

# “THEY ARE THE REVOLUTION”

AFGHAN WOMEN FIGHTING FOR THEIR  
FUTURE UNDER THE TALIBAN RULE



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*Cover Photo: Illustration by Ema Anis for Amnesty International 2021*

# **“THEY ARE THE REVOLUTION”**

## **AFGHAN WOMEN FIGHTING FOR THEIR FUTURE UNDER TALIBAN RULE**

*“In the first few days everyone was in shock. But then I saw brave women standing, demonstrating, raising their voices. That’s the new generation. They were listening. They are the revolution.”*

– SHUKRIA BARAKZAI

# INTRODUCTION

The Taliban's seizure of power on 15 August 2021 has resulted in sweeping changes to the lives of all Afghans, but Afghan women and girls face particularly dire restrictions on their rights in their daily lives. Even as the Taliban leaders who have been involved in international negotiations claim the group's approach to women's rights has evolved, these statements were quickly contradicted by events on the ground.

Except for healthcare workers and a few other isolated exemptions<sup>1</sup>, Afghan women have been told that they cannot work and should stay at home until the situation 'gets back to a normal order' and 'women-related procedures are in place'.<sup>2</sup> Since 20 September 2021, girls above grade six (age 12 above) have been banned from going to school, while rigid gender segregation at universities has severely curtailed the possibilities for many young women to pursue a meaningful higher education.

The abrupt reduction in international aid and the freezing of Afghan government assets by the World Bank and International Monetary Funds (IMF) have contributed to a growing humanitarian disaster. Preventing women from working has exacerbated economic problems for many families, which a few months ago had a steady professional income but are now facing destitution. In addition to the economic implications, removing women from government jobs has left a huge hole in the government's capacity to govern effectively.

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1 For example female employees of the passport office were reportedly allowed to return to work in early October. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/afghanistan-start-issuing-passports-again-after-months-delays-2021-10-05/>

2 <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/08/25/asia/taliban-women-workplaces-afghanistan-intl/index.html>

After the takeover, the Taliban's decision to effectively replace the Ministry for Women's Affairs with the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice – an institution that was responsible for grievous human rights violations against women during the first Taliban government in the 1990s – is a particularly ominous development. In addition to losing their access to education and employment, women now face increased threats of gender-based violence, severe restrictions on their rights to freedom of assembly, freedom of movement and freedom of expression, including on even their choice of clothing.

On the occasion of the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence 2021, Amnesty International is highlighting the achievements of 16 remarkable Afghan women. At a time when Afghans have had a whole spectrum of rights taken away from them almost overnight, these 16 stories serve as a reminder of how much Afghan women have achieved over the last 20 years despite political instability and conflict and the heightened risks that they now face under the present regime.

Crucially, these stories also illustrate just how much women can contribute to their communities, to society, and their country when they have access to their rights and the space to participate fully in public life. With Afghanistan facing a humanitarian and governance crisis of vast proportions, it is astonishing that a government would choose to actively bar these and many other Afghan women from participation in public life while depriving them of their human rights.

## **THE WOMEN**

Amnesty International conducted interviews with 16 Afghan women who have excelled in their chosen fields, despite immense challenges and the ever-present threat of gender-based violence. In their own words, they describe what they consider their greatest accomplishments and discuss their fears for the future.

# MANIZHA RAMIZY

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR AT KABUL UNIVERSITY  
AND HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER



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AFTER THE TALIBAN TOOK CONTROL OF AFGHANISTAN IN AUGUST 2021,  
THEY HAVE EFFECTIVELY SHUT THE DOORS FOR WOMEN WANTING TO GET  
HIGHER EDUCATION AND NONE OF MY FELLOW FEMALE LECTURERS ARE  
ABLE TO GO TO UNIVERSITY TO TEACH.

