

# Supporting Afghan Women Protesters

An Investigation Report

On

*Afghan women protesting the misogynistic policies of the Taliban live in desperate situation inside Afghanistan and neighboring countries. They need urgent help.*

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## Introduction

Since the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan, they have been enforcing restrictive policies on various aspects of women's lives. More than 60 decrees and directives have been issued, infringing on women's rights.<sup>i</sup> These include bans on education beyond the 6th grade, employment, travel without a male guardian, visiting recreational areas, participating in sports, going to beauty salons and now on their public appearances and voices being heard.

In August 2024, the Taliban codified the "Vice and Virtue" law, published in the official gazette.<sup>ii</sup> Article 13 mandated that women must veil their bodies, cover their faces, and remain silent in public.<sup>iii</sup> This law extends restrictions on women and expands the gap of gender segregation. It bans women from speaking loudly or assertively in public and further bans female voices from public announcements.

In response to these misogynistic policies, Afghan women have not remained silent. They have taken to the streets, protesting these injustices. The first protest began on September 2, 2021, in Herat and quickly spread to Kabul.<sup>iv</sup> Subsequent protests followed in Kabul on September 3 and 4, 2021.<sup>v</sup> Over time, these protest groups have organized into seven distinct movements, calling for an end to the Taliban's restrictive rules on women. This number could continue to grow.

In response, the Taliban have brutally suppressed the women protesters. Taliban soldiers have attacked the protesters with electric batons, tear gas, aerial gunfire, and whips.<sup>vi</sup> As the resistance grew, the Taliban have become even more harsher, starting to imprison, torture, and reportedly raping them in Taliban detention facilities.<sup>vii</sup> According to UN Special Rapporteur's February 2024 human rights situation report, "statements by the Taliban, confirmed by interviewees, indicate that women who are perceived to be protesting are treated particularly harshly, especially if there is a suspicion of foreign influence."<sup>viii</sup>

This *report* is based on desk research and interviews conducted with eight Afghan women protesters who were imprisoned by the Taliban. To protect their identities and ensure their safety, the author did not disclose the names or other identifying details of the victims. The interviews confirmed allegations reported by various public sources. These women's stories are deeply distressing and reflect severe violations of basic human rights. The psychological suffering these

women have experienced is overwhelming, often leading to isolation within society and even within their own families and communities. The victims suffer from intense pain and struggle to find peace. The experiences shared by these women involve inhumane treatment that violates international laws and conventions and strips away fundamental human dignity.

## Background

During the past two decades, before the Taliban's return in August 2021, Afghanistan had made significant progress in protecting and promoting women's rights. The 2004 constitution, which was the founding document of the former republic government, guaranteed equal rights for men and women, including access to education. During this period, women participated in all spheres of life, from basic social practices to political leadership, and from sports to senior business management positions. Their rights and roles were clearly defined and secured by the Constitution.

The progress made in the education sector was remarkable. By 2020, 3.5 million of the 9 million children attending schools were girls.<sup>ix</sup> Over 100,000 girls were enrolled in higher education institutions.<sup>x</sup> More than a quarter of parliamentary seats were held by women, and women occupied numerous senior-level positions.<sup>xi</sup> The Ministry of Women's Affairs was established in the cabinet to promote the rights and address the social issues of women.<sup>xii</sup> Additionally, dozens of private dormitories for girls attending higher education institutions were established. Overall, women were actively involved in all aspects of socio-political life.<sup>xiii</sup>

However, this progress was abruptly reversed with the Taliban's takeover. The direct victims of the Taliban's return to power have been women. Nevertheless, Afghan women have not been silent and continue to resist and protest courageously despite the threat to their lives posed by the Taliban.

The Taliban not only ignored but also reversed all the progress made over the past two decades. They justify their action by claiming that the group is now seeking to reform society by closing girls' schools, preventing them from attending university, and barring them from public work as part of implementing the Sharia law, defined solely by their regime. Taliban officials stated repeatedly reviewing the curriculum and aligning it with Islamic Sharia and Afghan values, girls will be allowed to attend school.<sup>xiv</sup> However, even after three years of their rule, they have not permitted girls to return to school.

