

IN THEIR OWN WORDS:

AFGHAN WOMEN JOURNALISTS SPEAK



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INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF JOURNALISTS
NETWORK OF WOMEN IN MEDIA, INDIA

SUPPORTED BY NORSK JOURNALISTLAG

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***NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED FOR SECURITY REASONS**



Credit: Hector Retamal / AFP

INTRODUCTION

“I do not want to perish, I want to live,” says Amal*, a television news reporter who worked out of a province in northern Afghanistan. Amal is from the Shia minority community, and has faced repeated threats since the Taliban takeover of the country in August 2021. Her father and brother were killed by Taliban forces. She lost another brother to suicide. She has had to move around to keep herself safe. Amal’s story of intimidation, threats and loss of livelihood repeats itself among scores of Afghanistan’s women journalists.

The UNHCR estimates **3.4 million people** in Afghanistan have been uprooted by conflict as of November 2021. A majority of these numbers are women and children. In September, a group of UN human rights experts identified Afghan journalists and media workers, particularly women, at heightened risk and called on all States to provide urgent protection to those seeking safety abroad.

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) too, has identified women journalists, along with independent Afghan media persons and high profile

and investigative journalists, as being particularly at risk. Human Rights Watch said strict new media guidelines which include a dress code, particularly harm women journalists, diminishing the space for dissent, and create an environment of worsening restrictions. It notes death threats against journalists who have criticized Taliban officials, and the requirement of journalists to submit reports for approval before publication.

The Afghan Journalists Safety Committee (AJSC) which issues a weekly summary on the state of media from different provinces in the country, noted that **since November 2020, a total of 12 journalists have been killed and 230 journalists have faced injuries, beatings, threats, insults.** At least 67 journalists have faced violence since the Taliban takeover in August.

News reports state that over 257 media outlets have closed in the country since the takeover. Reasons include financial challenges and restrictions on media operations. **Over 70 per cent of media workers are unemployed or have left the country**, according to TOLO News.

DISAPPEARING ACT

Latest figures suggest an unprecedented contraction in the number women journalists in Afghanistan. Despite assurances to the contrary and a professed respect for women’s rights, working women have faced consistent threats and intimidation, forcing them out of public and professional life. According to a survey by the Centre for the Protection of Afghan Women Journalists (CPAWJ) around September, there were **only 39 women journalists working in the capital, Kabul, a steep decline from 700 in 2020**, the survey notes. The capital city had 108 media outlets, employing 4,940 people in 2020.

Outside of Kabul, there are just a handful of women journalists remaining in the provinces. The 2020 survey had found that there were **more than 1,700 women working in media outlets** across the provinces of Kabul, Herat and Balkh. The numbers indicate the large strides taken by women journalists in Afghanistan over the last two decades towards securing freedom of expression for themselves and fellow citizens. It is these hard-fought rights that are now at stake.

NAVIGATING DIFFICULTIES

Women journalists in Afghanistan face dwindling resources amidst a harsh winter, and constant threats to themselves and families.

This was revealed by applicants to the fundraiser for Afghan women journalists, launched in September 2021, under the banner ‘Journalists for Afghanistan’ by the Network of Women in Media, India, in partnership with The Media Safety & Solidarity Fund (MSSF). The Associated Press donated prints for the photo print fundraiser.

“Since I was the breadwinner of my family of eight, we are now facing economic challenges due to losing my job. Unfortunately, the **arrival of the Taliban in Kabul took away our work and life**,” says one broadcast journalist who has worked in Maidan Wardak province and Kabul.

“We heard from one of our unions that **unemployment amongst women journalists is 95 per cent** because so few of them are able to work,” says **IFJ Deputy General Secretary, Jeremy Dear**, who is leading IFJ’s international response to Afghanistan. IFJ has been asking governments to target development assistance to help sustain media, either inside Afghanistan or in exile, with many journalists who have fled who would like to continue working in the media.

Many applicants revealed they were in hiding and had to change their location several times in fear of the Taliban exacting revenge for their journalistic work. Some have shared that they have been told by international NGOs that there are **no open visa programs by European countries for Afghan journalists and that humanitarian visas are not available** at the moment.

For the women journalists who have fled to another country, the danger of **harassment and threats to families are ever-present**. Maryam* was able to reach the US safely. However, back home in Afghanistan, her father was harassed by the Taliban because of her profession. He had to shut his shop, and was asked to reveal her location or hand over his son to join the Taliban forces.

