

REVERSAL AND REPRESSION:

State of Women's Rights and Civic Space in Taliban-Controlled Afghanistan (2021-2023)



Photo: Shafiullah Kakar/AFP via Getty Images

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INTRODUCTION

This shadow report on the status of human rights in Afghanistan has been prepared for the 4th cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) scheduled during the 46th session (April - May 2024). The collaborative effort involves three civil society organizations and an individual human rights activist. The thematic areas of focus for the report are two issues: "Women's Rights Situation" and "Civic Space: Rights to Freedom of Expression, Peaceful Assembly, and Association." The data in this report specifically corresponds to the period of 2021-2023, commencing mid-August 2021, with the Taliban takeover. The report aims to assess the current human rights situation pertaining to women's rights and the state of right to freedom of expression and assembly since the Taliban assumed de facto governance functions.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This shadow report was prepared in consultation/coordination with the following organizations or individuals, drawing on their primary areas of engagement and concern.

- **Rawadari:** Rawadari is an Afghan human rights organization that aims to deepen and grow the human rights culture of Afghanistan, ultimately reducing the suffering of all Afghans, especially women and girls. Rawadari helps build an Afghan human rights movement, monitors human rights violations, and pursues justice and accountability for violations. Rawadari works with individuals and collectives inside and outside Afghanistan.
- **Human Rights Defenders Plus (HRD+):** Primarily focuses on advocacy, monitoring, research, coordination, and protection of human rights defenders.
- **Wazhma Frogh:** Human rights/women's rights activist, focusing on security and violence against women and girls. Wazhma's data is collected from a network of activists she works with from different provinces in Afghanistan.
- **Safety and Risk Mitigation Organization (SRMO):** Concentrates on civic space and the situation of human rights defenders (HRDs), women human rights defenders (WHRDs), civil society organizations (CSOs), and journalists.

The data/information of each stakeholder organization or individual was collected by credible sources in 29 provinces including Kabul, Kandahar, Herat, Nangarhar, Bamiyan, Kunar, Uruzgan, Helmand, Badakhshan, Kunduz, Daikundi, Sar-e-pol, Takhar, Ghor, Maidan Wardak, Ghazni, Panjshir, Parwan, Baghlan, Khost, Paktia, Paktika, Farah, Nimruz, Badghis, Kapisa, Nuristan, Laghman and Balkh. Further, additional data was gathered from stakeholders' resources outside Afghanistan, for example, human rights defenders currently outside Afghanistan sharing credible information. The data was collected from a variety of sources, such as local focal points, open source, and impacted interviewees/informants.

The report offers a series of recommendations tantamount to a collective ‘call to action’, intended to galvanize the international community to hold the de facto authorities (DFA) accountable for gross violations of human rights and actively foster the expansion of women’s rights and civic space. Through careful synthesis of data, insights, and recommendations, the report highlights the severe human rights violations committed by the Taliban and underscores the impact of the regime’s daily directives and decrees which have progressively curtailed fundamental rights, impeding the rights of women and girls and citizens’ rights to freely express themselves and assemble.

The report stands as a testament to the commitment of Afghanistan’s civil society organizations and human rights activists who have continued to monitor and document violations despite the increasingly restrictive and challenging context in Afghanistan. It also serves as a call for justice and an appeal for efforts to protect and restore the rights and freedoms of the Afghan people, especially women, who continue to strive for equality and inclusion in society.

METHODOLOGY

Gathering accurate information under the Taliban regime has posed significant obstacles due to surveillance by de-facto authorities and security risks for interviewees. To compile this report, the authoring organizations utilized data collected through careful verification and confirmation from their monitoring efforts. For instance, SRMO maintains a database of incidents and human rights abuses targeting activists, civil society organizations, and Afghan civilians verified through credible sources, including victim/family testimony and two additional reliable sources. Rawadari also implements a similar three source verification process, gathering data from reliable local sources including witnesses, victims, and their relatives. The organizations contributing to this report maintain contact with various networks, including human rights defenders, activists on the ground and in exile, former employees of the previous government, survivors, and local journalists. Data is categorized by gender, type of violence, perpetrator, and province.