During these three years, women who have protested the Taliban's misogynistic policies have been harshly suppressed. Reports indicate severe forms of torture, including electric shocks in genital parts, being hit in body parts, and gang rape.<sup>xv</sup>

Taliban have repeatedly denied accusations of these brutal acts against women protesters. Despite multiple reports on sexual torture against women in prison, the group does not take any responsibility.

### **Life in Limbo After Imprisonment**

Following the violent suppression of protests that led to the imprisonment and torture of women protesters, various human rights organizations and individuals stepped in to help vulnerable women avoid further imprisonment and torture. These entities made efforts to relocate women at risk to safe places inside and outside Afghanistan. Some of these women have successfully been moved to countries like the USA, Canada, Australia, and some European countries with the assistance of women's rights organizations. However, these efforts have not been sufficient. Some women protesters still live under very difficult conditions in countries like Pakistan and Iran and others remain in hiding in Afghanistan. Women protesters abandoned in these countries, continue to suffer from the traumatic experiences of torture and imprisonment.

Iran and Pakistan have hosted millions of Afghan refugees for over four decades due to continuous violence and turmoil in Afghanistan. The Taliban's return to power in 2021 triggered yet another large-scale migration. The latest data report released by the UNHCR shows there are 4.5 million Afghan refugees in Iran and 3.1 million in Pakistan.<sup>xvi</sup> However, over the past three years, Iran<sup>xvii</sup> and Pakistan<sup>xviii</sup> have repeatedly expelled Afghan refugees in large numbers. For instance, between September and November 2023, Pakistan's authorities forcibly returned nearly 400,000 Afghan refugees, some of whom had lived in Pakistan for nearly 40 years.<sup>xix</sup> Among those most at risk of deportation are women protesters, the most vulnerable group among the refugees. If they are sent back to Afghanistan, they will once again face the danger of imprisonment and torture. Therefore, it is imperative for human rights organizations and the countries who hold human rights dear to identify and assist vulnerable women inside Afghanistan and in neighboring countries.

## Recommendations

The first and most crucial step in supporting women protestors is to identify them within Afghanistan and neighboring countries. After identification, providing support and protections such as safe houses, shelter, food, and clothing is essential, as these women have lost their sources of income and have exhausted any savings, they had over the past three years. Alongside material assistance, these women need urgent psychological support. They have not only lost their freedom and jobs in Afghanistan but also carry the traumatic and bitter experiences of imprisonment and torture.

It is essential for countries that support human rights to prioritize the asylum cases of Afghan women, particularly those who have been tortured and imprisoned by the Taliban, as the suppression of Afghan women due to their gender is currently one of the most pressing human rights issues.

Establishing safehouses to safeguard women activists at risk could be a key policy action donors and stakeholders could consider for Afghanistan. While it may be challenging to maintain a safehouse under Taliban rule without their supervision, practices in other countries have shown that it is possible. Secret safehouses for women, without Taliban's supervision will be essential to provide the necessary safety and protection for women who need shelter.

Despite the Taliban's brutal suppression of women's protests, Afghan women have not been deterred from their struggle for fundamental rights, such as education, work, and meaningful societal participation. Their resistance highlights that a significant number of Afghan women have reached an understanding and awareness empowering them to fight for their fundamental rights, which align with Islam and Afghan values. The steadfastness of Afghan women, both inside and outside Afghanistan, against the Taliban's anti-women and anti-human rights policies has been crucial in preventing the Taliban from gaining international recognition. Afghan women activists expect the international community to heed their protests and create conditions in Afghanistan where women can work and study freely.

For the past three years, both women inside Afghanistan and Afghan rights activists abroad have consistently recounted the current situation as gender apartheid and urged the international community to recognize it as such.<sup>xx</sup> They demand that the United Nations codify gender apartheid in international criminal law and prosecute its perpetrators accordingly.



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