“WE HEARD FROM ONE OF OUR UNIONS THAT UNEMPLOYMENT AMONGST WOMEN JOURNALISTS IS 95 PER CENT BECAUSE SO FEW OF THEM ARE ABLE TO WORK.”

IFJ DEPUTY GENERAL SECRETARY JEREMY DEAR

STEPS IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

Support and solidarity actions were evolving even as the Taliban steadily took over Afghanistan and professional journalists' unions and networks reached out to their colleagues. The NWMI fundraiser collected around USD 100,000 and disbursement is taking place through the MSSF. IFJ is distributing funds collected through unions and affiliates in Afghanistan, having taken note of the financial problems journalists are facing. According to Jeremy Dear, €10,000 were raised during a conference of journalists and distributed by the Afghan Independent Journalists Association (AIJA). The problems with Afghanistan's banking system have made it difficult to transfer funds, he says.

"We think governments should be putting a lot more funds into providing humanitarian assistance, in terms of providing safe houses and providing basic necessities for life, to enable people to survive when unemployment is at such high levels and they are unable to leave the country," says Dear, echoing the calls of other humanitarian organisations.

Dear says the organisation has been endeavouring to secure more visas and spaces for evacuation, adding that several hundred have left with the help of the IFJ and its affiliates. "We are currently in negotiations with the Greek government about getting possibly 100 people out before the end of December," says Dear. IFJ has been lobbying the international community to make more humanitarian visas available for journalists and to relax the rules around visas and passports. "Many Afghans don't have a passport. The passport office has been closed. The only way to be able to get a passport is to pay large amounts of money to individuals who will help you get a passport and it's very risky and expensive. So, we've been asking the national community to accept other forms of identification and we've also been asking them to help support media," adds Dear.

Some notable positive steps at this time also include the AJSC weekly reports, which provide timely insight into the media environment in Afghanistan. CPAWJ's director [Farida Nekzad](#) has joined as a [Journalist-in-Residence](#) at the School of Journalism and Communication, Carleton University, Canada, where she will be able to engage on matters related to Afghan journalists with the university community. IFJ has been in talks with the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers to explore the possibility of media companies offering employment or freelance commissions to Afghan journalists in exile.

This report attempts to bear witness to the predicament of Afghan women journalists through stories told in their own words. Some have fled the country, while some remain.



Escape to safety. Photo shared by one of the NWMI fundraiser applicants.

'WE WILL ONCE AGAIN STRIVE TO ACHIEVE THE RIGHTS OF AFGHAN WOMEN': FOUNDER OF RADIO STATION IN EXILE

Noor Begum*, 39, is no stranger to fresh starts. She has lived through Taliban attacks on the exclusive radio and television stations she built for women in a northern provincial capital in Afghanistan, twice. The premises were set on fire in 2015, destroying everything, when the Taliban took over the city for some time. Begum and her colleagues had fled to Kabul, and returned when it was safer. "We started from scratch," she says. Then, in 2016, they struck again, looting equipment and occupying the station for five days. Once again, they had to go to Kabul. "Two months later, I went back and rebuilt the radio and television station," says Begum. And now, once again, with the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August this year, equipment was destroyed and the team of women had to flee. This time, though, rebuilding the radio station appears far tougher. Watching the news on her country from far away in the US, Begum is not one to give up.

Early on, in childhood, journalism fascinated Begum. As she grew up, she realised the value of information and the impact it has on people, society, and especially women. "I felt I need to be a journalist and make everyone, especially families and women aware, so they know everything about their lives and their rights," she says. Afghanistan has seen years of war and violence and Begum hopes her contribution to journalism would help solve some of these challenges and find a pathway to peace.

Beginning with a local radio station, where she presented Dari and Pashto language news, she

delved into coverage of women's issues, and worked there for four years. Begum got the opportunity to attend a UN project training programme, sharpening her skills further. She worked freelance for five years, her research taking her across the province. She recorded the voices of women and girls and published them on news sites, she says. Her report on women's education helped raise awareness, adds Begum.



Noor Begum at work.