The organizations are all committed to the ‘do no harm’ principle related to data collection and have taken measures to protect the identify of sources and survivors. To ensure the safety of interviewees and sources, specific details about their identities are not disclosed in some cases and in other instances to safeguard victims and witnesses, exact dates and locations of human rights violations have been omitted. All data in this report has been included after verification by the collaborating organizations.

CHALLENGES

The presence of the Taliban in the country has disproportionately affected the operations of civil society organizations (CSOs) and human rights defenders. Additionally, access to information and monitoring efforts have been significantly restricted under Taliban control. For CSOs established in Afghanistan prior to the Taliban's takeover, there has been a noticeable shift in their activities due to heightened risks faced by their colleagues. Organizations formed in exile have strategically adapted their programs and operations to ensure the safety of their team members, often working undercover or maintaining a low-profile presence within Afghanistan. The impact of the Taliban's anti-women policies and directives have also reverberated across the work of CSOs in country, adversely impacting the organizations contributing to this report as well. Women's movement and work has been constrained by restrictive bans and decrees. For instance, SRMO, based in the UK, continues its work from outside the country due to constraints faced by women activists inside Afghanistan. Some organizations have managed to maintain a level of activity by transitioning fully to online platforms following the catastrophic ban on women's employment.

Status of Women's Rights from 2021 to 2023

Over the previous 20 years, under the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, gradual progress was made to safeguard women's rights, for example, through the establishment of specialized prosecutors' units and courts to address violence against women and girls. The Republic's commitment to international treaties and legal framework offered foundational support for women's rights, albeit limited sustainable impact. Subsequent to the Taliban's takeover on August 15, 2021, women's rights significantly eroded, evidenced by the Taliban's temporary advisory on August 25, 2021, warning women to stay home for "safety" reasons. By June 2023, the Taliban had issued over 60 decrees, orders and edicts¹ curtailing women's rights, creating an environment of systematic oppression and gender-based discrimination equivalent to gender apartheid. Amnesty International and the International Commission of Jurists have suggested that these policies constitute crimes under international law, namely gender persecution, which in turn is a recognized crime against humanity. Women face increased harassment, verbal abuse, and violence from officials of the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (MPVPV) which was ironically put into place in lieu of the Ministry of Women's Affairs. Reports of such incidents highlight the distressingly cyclic impact on women's physical and mental well-being. For example, DFA insist that only female doctors treat female patients and yet they have curtailed women graduate doctors from final examinations and no longer allow women to start medical studies at the university level. This display of misogynistic practices

¹ United States Institute of Peace. (n.d.). Tracking the Taliban's Mistreatment of Women. Retrieved from <https://www.usip.org/tracking-talibans-mistreatment-women>

perpetuates an escalation of violence against women/girls under the current repressive system implementing a gender apartheid. Further illustrations of abrogation of freedoms include a meeting attended by HRD+ sources with Unit 053 of the Taliban's General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI) and media in a northern province, during which journalists were warned against reporting on violence against women, indicating a clampdown on information dissemination.

The entities engaged in this report observed, validated, and recorded instances of grave women human rights infringements implemented by the Taliban. The subsequent cases represent a sample of our findings; however, it should be noted that violations of women's rights in various regions significantly extend beyond these instances.

- **Punishment and Arbitrary Detention of Women:** Between August 2021 and November 2022, Rawadari identified 136 cases of arbitrary arrests and imprisonment of women across provinces such as Kabul, Ghazni, Badakhshan, and others. Reasons for detention ranged from association with the previous government to voicing opposition to Taliban's policies. Charges or accusations from DFA also included fleeing home to marry ('elopement') or failure to adhere to hijab requirements.
- **Education:** The Taliban's return halted education for girls while schools reopened for boys; girls above 6th grade were banned from schools, resulting in over 680 days of lost education. As of August 2023, DFA issued over 15 restrictive decrees and orders, severely impacting women's education. Regarding higher education, initially in September 2021 women were banned from teaching at Kabul University and on December 20, 2022, a complete ban was imposed on female students attending both public and private universities. These are only two of several examples of the severe limitations on women's access to higher educational opportunities. Most recently, women who had received scholarships for studies in United Arab Emirates, Dubai were turned back from the Kabul airport by the Taliban.²
- **Healthcare:** Challenges in women's healthcare have existed in Afghanistan for decades, with high maternal mortality rates and lack of access to healthcare in rural Afghanistan. However, the situation significantly worsened after the Taliban announced a travel restriction of 45 miles without a male escort (mahram) for women, further hindering access to healthcare. As noted above, the DFA have also restricted male doctors treating female patients and prohibit female medical students from final exams. These policies exacerbate the issue, especially considering the scarcity or absence of female doctors in remote areas to provide lifesaving healthcare services to women, children and newborns.