# MANIZHA RAMIZY

*Manizha Ramizy is an academic and Women Human Rights Defender (WHRD). Many female university lecturers were told not to come to work after the Taliban takeover, and many female university staff have also not been paid. Some private universities have set up gender segregated classrooms, but many public universities have decided that women cannot work until separate classes can be established for women and men.*



I was one of the younger university lecturers and taught Human Rights at Kabul University since 2017. It was not easy to enter the academic world as a woman lecturer. The whole system was male dominated with very little support for women and girls who wanted to enter academia. I also faced discrimination but managed to work my way up.

At Kabul University, I was teaching in the Faculty of Psychology, Social Work, and Child Rights Protection studies. Once I entered academia, I worked hard to make changes in the curriculum such as including human rights as a subject taught at the university. Finally, after three years, our work paid off and the Ministry of Higher Education agreed to include human rights in the curriculum of the Sociology and Psychology faculties. In that faculty, we were also teaching people to become social workers, and therefore teaching human rights and child rights was very important. I wrote a book on human rights for social workers and that subject is now taught in all state universities across Afghanistan.

I also researched about the state of children in institutions such as orphanages and highlighted the issues they face. The findings of the research were published and widely distributed among organizations working on child protection issues.

When the US embassy created Link-in programmes, which were designed to link all Afghanistan universities in a network, as part of that programme I was voluntarily teaching human rights.

In the past ten years, I established a Centre for Legal Studies and advocated for the promotion and protection of human rights. I tried and succeeded in ensuring that human rights became an integral part of the education curriculum so that all university students are aware of their fundamental rights, particularly students studying sociology and psychology.

Before the Taliban takeover, the biggest challenge for me was to convince the government to bring women into key positions and to make the appointments of women merit-based. In the past, the government tried to control women's movements in Afghanistan – if they ensured that women were not united it was easier for them to control them. Despite that, many women started creating movements across the country and raised their voices.

After the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in August 2021, they effectively shut the doors to women wanting to get higher education and none of my fellow female lecturers have been able to go to university to teach. The Taliban authorities have segregated women and men sections, and, in some provinces, young women are not even allowed to come to the universities. The Taliban are not even paying the salaries to the women teachers.

The Taliban is systematically removing all the fundamental rights and freedoms for women and girls. Restrictions on freedom of movement and on social, economic, and political participation are the main obstacles for women and girls' rights in Afghanistan. The Taliban regime is creating restrictions and obstacles for women every day and we will not have any possibility of professional and technical development.

My colleagues have not been allowed to enter the Kabul University by the Taliban and they also raided the houses and offices of women's rights groups. Furthermore, Taliban has used violence against women demonstrators, and they are viewing women simply as someone who should just give birth and spend time inside the home. Women who were supporting their families financially are suffering more than anyone else – barring women from exercising their economic rights including their right to work constitutes a human rights violation and gender-based discrimination against women.

I hope that not just the international community but also Afghans, particularly Afghan women and women across the globe, raise their voices at the international level to speak against the violence and discrimination we are facing.”

# ELAHA SAHEL

JOURNALIST



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WHEN THE PEACE TALKS STARTED TWO YEARS AGO, AFGHAN WOMEN KEPT CALLING ON THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY TO ENSURE THAT WOMEN'S RIGHTS WERE PROTECTED DURING AND AFTER THE PEACE PROCESS. UNFORTUNATELY, NO ONE LISTENED TO US.

# ELAHA SAHEL

*Elaha Sahel is a journalist and a women's rights activist. Although Afghan women journalists were able to interview Taliban officials in the first few days after they seized power, the situation quickly deteriorated. Women anchors were taken off air at the national television station and women journalists started receiving threats, warning them to stop work. In the year before the Taliban takeover of Kabul, several women media workers were killed. According to research by Reporters Sans Frontieres (RSF), hundreds of women journalists have reportedly been forced to stop work since the Taliban takeover, while dozens of media outlets have ceased operations. Many high-profile women journalists have fled the country or are currently in hiding, looking for a way to escape.*



I started working as a journalist at a very young age, soon after the Taliban regime was overthrown by the US in 2001. I began my work with local media in Herat and slowly I started to work with national and international media. Meanwhile, I also continued to work on the promotion and protection of women's rights through different means – from civic activities to staging demonstrations and rallies in support of women.