"I realised girls are interested in becoming journalists and I got this idea to build a radio station for young women, and also help inform women," she says. With a team of 20 young women, the radio went live. It had various programmes, covering news and events of the day, training for women, interviews and special reports. The radio station found support among its women listeners but found opposition among men. "Our society is traditional and patriarchal. Our voices are not accepted in the media, but we fought off threats," says Begum. The threats Begum spoke of are not minor. "Roadside mines, death threats by the Taliban, and threats by religious scholars and extremists," she elaborates. Undeterred, Begum started a television station in 2015 so young women could learn techniques about recording videos, interviews, and be seen on air.

The threats did not stop with Begum. A few months before the Taliban takeover this year, her husband received death threats. “I moved three houses for three months and I was doing my job at home,” says Begum, adding some Taliban forces also landed up at their door one night to take her and her husband away, but they did not succeed. Once again, her family moved to Kabul after August but did not feel safe there either. A BBC correspondent helped report her plight to a British parliamentarian. Flight tickets were arranged, but at the airport gate Begum and her family witnessed an explosion. Amid shots fired by the Taliban and physical attacks, she finally got on a flight to Qatar in October. After around a month in a transit camp, they made their way to a camp in New Jersey, USA. It will take a while to resettle in the city, says Begum, as there are restrictions for camp residents.

Begum sees the possibility of reviving her work. Some funds have been raised for her through the Global Alliance on Media and Gender (GAMAG) via NWMI members. “I built the radio with all my dreams, I worked hard for 13 years to bring information to women. I want to keep this light on. I want to turn on the radio again when the opportunity arises. If not in Afghanistan, wherever I am, if I receive financial support, I would raise the voice of Afghan women by creating a small radio station,” she says. “I want to show the Taliban and their allies that women never accept defeat. Women have always been and will always be with us. With the support of committed women from other countries, we will once again strive to achieve the rights of Afghan women,” says Begum. Her thoughts are constantly with her colleagues back home, and she worries about their safety. She provides advice and a shoulder for their troubles and amplifies their voices to the media.



Noor Begum with her daughter at transit camp in Qatar.

"I beg the international community to never recognise the Taliban and the Taliban terrorist government in the first place. Pay attention to the situation of women journalists, especially women who are under serious threat for their work, and relocate them to safer countries. May their lives be safe," says Begum.

"Please listen to and cooperate with women journalists who are trapped in Afghanistan and whose lives have become hell," she appeals.

**"I WANT TO SHOW THE
TALIBAN AND THEIR ALLIES
THAT WOMEN NEVER
ACCEPT DEFEAT."**

*NOOR BEGUM**



Two drawings by Begum's daughter. The first depicts the flag of Afghanistan, which she loves.

WE HAD TO CHOOSE BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH

Transcript from a recording of Zenab*, a 25-year-old reporter and presenter with Afghanistan International Radio and TV. After Afghanistan fell to the Taliban, she left for Turkey with three family members. Others in her family are still in Kabul, and they have lost their jobs. She continues to work but finds her income is not enough to support her family.

"I am an Afghanistani female journalist. My country was a place where women were all silent. My mother used to tell me from childhood that you should be a journalist. My mother had been a victim of domestic violence for years. But no one ever found out about her. Like my mother, thousands of other women did not express their pain. We needed female journalists in our country to inform the world about the situation of women in Afghanistan. I decided to become a journalist even though I know that journalism is a crime in my country. Especially, becoming a TV presenter is a bigger crime. But I accepted all the problems, and become a journalist by struggle. I started my career in radio and became the voice of freedom of expression and the voice of women. Later I went to television and became the host of a daily famous television programme. In my programme, I invited active women- doctors, teachers, journalists, human rights activists, human civil rights activists. And I encouraged other women to be literate like this. To say no to violence. And to fight, not to give up. We created a team of female journalists to work against the perpetrators and enemies of freedom of expression. We lost many of our colleagues in freedom of expression and journalism. Our media was repeatedly



Zenab in Turkey.

threatened by the Taliban before the fall of Kabul. And several of my colleagues were killed by the Taliban attacks. Until the Taliban took over Afghanistan, we continued to fight. But we realised we had to choose between life and death. And I had to run away. I had to run away leaving Kabul without my family... I wish to be with my family again... To hug my mother and father again. To play with my ... again. I want to work again and be a journalist. I wish my country would be released from captivity. I want peace for my people. I want peace for my country. We are human. Like other countries, like other people. Why we don't have peace? Why we can't live in our country? I wish one day we can go to our country again, and we live together again. And be a journalist. For our country, and for our people again. Sorry and thank you."