² Rights groups condemn Taliban's new curbs on women's education movement. (2023, August 28). Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/28/rights-groups-condemn-talibans-new-curbs-on-womens-education-movement>

- **Political and Economic Participation:** Women's opportunities in government, parliament, and organizations effectively ceased under the Taliban. As noted above, on September 17, 2021, the Ministry of Women's Affairs was replaced by the MPVPV, signaling a shift in priorities and a lack of willingness to enable, encourage or support women's participation. On December 24, 2022, Taliban banned women from working for NGOs and systematically limited their economic opportunities going as far as imposing bans on sectors such as bakeries, medical centers, beauty salons, and small businesses run by women. These measures have further restricted women's participation and their ability to achieve economic independence.
- **Access to Justice:** In an exceedingly short period of time, DFA dismantled established laws and mechanisms protecting women and girls which had been developed over the previous two decades. Specialized prosecutors' offices, courts, and the Law on Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW Law) were abolished. Other legal instruments as well as international legal commitments designed to provide women with access and participation in justice have been similarly ignored. This has been accompanied by removal of women employees in legal and judicial institutions, diminishing women's representation and protection. Rawadari findings reveal that the Taliban terminated the employment of approximately 1,016 professional and administrative staff from various sections of the Attorney General's Office, along with 2,000 male and female judges nationwide. Roughly more than 300 female judges were active prior to August 2021.³ Taliban also dismantled the special units responsible for addressing violence against women and children, as well as the unit focused on combatting harassment of women in government offices within the Attorney General's structure, both in the capital and provinces. Additionally, the Taliban disassembled 27 women's protection centers (shelters) which had been provided under the Law on Elimination of Violence against Women (LEVAW) and supervised under a special department at the Ministry of Women's Affairs. The 2009 LEVAW prior to its 'repeal' defined and criminalized many actions/offenses as crimes of violence against women, a significant tool to combat VAWG. Consequently, other mechanisms aimed at safeguarding women from violence were dismantled, and legal and judicial institutions, including courts, prosecution offices, and vital departments of the Ministry of Interior, witnessed the removal of female staff, in violation of Afghanistan's obligations under UNSCR 1325. Currently, hardly any women are employed in legal and judicial institutions under Taliban control, except for a small number serving as guards or performing body searches. Women defense lawyers are not receiving official permission to practice. This situation has resulted in reduced protection and increased vulnerability of women to gender-based violence, as there are simply no

³ United States Institute of Peace. (2022, August). After a Year of Taliban Rule, Advances for Afghan Women and Youth Have All But Evaporated. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/08/after-year-taliban-rule-advances-afghan-women-and-youth-have-all-evaporated>

means to address and respond to such cases. This absence of mechanisms/procedures potentially leads to abuses by families, as women lack avenues to report, and investigative processes are lacking. Inevitably cases of VAWG are increasing.⁴ The Taliban's interpretation of Sharia law is marked by a distinct stringency and noticeable bias against women. This shift has significantly undermined women's rights in Afghanistan. Despite the challenges posed by the sensitive nature of these issues and the lack of comprehensive data, insights from HRD+ interviews with confidential sources within the country indicate a rise in instances of violence, domestic abuse, and harmful traditional practices targeting women since the resurgence of the Taliban. The existing system appears deliberately crafted to diminish women's influence, curtail their agency and thus render them 'invisible'. Given the totality of repressive actions against women, upticks in VAWG have been recorded. For example, according to SRMO's findings, between April and June 2023, there were 18 documented cases of women murdered, along with an additional case where it remains unclear whether the woman's death resulted from murder or suicide. Suicides have reportedly been rising. While the actual number of women's deaths due to violence is likely higher, these cases provide a glimpse into the daily violence that women endure.