I worked on issues such as child marriage, women in prisons and homeless women and girls.

When the Taliban took over in August 2021 everything changed, and our lives were turned upside down. I can't express my feelings; it seems that everything I had was gone in a puff of smoke.

We as journalists achieved a lot and we also sacrificed a lot for our achievements. The level of freedom of expression in Afghanistan was better than in any other country in the region. The more journalists we had, the more we could exercise our right

to freedom of expression and a free media. Women were an integral part of this achievement, whether as reporters in the field or as newscasters sitting in the studios. We played a significant role in this entire process. Women journalists were the face of Afghan media and we were working hard to draw the attention of the world to the situation of women.

I won the award for the “Journalist of the year” in 2020 and I won another award in Uzbekistan for my journalism work. I led several investigative projects into the situation of women and girls in Afghanistan and some of them led to debates at the higher levels of government.

When women and girls saw other women on their television screens or heard their voices through the radio, they could dream. We gave them the dream that women don't just belong in the kitchen. Women can be an important part of any society and their role is important and integral. We gave this dream to other women and girls on who they could become and what they could do.

I am of the generation that has experienced both Taliban regimes. I was 10 years old when the Taliban came to power in 1996, and the year 2001 allowed me to dream for a better future and to dream about who I wanted to become. 2001 is the year of achievement for me; it shaped my future and the person who I became today. 2001-2005 was a time of so many opportunities. Many organizations including media were trying to give opportunities to Afghan women to work, participate and become part of the new Afghanistan.

It is very sad and painful for me to go back to the situation when I was just a 10-year-old girl, when I first experienced the Taliban. This has been the most painful moment of my life to see how history repeats itself for women here.

After the Taliban took over, the first thing that happened was that hundreds of journalists and media workers including women fled the country. This is because

of the violence and low tolerance the Taliban showed towards journalists and media workers in the past. We knew what it was like to live under the Taliban.

Secondly, the Taliban prevented women from working and we all lost our jobs and source of income. Most of us are now left without any money as our bank accounts are frozen or due to the banking crisis, we cannot take money out. Journalists suffered a lot, particularly freelancers like me, as we lost our jobs without any guarantees from our employers.

The discrimination and violence against women journalists started right after the Taliban took power in Herat on 9 July 2021. Our families were the first to impose restrictions on us, fearing retaliation by the Taliban. They told us not to leave the house, and what to wear and what not to, to mitigate any form of attack from the Taliban.

Journalists are at a heightened risk than others. The Taliban allowed female doctors and primary school teachers to return to work, but they stopped journalists from doing so. Today most women journalists have either left Afghanistan or are in hiding and they have vanished from the local media.

When the peace talks started two years ago, Afghan women kept calling on the international community to ensure that women's rights were protected during and after the peace process. Unfortunately, no one listened to us. Westerners kept stamping us with the brands of 'elite women', 'Westernized women' and not being truly representative of Afghan women. They did so to silence us and to make sure that we are not heard. We were betrayed by the people who told us that they were here because of Afghan women. In the past two months we heard very little criticism from the international community towards the conduct of the Taliban against women and this is sad."

# ZALA ZAZAI

POLICEWOMAN



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SINCE THE TALIBAN RETURNED TO POWER MOST WOMEN IN THE POLICE WERE FORCED TO STAY HOME. NO POLICEWOMEN WERE ABLE TO COME TO WORK AND MANY HAD TO FLEE BECAUSE OF THE HIGH LEVEL OF THREATS AGAINST THEM BY THE TALIBAN.

# ZALA ZAZAI

*Zala Zazai is a female police officer who served as the head of the Criminal Investigation department of Khost province, and later as an investigator of crimes against women. At least four Afghan policewomen, including one who was eight months pregnant was reportedly killed by the Taliban fighters since the Taliban takeover in August 2021. Afghan policewomen are at risk of retribution from those they previously arrested (many of whom were released during the chaos of the Taliban takeover) as well as from conservative family or community members who disapprove of their chosen profession.*



Since June 2020, I served as the first woman police officer in Khost province. It is one of the most insecure and conservative provinces in Afghanistan and I am proud of being able to do that. I have been working to investigate crimes against women and I will not take any credit for that as it was my job. As a police officer and as a woman, I did what I could to ensure that women who are victims of crime and abuse of any form are treated fairly and receive justice.