OUR DARK DAYS STARTED AGAIN

Transcript from a recording of Afghan journalist Makia, who talks of her work and life in Afghanistan, and what the Taliban takeover has meant for the media community in the country. Makia is among the lucky ones to have made an escape, first to Pakistan, and now starting life anew in Canada.

"I was a child. I watched TV and I watched the news program and I listened to the BBC radio and Voice of America radio with my father because my father listened to BBC and Voice of America at that time. And I liked to listen with him. And sometimes I liked that answer, "Who read the news and other programs on TV?" At that time, when I watched TV with my father and listened to the radio, I said to my father and mother, "I will become a journalist when I grow up," and at that time, I act like a journalist or announcer. So, when I graduated from high school, my mother, my parents asked me, "You must become a doctor in the future." But I don't like to be a doctor, I said to my parents, "No, I want to be a journalist in the future." When I took the entrance exam, I chose journalism. And fortunately, I succeeded. I was very happy, very happy that time because I wanted to be a journalist in the future, and also an announcer. And, that time, when I graduated from the faculty of journalism, I faced difficult times because that time was war in Afghanistan and also after that, the Taliban came and that time, we faced difficult days and nights that time also. Especially in civil war, we faced difficulties. And also, when the Taliban came. After the (end of the) Taliban regime, I started my work with different media. First, I start my work with National TV and was a reporter and announcer, and I prepared different programs. Every day, I have a report. After that, I started my work with Pajhwok news agency. I was the first journalist there.

I, like my other colleagues, that when Pajhwok agency started work, I worked with them as a reporter in the political section, election and parliament section, human rights and political parties. After that, I went to Internews Salam Watandar and I worked with them as news manager. And also sometimes as editor and trainer, I work with them. I worked with Internews Salam for five or six years. After that, I went to Voice of America and I worked with them and the election project- the president election project. And, I was their reporter, editor, translator. That all was my work. So after that, I worked with different sections of Voice of America until the Taliban came back to Kabul and capture Kabul and other provinces of Afghanistan. And I stopped my work, as did hundreds of journalists, because I was under threat.



Makia at work.

And, I stayed home. And also, my office doesn't want their colleagues working in Afghanistan because they are under threat and they worked with Voice of America and also before I worked with Internews... It was difficult for me to continue my work during the Taliban's capture of Kabul. And also I was director of Women Journalists Coordination Center and in a committee of government.

When the Taliban took Kabul and other provinces and they control these places, our dark days started again after 20 years because we struggle for all things...

We struggle for human rights, women's rights, for media. For ourselves, that we lost all things in a hurry. And we are back to 20 years ago, started our difficulties. [We had] started [with] more women journalists, women announcers, women who work in media, in different sections of media. Now, they are staying in home, they haven't any work, they haven't any salary, and they are facing financial problems. We lost all of our things. It's very difficult for us, and for all women, for all men, for all child[ren], that we lost our hopes. We had a lot of hope, but we couldn't after that, to reach our hopes to struggle for our hopes and to work outside the home. What we have, what we want. More journalists are under threat in Afghanistan and were under threat in Afghanistan when Taliban captured Kabul. More journalists escaped from Kabul to other countries. And more of them escaped from (provinces). They are living in Kabul, but they hide and they are facing financial problems.

Those who left Kabul and went to other countries, especially neighbouring countries, are also facing financial problems. It's very sad to us. And we think when the Taliban came, we died, we died again like 20 years ago. Yes, I also left Kabul after one month or so, when the Taliban captured Kabul because I feared. I lived with fear and also I was under threat because I write about Taliban on social media and also when some of my friends 'like' something in social media, I comment against the Taliban. My many posts were against the Taliban. And also when I was news manager, I had problems with the reports and other things that my colleagues prepared from different provinces, especially insecure provinces. And we don't want them to edit it. I want them to send the voice and text to us to cover. We will edit it and broadcast it from here.

I left Kabul and I left my hopes in Kabul and Afghanistan. Because I had a lot of hopes. And I wanted to be a journalist 20 years ago or 25 years ago. I had a lot of hopes that I must complete it. I hoped to go to other provinces and other villages and prepare different reports, different clips and interviews. But unfortunately, I couldn't go there because the province was insecure.



Makia in Pakistan.

And I couldn't go there and prepare reports that I want. I wanted to go to the other province with a camera and a recorder, but I couldn't. And that is my hope [aim] which I could not reach. Me and other Afghans want to [see] one day Afghanistan liberated again. And the Taliban [to] leave Afghanistan and Kabul.