Between August 2021 and June 2023, Rawadari's findings show that women's cases formally initiated during the prior government have been dismissed. Most women's cases, both criminal and civil, are settled within administrative offices without formal records and most assuredly without representation by legal counsel. For example, in provinces like Balkh, Takhar, and Baghlan, the Department for Promotion of Virtue stands as the sole entity vested with authority to address women's legal cases.

According to Rawadari and HRD+ findings, in most regions of the country, women's legal and criminal cases are resolved through non-judicial methods such as all male local jirgas. For instance, on February 19, 2023, in Badghis province, a woman was brutally assaulted and set on fire by her husband. The local community rushed her to a hospital, where she succumbed to her injuries a month later. Despite complaints to the Taliban, the matter was referred to a local elders' jirga. As 'punishment', the jirga decided that the husband must transfer a plot of land to the deceased woman's father and family.⁵

⁴ UN Women. "Gender Alert 2: Women's Rights in Afghanistan One Year after the Taliban Take-Over." August 2022. https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-08/Gender-alert-2-Womens-rights-in-Afghanistan-one-year-after-the-Taliban-take-over-en_0.pdf.

⁵ ILAC. (2023). ILAC Afghanistan Rule of Law Assessment 2023. http://ilacnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/ILAC_Afghanistan_Report_2023-2.pdf

Civic Freedom: Freedom of Expression, Peaceful Assembly, and Association from 2021 to 2023

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Article 17, ensures protection from arbitrary interference with privacy, family, home, or correspondence. Article 19 secures the right to hold opinions and express them freely, including seeking, receiving, and imparting information across various media. Article 21 recognizes the right to peaceful assembly without restrictions, and Article 22 upholds the freedom to associate with others and form groups for mutual interests.

Ratification of the ICCPR on January 24, 1983, and the Afghanistan's previous Constitution of 2004 guaranteed the right to peaceful assemblies, creation of associations, and freedom of expression for all citizens. However, the Taliban's limited understanding of international treaties and their reluctance to uphold international obligations have eliminated freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association under their rule. They have forcefully extinguished individuals' rights based on expression of dissent, disagreement with the DFA actions and peaceful protests in many provinces. Taliban violently repress their opponents and critics and have utilized violence as a tool to subdue criticism and dissent.

Since the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan, the space for establishment of new student, professional or trade unions, civil institutions, or political parties has considerably shrunk while there is also no room for operation or establishment of political parties. Taliban have actively suppressed and hindered any activities of such existing organizations in various provinces. For instance, the union of university professors, which previously operated throughout Afghanistan, was disbanded in Kandahar by an official letter from the Taliban's Ministry of Higher Education. On February 20, 2022, during a meeting with civil society representatives, the Chief Justice of Kandahar ordered civil rights activists, as well as voluntary and social charity organizations, to halt their activities. Some participants in the meeting conveyed that the Chief Justice cited the absence of a specific policy for civic and voluntary activities as the rationale for this directive.

In implementing restrictions on unions and associations, Taliban are harassing and arbitrarily detaining civil society activists, tribal elders, education campaigners, university professors and human rights defenders. HRD+ has documented the detention of Matiullah Wesa, an education campaigner and the Head of the PenPath organization, which advocates for inclusive education in rural Afghanistan. Mr. Wesa was arbitrarily detained on March 27th, 2023, with the reason cited as "illegal activities" by the Taliban General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI). As part of awareness campaigns, he organized public events involving local community elders to advocate for inclusive education for both boys and girls. In another incident, civil rights activist Azim Azimi was detained by the Taliban's intelligence agency for his involvement in organizing protests against the planned visit of Pakistan's National Security Advisor, Moeed Yousof.

The Taliban's lack of tolerance also extends to religious practices; they imposed restrictions on public ceremonies for the Shia religious minority group during Ashura commemorations in 2023.

When some mourners/participants in Ashura ceremonies protested the restrictions, their protest was met with violence by the Taliban. The DFA employ aggressive tactics, including the use of live weapon fire, physical assaults, and detentions to scatter protests and gatherings. The Taliban's response to protests has been and remains marked by violence, and 13 civil and peaceful demonstrations were suppressed during the initial months of de facto governance. Taliban have arrested protestors and journalists covering protests.