My life was not easy, and my struggle first started in my own home. I fought to get an education, to study what I wanted, and for the right to choose my own profession. There was a lot of opposition from within my own family about me joining the police force and I had to convince them a lot. After completing my education and as soon as I joined the police, I realised that other people too didn't want to see a woman serving as a police officer. This is a male-dominated field and women joining the police force are not deemed a "good fit". Many people view women working in the military and police force in a bad way and they call us names because we are working in a male-dominated field.

The women in the police and military all fought hard against our families and society, as well our own colleagues. We overcame so many odds and challenges to ensure that women were part of the police and army, but then everything changed in August 2021.

Since the Taliban returned to power most women in the police were forced to stay home. No policewomen were able to come to work and many had to flee because of the high level of threats against them by the Taliban. In recent days I have heard that the Taliban are calling women police to return to their work, but in reality, it is nothing but a trap. Some of the women police officers have received calls from the Taliban who are trying to find their whereabouts or threatening them. They are all in fear and despair.

At the time Afghanistan fell into the hands of the Taliban, I was luckily out of the country. But many women police officers who remain in the country have experienced psychological and physical violence. Women who are living under the Taliban are not even daring to leave their homes.

The international community must pressure the Taliban to ensure women's rights and they must do everything to ensure that women are part of the new government. The Taliban cannot eliminate half of the population of Afghanistan. Women will be and should be there. The Taliban have no choice but to include women and allow them to continue with their work and take an active part in social, economic and political life.”

# ROSHAN SIRRAN

FORMER MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT  
AND CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVIST



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THE TALIBAN BANNED WOMEN FROM WORK, WHETHER THEY ARE  
TEACHERS, DOCTORS, JUDGES, OR POLICE. THIS WILL HAVE A  
LONG-TERM EFFECT ON OUR SOCIETY.

# ROSHAN SIRRAN

*Roshan Sirran is a long-standing women's rights activist and executive director for Training Human Rights Association for Afghan Women (THRA). Among other things, she has done extensive work on electoral reform and lobbied for women's rights to be protected during the peace process. She was a member of the Afghan parliament and a member of the Afghan peace delegation in the 1980s. Rights activists – particularly those working on women's rights - face an extremely hostile environment since the Taliban seized power for the second time.*



In my organization THRA, we were working on election related issues including electoral reforms, civic education, and political participation. I had developed an information package related to electoral reforms, election law reforms and lessons learned and how to ensure that elections are free and fair. Furthermore, the package also emphasized the role of women and women's participation as voters and as candidates and how to ensure women's participation in these processes. We had specific recommendations to the government and other organizations involved in the electoral process.

My biggest achievement is the Afghanistan constitution. I take a lot of pride in being part of that process, which ensured fundamental rights and freedom for all Afghan citizens. We ensured equality between men and women, access to health, education, political participation, freedom of association and freedom of assembly. Also, we managed to enjoy all these rights in our daily lives. It was not perfect, but we did the most we could. Under the new constitution, women progressed a lot in different areas; they became an important part of the government and private sectors. Then women's participation started to happen naturally in all aspects of life including security, the judiciary, and in the media among others.

One of the biggest challenges we have faced is insecurity; it continued to affect our work and slow down our progress, especially in the rural areas. Due to the continued insurgency and insecurity we had to limit our areas of operation. The other challenge we had was the rule of law. The lack of implementation of the law affected women mostly. It was also quite challenging at the government level because most of the appointments of women at senior levels were not based on merit. This created a situation of distrust and distance between professional women and the government.

Since the Taliban took power in August 2021, the situation for women has become far worse and it is incomparable with the former government. The Taliban banned women from work, whether they are teachers, doctors, judges, or police. This will have a long-term effect on our society.