And our people become free again and we can go back to our country because they obligate us now to leave our country, to leave our hopes, to leave our work, to leave our relation and friends. It's difficult for me, for all Afghans, for all women, for all journalists and for all who hope for their country. You know, when we left Afghanistan, it wasn't a good time for us. We were obligated to leave Afghanistan, we were obligated to see our hopes that died. And other countries that helped Afghanistan for 20 years must make an honest decision about Afghanistan. Our forces retreated but they were forced, obligated to retreat. Now the Taliban kill them every day, kill the human rights activists, the media rights activists, women rights activists, and other people who struggle for freedom. The Taliban kill these people every day. It's a disaster for us, and for all people. We hope, one day, we see the Taliban has left Afghanistan and we become, our country becomes, free again. It's our hope to come back to our homeland. I hope one day our girls go back to school. Our women go back to their office. Our women journalists go back to their media. And all women and youth [fulfill] their [wishes] in their countries, not other countries. We were forced to move from our sweet homeland.

We never wanted to leave our country. All Afghans like me, they think this: 20 years (ago), I go to different countries, but I came back to Afghanistan because I had a lot of hope in my country. All my friends told me not to go back to Afghanistan because Afghanistan is not a safe place for

journalists and other women activists or human rights activities.

But I said to them, "No, I could go back to my country. One day, my country become secure and better and better than today, but I'd never thought the Taliban will come back to Afghanistan and capture our provinces and Kabul. We are back to 20 years ago. Our dark days have started again. I never thought that. I say this honestly I am worried about my colleagues, about the women journalists and men journalists that are in Afghanistan. They hide from the Taliban and are facing financial problems. They are facing hard times, hard days and nights in Afghanistan. I'm very worried about them. I want to tell other associations and international associations of journalists that they must help and support Afghan journalists.

A lot of them are under threat. A lot of them are beaten by the Taliban and hence it is a disaster for me and all my colleagues that they are still in Afghanistan. I want to [tell] the international journalists' organisations and their countries to take them, real journalists, from Afghanistan. They struggle for human rights, for our country and for their job."



Safe at last: Photo by Makia after reaching Canada.



Nusrat at work.

Nusrat* is a 25-year-old journalist from one of the northern provinces in Afghanistan. She was working as a reporter at a radio station and had to move to another city in Afghanistan following threats.

How did you decide to become a journalist?

I was very interested in journalism. Before working in radio, I always stood in front of a mirror and talked. I wanted to serve the people, protect rights and freedom of expression, reduce violence and raise public awareness. To inform the people, especially women, who were not aware of their basic rights to access their rights. Like studying, working outside the home, being aware of the age at which to get married, and choosing a spouse is a personal right, not a family's, to avoid forced and early marriages. By presenting audio reports on their rights to the farthest reaches, I wanted to introduce people to modern life to enjoy the benefits of technology.

Could you describe some of the work you have done?

I had training programs on the radio, as well as reports on women's right to education, the right to work, the right to access health services, the right to women's inheritance, I went to the villages and interviewed women. Women living in remote areas

have no rights. They did not know it, so I was preparing a report and broadcasting it on the radio.

What is everyday life like now since the Taliban took control?

Unfortunately, the daily life of journalists and people is abnormal, there is no security, the income of the people is zero, and some journalists recently committed suicide because of the weak economy. Some parents are selling their young daughters to avoid starvation, and targeted killings have increased in recent years. Two months ago, four civil activists in Mazar province were killed by unknown individuals, and a doctor has been abducted in Kunduz province, but his fate is still unknown. Another doctor, a woman, has also been abducted in Mazar-e-Sharif. Therefore, ordinary people's lives have become nightmares.

What do you hope for the future?

If this is a government, this is oppression. I have no hope for the future at all, it can be said that I will not have a good future ahead.



Mehbooba with her daughter in Pakistan

Mehbooba* is a 27-year-old journalist who was working with Subhe Kabul newspaper till August 2021. She is now in Pakistan.

Could you describe the journalism work you were doing?

I was working with Radio Killid as a news anchor and producer. After that, I was working with Subhe Kabul newspaper. My job was to finalize the reports in women's department. I used to edit the reports by my colleagues before sending it to the manager.

We understand you are from the minority Shia community. What were the conditions for your community before and after the Taliban has taken over?