As per SRMO's documentation, the Kabul Fans YouTube channel's office in Karte Char, Kabul was raided on April 13, 2023. Eight men in Taliban attire forcibly entered the premises, assaulting multiple staff members, damaging equipment, confiscating mobile phones, and looting money. Despite reporting the incident to Taliban authorities, there was no follow up from the authorities. Furthermore, there have been cases involving educators facing arrests or even death, with limited insight into the motivations behind these occurrences. As of September 2023, at least a total of seven educators including three school principals and four teachers, have been detained. Another incident involved undisclosed numbers of teachers held in custody in Mazar-e Sharif, Balkh province on May 16, 2023, following the discovery of secret lessons provided to girls in a raided school. This operation also resulted in the detention of several students by the Taliban. Similar situations of teacher detentions were documented in Kapisa, Parwan, Baghlan, and Panjshir provinces. The situation has been further exacerbated by disturbing accounts of school poisonings and arson attacks. 50 cases of male and female students were recorded in "Kabud Ab" school and 20 cases of students and two teachers in "Faizabad" girl school in Sancharak District of Sar-e Pul province on June 3, 2023. Additionally, around 40 female students at a religious school in Nav Abad area, Qala-i-Kah district of Farah province were poisoned by drinking water.

Multiple incidents were reported related to concerning events involving university professors. On April 4, 2023, in Faizabad city, Badakhshan Province, Taliban intelligence arrested Sakhidad Sangin, an English literature professor at university in Faizabad. The academic community remained silent, fearing repercussions from the Taliban. On April 9, 2023, in Maimana city, Faryab Province, Mohammad Kazim Amini, a professor at a teachers' training center and writer, was detained without a clear reason. He was later released on bail on April 11, 2023, on the condition that he refrain from any further activities against the regime. On April 19, 2023, in Bazarak city of Panjshir province, Jabar Jibrán, a Shari'at professor at Panjshir University, was arrested by Taliban intelligence and transported to an unknown location for alleged collaboration with the National Resistance Front. On February 1, 2023, in Kabul, Zakaria Osuli, a university lecturer and writer, was arrested by the Taliban. He had recently published a book about Ahmad Shah Massoud, a former Afghan politician recognized by the former government as "national hero". These events among others add to growing concerns about academics' safety in Afghanistan under the Taliban.

Based on the HRD+ findings, Taliban have introduced several sets of regulations through decrees and directives restricting media operations. On September 19, 2021, DFA outlined 11 such controlling rules for Afghan journalists and media workers. On November 21, 2021, the Taliban's

MPVPV issued additional 8 religious' guidelines for media outlets. In July 2022, the Taliban's Supreme Leader issued further directives that prohibited criticism, accusations or implied criticisms against Taliban authorities, public service officials, and religious scholars. Consequently, Afghanistan was removed from the Media Freedom Coalition (MFC) in November 2022. A statement from the MFC noted that this decision was based on the discrepancy between Afghanistan's media freedom situation and the Global Pledge, which commits governments to reinforce international initiatives to champion media freedom.

Taliban authorities have imposed other repressive measures on the media landscape, leading to the closure of 200 media outlets and causing 4,932 journalists and media staff, including 914 women, to lose their jobs as verified by HRD+ sources within Afghanistan. This authoritative clampdown has extended to NGOs, which have faced office searches, closures, and prevention of female staff from working, as documented by Amnesty International in September 2021. Consequently, freedoms of association, assembly, and expression have been effectively suspended. Additionally, according to the latest CIVICUS Monitor report from March 2023, which tracks civil society freedoms globally, Afghanistan's civic space has plummeted from a "repressed" to a "closed" rating – the lowest designation possible.

This situation highlighted by Rawadari's report titled "One Year of Taliban Rule in Afghanistan" underscores the significant deterioration of civic space between August 15, 2021 – August 15, 2022. During this period, the Taliban executed a broad shutdown on civil society organizations, media outlets, and independent news agencies. In the same period, 151 journalists were arrested, and 46 journalists faced violence and intimidation. According to an evaluation by the International Federation of Journalists and the National Union of Afghan Journalists, the activities of 318 media outlets have been censored and nearly 3,000 journalists have lost their jobs after the Taliban took control of the country.

