from the Taliban's security institutions that, unless she stopped her civil society and human rights activities, she would face arrest, imprisonment, torture, and even the risk of death.

Continued pressure and threats have forced several women protesters to leave Afghanistan. For many of them, Pakistan and Iran were the only available options where they could seek refuge.

Between Displacement and the Fear of Return

The women interviewed, including those in Pakistan and the woman who remains in Afghanistan, describe lives shaped by restrictions, fear, and psychological distress.

For those still in Pakistan, the lack of official residency documents, uncertainty about the future, and constant fear of arrest and deportation have left them living in limbo, unable to plan for what lies ahead. Their lives remain suspended, with even the most basic sense of stability and normalcy out of reach.

The women interviewed describe interconnected challenges that have profoundly affected their lives: economic hardship; fear of arrest or forced deportation; difficulties renewing residency documents; limited employment opportunities; barriers to healthcare and their children's education; discrimination against asylum seekers; inadequate social support; restrictions on freedom of movement; emotional distress; uncertainty about the future; difficulties securing housing; and the rising cost of living. Together, these pressures have undermined their sense of security, stability, and hope for the future.

Ms. Arefi says that despite the difficult conditions of living in Pakistan, she has not lost hope. She believes that justice, human dignity, and freedom are values worth standing up for.

> *"I hope that my voice and my family's voice will be heard and that we will be given an opportunity to live in safety and freedom, with human dignity and access to our fundamental rights. An opportunity to begin our lives again, far from fear, threats, and harassment."*

The protesters also call on the international community to stand in solidarity with Afghan women and help ensure they can live in safety and dignity in countries where their rights are protected.

Ms. Salangi emphasizes the need for fair and transparent asylum procedures, stating:

> *"At the very least, help those who have three to four years of work experience and sufficient documentation, and grant them asylum. Do not make decisions based on the personal preferences and interests of certain individuals. Please exercise greater care."*

Farakhunda (a pseudonym) is another protester who opposed the Taliban's repressive policies and continues to live in Afghanistan. She describes an even deeper form of suffering.

> *She says: "What we experience under the Taliban cannot be called life, because life encompasses many things, including social well-being, freedom, and the right to education. Without these things, life loses its meaning."*

Farakhunda says that because the Taliban are pursuing her, she can neither enter the labour market nor participate freely in society. As a result, her life currently has no meaning.

Farakhunda says her life is on hold, and she constantly wonders what will eventually happen to her. Expressing her anxiety and uncertainty about the future, she says:

> *"I am constantly wondering what will happen to us. Where are we heading? Will we ever be able to breathe freely and live as human beings, or not? I cannot find satisfactory answers to these questions."*

Financial hardship has made life increasingly difficult for Farakhunda in Afghanistan while also preventing her from affording the cost of leaving the country. She says that if she had the financial means, she would seek refuge in a neighbouring country to escape the constant fear of arrest by the Taliban.

The women interviewed for this report, whether living in Afghanistan or Pakistan, share a common motivation: defending women's rights and protesting against the Taliban's repressive policies. Yet their courage has come at a profound cost. Today, their lives remain suspended in uncertainty, shaped by fear, insecurity, and an uncertain future.

Khadija Haidari is the only interviewee who has managed to find refuge in an African country, where she can begin to envision a future for herself. For the other women, prolonged uncertainty and the struggle to survive under these conditions have taken a severe psychological toll. Persistent fear and anxiety, along with their emotional consequences, have become part of their daily lives.

> *Somaya Behboodi, a psychologist, says: "When someone flees oppression at the hands of another person, it means they have already suffered enough and have experienced different emotions, such as fear and anxiety, all at once. But when that person flees to a place where, despite expecting to find refuge, they instead experience even more suffering, fear, and anxiety, another source of suffering and pain has been added to their lives."*

According to Ms. Behboodi, these women continue to endure new traumas before they have had a chance to recover from previous ones. The constant fear of arrest by security forces has left them in a persistent state of alertness, contributing to ongoing anxiety.

Ms. Behboodi adds that feelings of helplessness may also arise as these women struggle to rebuild their lives in Iran or Pakistan, where uncertainty and insecurity prevent them from establishing a sense of stability. Prolonged exposure to these conditions can take a serious toll on their mental health and increase the risk of depression.

Despite the dangers that women protesters face in Afghanistan, the Pakistani government continues to arrest and deport them, disregarding the principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits the forced return of people to places where they face serious risks.

Fereshta Abbasi, a researcher with Human Rights Watch's Afghanistan division, told Femena that the Pakistani government has no willingness to continue hosting those Afghan nationals whose safety is at risk under Taliban rule or who may face ill-treatment, arbitrary detention, and torture.

According to Ms. Abbasi, Human Rights Watch has also documented cases in which the Pakistani government arrested and deported Afghan migrants even when they held valid visas.

Ms. Abbasi adds that Afghan asylum seekers in Pakistan may be able to avoid deportation only by paying bribes to police officers, either at the time of arrest or while being held in detention camps.

Meanwhile, according to Human Rights Watch, some women have been arrested and tortured by Taliban forces after being returned from Pakistan. Ms. Abbasi says the threats currently facing women human rights defenders in Afghanistan could also lead to their killing and enforced disappearance.

Although UNHCR and IOM monitor cross-border movements between Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan, the exact number of Afghan nationals who have travelled to these countries remains difficult to establish. Many movements occur through unofficial crossing points, making comprehensive monitoring challenging.

Nevertheless, according to a United Nations report published on 19 May of this year, nearly 5.9 million Afghan nationals have returned from Iran and Pakistan to Afghanistan

since September 2023. The report adds that 600,000 people entered Afghanistan in just the first four months of this calendar year.

The accounts of the women in this report demonstrate that protesting against the Taliban's policies did not end with their departure from Afghanistan. Instead, it led to continued insecurity, exile, and uncertainty. Violence and threats have continued in new forms in Pakistan and Iran, leaving these women's lives filled with insecurity, fear, and anxiety. They remain caught between their longing for freedom and the uncertainty of whether they will ever attain it.

Beyond the immediate threats to their safety because of their protests, these women are also haunted by the possibility of never witnessing the future they have fought for: a future in which all Afghan women can live freely.

> *As Zarifa Salangi explains, what frightens her most about returning to Afghanistan is the possibility of never seeing the day when freedom becomes a reality and never fulfilling her dream of being able to "dance with my hair loose in the wind."*

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.

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Rawi Zan Media is the result of the effort and commitment of a group of female journalists and writers. Seeing the severe oppression and suffocation imposed on Afghan women by the Taliban, they decided to launch this media outlet in September 2022.

The explicit policy of Rawi Zan Media is to fully support the lost rights of women and to provide an accurate, objective, and impartial reflection of current events in the country. Operating with a deep understanding of media ethics, it works independently, free from the influence or control of any domestic or international organization.

www.avizan.com

The Women's Justice Movement (WJM) is an independent, women-led organization registered in Norway that works to defend human rights, justice, and gender equality, and to support the women and girls of Afghanistan.