Before the Taliban takeover, most of the attacks were in the areas of Shia people by Taliban and ISIS. They attacked schools, and even hospitals. They killed newborn kids and mothers. After Taliban takeover, attacks continue.

Could you describe your escape from Afghanistan?

When Taliban took over, we were in our own home. On the first day, we were so scared and we left everything behind and went to my brother-in-law's house for some days. After that, we went to my mother's house. One night, because we didn't feel safe we left Kabul, and went to Mazar-i-Sharif. We stayed 20 days in relatives' home and we spent all [the] money that we had. We contacted the Too Young To Wed organisation to bring us to Pakistan, and they helped us [with our] visa and air ticket, and we came here to Pakistan.

What has life been like, after reaching Pakistan? What are your plans?

After reaching Pakistan we tried to visit some embassies for receiving humanitarian visa, because as you are aware, Taliban very easily can reach us here. But unfortunately, we couldn't get a positive answer to our emails. They didn't even give an interview time and priority for people who have worked with them. The plan is to reach a country that accepts refugees. And, as you know, it might not be possible to easily find a journalism job again, so I am trying to build [my] photography skills and I watch videos and need to buy a camera to be ready for starting a new life.

What specific assistance would be helpful in the short term and long term for you and other journalists?

Definitely for the short term, the urgent need is relocating and living costs because we are still not in a situation to find a job. After that, helping to stay again on our own feet. One important thing, if you could negotiate with governments to accept our degrees so we could continue our education. We have Bachelor's (degree) and in some countries they don't accept it and we need to study again. We will lose time, so we need them to accept our degrees so we can start our Master's degree. For me, personally, I need a camera to start a YouTube channel as a revenue source and also, to practice my lessons for photography skills.

Safiya* is an 18-year-old journalist who has worked with GHAG FM Radio at Wardak province, Afghanistan as producer and presenter, and at Waak TV, till the takeover of Afghanistan by Taliban in August 2021. The radio and TV channels were established by her father.

Could you speak about your work and family's involvement in journalism?

I have worked for the last two years as a journalist with GHAG FM Radio and Waak TV in Wardak province that were established by my father, also a journalist. He has worked for the past 18 years in various departments with national and international media and has trained several local journalists, and also founded three independent media outlets. The radio station was broadcasting government and international community-funded activities which were not acceptable to the Taliban. GHAG FM Radio was established in the unsecure Wardak province with the aim of promoting human rights. It was expanded to include a TV channel and a weekly in 2020.

I have worked with my father and I have produced various radio programs for the rights of women, girls and children. Until I can provide comprehensive information on their rights, how can they claim their rights as stipulated in Afghan law? After knowing about their rights, they can make their future society literate.

I worked while completing studies and I have graduated. I want to finish my education in a prestigious university. On August 15, 2021, the Taliban captured Maidan Shahr. They asked our media group to not have any female employees.

If female employees continue to work, they and their families would be attacked. At present, my life and my family's life are in danger, under serious threat.

We understand you have had to move owing to threats. Could you tell us about your situation now?

We moved from Wardak province to Kabul, and now we have many economic and security problems. Especially due to security problems, we cannot work. With winter, we are facing food shortages. With the Taliban's arrival, media networks have been closed and we have been stuck in Kabul. Therefore, we decided to apply for a humanitarian visa to secure our lives, and also develop my professional career in a safe environment.

As a young person who has not lived under Taliban rule before, could you tell us what it feels like now?

Do you have a message for the international community as a young person?

As a young journalist who enjoyed all the liberties of life, now that we do not have the right to study, right to work, right to freedom of expression and to travel, I feel like I am a prisoner. My message to the international community is that they accept us (the girls and women) as human beings and put pressure on the Taliban to respect all the rights of women. We Afghan women can do nothing without crying.



Yasmin* is a 19-year-old reporter with a news website in Kabul. She has completed several trainings, including from Internews and Oxfam, and served as volunteer for a US Embassy campaign on civic rights and responsibilities.

A Taliban fighter walks past a mural along a street in Kabul on September 15, 2021. Credit: Bulent Kilic / AFP

How did you come to choose journalism?

Getting into journalism was my only childhood wish. The talent I had encouraged me to become a journalist. I believe that anyone who is qualified in any field is also interested in working in it. I would always say why not everyone chooses journalism but then I realised that being a journalist requires a certain ability and skill.

We understand you have been continuing to work through these last months. Could you describe the challenges you are facing now?