The Taliban's imposition of repressive regulations on media and press operations has further worsened the situation. These measures include prohibitions on independent and impartial reporting, necessitating media to align with the DFA's policies. Disobedience has resulted in violence against journalists, illustrating a drastic curtailment of freedom of the press. Violence against a free press inevitably results in a chilling effect. In several provinces, female journalists have been barred from working in the media. The Taliban's use of arrests and torture as punitive measures for impartial reporting or coverage of protests has further stifled journalistic freedom. As documented by HRD+, a critic was taken from his home by the Taliban in Badakhshan province, with no information provided on his fate. Social media users have reported threats and security problems after expressing critical views, often resulting in arrests by the DFA. In addition, Taliban imposed other restrictions on media, barring the airing of certain dramas, satirical programs, and content that challenges their beliefs. This atmosphere of fear has restricted citizens from expressing their opinions openly, and media outlets promoting freedom of expression have significantly diminished. In response to the HRD+'s inquiries regarding violence against journalists, a media support organization – operating within Afghanistan and opting for

anonymity due to security concerns – reported 237 documented cases of violence against journalists and media personnel (15 targeting women journalists). These cases include violence, murder, injury, threats, detention, abduction, and more. Notably, an Afghan French journalist, Mortaza Behboudi, who went to Afghanistan to cover the current situation, was arrested in Kabul on January 7, 2023. The Taliban have charged him with 'espionage.'

According to SRMO's monitoring, the hostile view towards civil society members within the Taliban regime was highlighted by the Acting Minister for Higher Education, Neda Mohammad Nadeem, who declared in Kandahar on March 12, 2023, that those who oppose the system, whether through speech, pen, or action, are considered "rebels subject to death". Also, Rawadari documented that the Taliban governor of Kabul stated in a released video through social media that "opposition to the Taliban is forbidden, and it is permissible to kill the opponents of this regime."

According to Rawadari, 31 people were arrested and tortured in Farah province for criticizing the "Islamic Emirate" on social media during the Taliban's initial months of rule. On September 11, 2021, several local elders and influential people in Parwan province held a protest meeting which was suppressed by the Taliban military. In addition to beating protestors with sticks, whips, and gun butts, Taliban also arrested some participants and reporters and confiscated reporters' cameras and demonstrators' cell phones. Taliban released these individuals after those arrested pledged not to repeat similar actions.

Afghan citizens, particularly women, have faced violence from de facto security personnel during spontaneous or organized demonstrations across the country. As women protested against the erosion of their rights, the Taliban responded brutally, resorting to beatings, water hoses, live gunfire, tasers and arrests to quell protests. The Taliban's harsh crackdowns forced protests off the streets and onto virtual platforms like social media, such as the "Purple Saturdays" and "Afghanistan Protester Women's Spontaneous Movement".

Instances of the DFA brutal reactions to women practicing their civic rights have been documented as following:

- Between August 2021-August 2022, Rawadari documented 73 women were arrested by the Taliban for exercising their right to protest. Taliban in Kabul arrested and detained seven women who were involved in protests in armed raids on their houses, and 40 women were arrested by Taliban after participating in a protest march in Mazar-e Sharif, Balkh province.
- On April 3, 2023, Taliban authorities shut down "Voice of Women" in Herat, an NGO with over 20 offices across various Afghan provinces. Taliban also implemented a seizure of the organization's assets nationwide, citing their activities as "suspicious".
- On April 2, 2023, in Kabul province, it was reported that two family members of a female protestor who had been previously arrested and subsequently released

on bail, were killed by the Taliban. Sonia (fictitious name), critical of the Taliban after her release, faced a re-arrest attempt by them based on a tip suggesting she was at her uncle's residence. Taliban raided on her uncle's house, and in confrontation over her arrest, her uncle and cousin were fatally shot by the Taliban.

- Women have been killed based on their previous affiliation or work with former security institutions and civil activities.
- On September 16, 2021, 8 women who were involved in organizing protests against the Taliban in Mazar-e Sharif were mysteriously found dead.

Based on the HRD+ record, on July 28, 2022, the Taliban Supreme Leader declared the nullification of all laws and regulations established over the previous two decades that conflict with Sharia Law. In addition to the absence of policies and legal structures to safeguard civic space and women's rights, Taliban have, in the last two years, introduced directives, regulations, and edicts that severely curtail the rights of people.