Media has become increasingly censored in Afghanistan in recent months. Over the years, a journalist was able to cover any issue. But now, if journalists want to protect themselves and survive, they must be very careful in their journalistic activities.

We never imagined that we would one day live under Taliban rule. And we also feared that our education and activities would collapse under the Taliban.

Now that the Taliban has arrived, I think everything will start again as a first for Afghan women. The achievements and progress that Afghan women have had are completely gone and it will take another 20 years to make that progress. As a young woman, I urge the international community to put pressure on the Taliban to allow Afghan girls and women to study and work. Or collaborate with them to provide education and employment opportunities for Afghan girls and women.

What do you hope for yourself and other women journalists?

I am concerned about my work and that of other female journalists. With the advent of the Taliban, many female journalists stayed at home, lost their jobs. Their lives were in danger and many fled Afghanistan. Very few [women] journalists now appear in the Afghan media. I hope the Taliban will end their problem with women going to work. And Afghan female journalists can once again do journalistic activities in their own country without fear.

Mahira* is a 47-year-old journalist who has worked at public broadcaster, National Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA), and is a member of CPAWJ. She has also served as volunteer at the media development NGO: Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan. Two of her children are also journalists. This is the second time she has had to relocate to Pakistan.

What has your journalism experience been like?

I was a journalist at RTA. I completed courses on peace reporting and pandemic reporting. Besides this, I participated in training on investigative journalism by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, broadcast journalism and radio programming by the BBC, and courses by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). I have reported on Afghanistan’s national army and national police.

Could you describe life under the Taliban the last time around?

I got married in 1993 to an Afghan journalist-filmmaker-actor, but during the civil war, his office was hit by a missile and he passed away. I was living with my young daughter and pursuing my studies. Then Kabul was invaded by the Taliban regime and Afghanistan’s people, especially women, faced a dark future.

Women could not go outside without a burka and their husbands. I had to re-marry. I did not want my daughter to stay illiterate. We left Afghanistan and shifted to Pakistan. My daughter, then 4, started school. After the collapse of the Taliban regime and the formation of a new government in Afghanistan, there were hopes for every Afghan citizen and we came back to Afghanistan.

It took us two decades to reach where we are right now. With all the problems that I had during these years, I continued fighting for my and others’ rights. And now, once again, all the achievements that took us two decades have come to an end!

What is the situation now for women?

At the moment, all the places we wished to go to join our fathers, brothers, and husbands and build our country are closed to us women. We are under stress and the Taliban have plans to force young girls and women to marry their fighters and take them as sexual slaves. They want to forcefully recruit young boys to their army.

The Taliban want to punish those who worked in the media and former administration, like me, my daughter and my son, because we were working against them and were the voice of the people. They want to punish us so no other woman in Afghanistan will be able to raise her voice against them and work in society. They are looking for journalists and social workers.

When I went in for work, they threatened me not to return. They followed me home and arrested my son for no reason two days later. It took a lot of effort to get him free after five days. We were hiding in our relative’s houses. I contacted many organisations to help us leave Afghanistan but did not get any replies. We finally left for Pakistan and we are safe. But we face financial challenges here. We don't know how long we can survive here. We have concerns about our future, about my education and my children’s education, about our careers.

I didn't want to lose my family members' lives or my life in this situation, I didn't want them to take my daughter forcefully for their fighters or to forcefully recruit my boys to their army.

"ALL THE ACHIEVEMENTS THAT TOOK US TWO DECADES HAVE COME TO AN END"

A WAY FORWARD

The testimonies of Afghan women journalists in this report bear witness to ongoing suffering as well as courage and persistence in the face of violence, harassment and discrimination. The international community must make interventions on several fronts in the short and medium-term. As Afghanistan moves into winter, the priority is immediate humanitarian assistance; safe houses, living costs and basic necessities for the survival of those who remain in Afghanistan at this crucial time when their identity as journalists and livelihoods have been summarily snatched away.

Granting refugee visas for journalists at risk to leave and work permits for those who have resettled must be a priority for the international community. For those who have left, their educational qualifications should be recognised in their countries of asylum so that they can continue their education and upskill themselves. Assistance to purchase equipment and training in their new homes can enable Afghan women journalists to continue to tell their powerful stories to the world.



Taliban members stop women protesting for women's rights in Kabul on October 21, 2021. Credit: Bulent Kilic / AFP



*NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED FOR SECURITY REASONS