Amid the dire human rights situation in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime, in which fundamental rights and individual values are under threat, this report has developed recommendations for both Afghanistan and the international community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To Afghanistan:

- The DFA must acknowledge fully their legal responsibilities/obligations to respect, promote and protect human rights values. Afghanistan is a state signatory to human rights treaties and conventions. As DFA, Taliban are obliged to uphold these commitments for the protection and promotion of human rights of all Afghans.
- The current systematic discrimination (gender apartheid) in legal and judicial institutions against women and denial of justice must be immediately remedied through laws, decrees and enforcement, consistent with international standards. The DFA must enable women's safe return to work in the legal/judicial sector and other sectors and re-establish protection frameworks and mechanisms to facilitate women's access to justice.
- Restrictions imposed on the fundamental rights and freedoms of women including the right to freedom of movement, employment and public participation must be eliminated and all barriers to their social, political, economic and social participation must be removed.
- Value the right to free assembly and expression, allowing citizens to raise their voice and share their concerns and demands in safety.
- Release all those held in arbitrary detention in relation to public protests, freedom of expression, and other 'perceived' accusations the subject of which directly contravene human rights law. Cease all forms of intimidation, harassment or acts of reprisal against protestors, their families and associates.
- Embrace diversity within Afghanistan and promptly end all forms of discrimination, including those based on gender, ethnicity, and religion.

To International Human Rights Organizations, Civil Activists, and Media Outlets:

- Call for Accountability: The international community should hold the Taliban accountable as the ruling authority in Afghanistan using a variety of tools and measures. Specifically, the UN Human Rights Council should support and strengthen the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan. Additionally, the Council should establish an independent international accountability mechanism dedicated to Afghanistan.
- Document and Report Human Rights Violations: Media outlets should work in collaboration with organizations and human rights defenders to document and report human rights violations in Afghanistan, safeguarding the safety of victims and witnesses.
- Protection: It is imperative for the international community to actively ensure the safety and well-being of journalists and civil society activists, judges, lawyers and prosecutors who are at risk of reprisal by the Taliban, especially those advocating for

women's rights. Member states as well as international organizations should provide financial and political support to Afghan HRD, and civic community currently stranded in neighboring and regional countries, living in legal limbo and financial hardship. Resettlement schemes need to be implemented and expanded to reach more at-risk Afghans.

- Robust measures should be taken to safeguard the rights and security of human rights defenders and journalists, given the concerning instances of violence, disappearances, and unlawful detentions.
- Immediate actions should be taken by the international community for the return of millions of girls and young women deprived of education to schools and universities which were closed over two years ago.
- Immediately assist HRDs who fled Afghanistan and are facing challenges in new countries.
- Urge the Taliban to cease attacks on HRDs, WHRDs, journalists, and civil society, respecting their rights to freedom of expression.
- Continue negotiations with the Taliban authorities, prioritizing the deep humanitarian crises, women's' human rights and the preservation of the civic space.
- Urge the Taliban to ensure meaningful and equal participation of all groups in political and public life.
- Publicly denounce assaults/attacks on human rights advocates, following a zero-tolerance policy against any form of aggression that undermines the core values of human rights and democratic ideals, including freedom of speech and assembly.
- Respect freedom of assembly and association, freedom of movement for people addressing unjust acts and raising voice to alter the situations.
- Allocate adequate financial resources for Afghan NGOs dedicated to safeguarding human rights defenders, enabling them to sustain their crucial efforts in supporting HRDs and vulnerable civil society. Additionally, extend significant support to Afghan civil society, both within the country and exiled communities, to ensure continued monitoring, documentation and support to civic and human rights work.
- Engage in regular consultation with the Afghan human rights community, particularly Afghan WHRDs inside and outside the country to inform policy and action on Afghanistan.
- Member states should support Afghan and the international civil society's efforts holding the Taliban accountable. These efforts include the campaign for the recognition of gender apartheid, efforts to hold Taliban accountable for violations of Convention on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in the International Court of Justice, the ongoing International Criminal Court investigation and other avenues for justice and accountability.