My own organization has not been able to maintain permission to work under the Taliban as most of our employees are women. It has slowed down the whole work we were doing to reach out to people at different levels. All these limitations are imposed on us just because we are women, and nothing else.

If I was young under the Taliban, I would not have been able to achieve even a fraction of what I have achieved so far. There is a massive difference between the time we served then and now under the Taliban. The Taliban are bringing under question the concept of social justice and there is no social or racial justice at all.

International aid must be subject to ensuring women rights, protection for all Afghan people and removing the discriminatory practices against ethnic minorities. The international community must also monitor the current situation and ensure that Afghan women are kept under consideration. The international community must ensure that all citizens are treated equally and with dignity.”

# SHUKRIA BARAKZAI

FORMER MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT AND  
FORMER AFGHAN AMBASSADOR TO NORWAY



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I DON'T WANT AFGHAN WOMEN TO BE PART OF HISTORY. WE NEED EVERYONE TO BE THE VOICE OF AFGHAN WOMEN, CALLING FOR THEIR SAFETY AND SECURITY.

# SHUKRIA BARAKZAI

*Shukria Barakzai is a former member of parliament and Afghanistan's former ambassador to Norway. She established an underground school in her home during the first Taliban era in the 1990s and founded an influential women's magazine called Mirror in 2002. Between 2005-2010, she was twice elected as a member of parliament. After an attack on her life, she was posted to Norway as a diplomat. During the drafting process of the constitution, she debated notorious militia leaders, securing notable protections for Afghans – and particularly Afghan women – in the constitution that was adopted in 2004.*

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I was involved in drafting several articles in the 2004 constitution concerning the elimination of violence against women and fighting to have women's representation in parliament. It wasn't easy, debating in the drafting committees with high profile militia leaders. But because of our efforts, Afghans had at least 17 years of enjoying their rights and duties under that constitution. I feel proud that the constitution opened the door for opportunity, justice, equality, and elected government for the people of Afghanistan.

I ran for parliament and won twice for my city Kabul. We established a group of female parliamentarians. I was on the Parliamentary Defense Committee during which time I travelled to lots of military bases and lobbied for women's inclusion in the defence and security sector as emphasized in the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.

We tried a lot for transitional justice and asked for a special court for war crimes. We wanted warlords and all criminals to be accountable. We failed. But it was a great achievement to stand together for this demand. When it comes to a conclusion or concrete steps towards justice as a backbone for society, that dream did not come

true. After four decades, we are still asking for the same thing. There was a lack of political commitment – that is and was the biggest challenge.

I remember when I was young – I didn't give up. During the 1990s we had no media, no social media, no networking. The city was destroyed. That time I didn't give up and now if I was a young woman, I would feel that I have a big dream for myself and for my country. I stood up for my rights, raised my voice. I was determined to make things different. Sooner or later the Taliban should listen if the message is coming from every single corner.

In 2014, I was targeted by a suicide attacker and after that my movement was limited. The government warned me that they couldn't guarantee my safety. I was outside the country for a while as Ambassador to Norway. I was used to being in parliament, speaking the truth publicly and openly. The diplomatic world is very different. I felt like I was in tight shoes and couldn't walk.

Before [the Taliban takeover in 2021] I was considering that we had achieved a lot, but to be honest after the collapse of the government I was rethinking. What happened? What did we achieve? In the first few days everyone was in shock. But later, when I saw brave women standing, demonstrating, raising their voices saying, 'we are not the women from the 1990s, we are a different generation'. That voice gave us hope that nothing was wasted in the last 20 years.

Those women opened their hearts and said, 'you can shoot me, but you can't eliminate me'. And that was their great message to the Taliban – their [expectations for] equality, justice, job opportunities, for being an equal citizen. And that is a great achievement. Our collective achievement. That's the new generation. They were listening. They are the revolution. And they are right - in the 1990s when I was lashed on the street by the Taliban, I didn't demonstrate. It was impossible – there was no network, no texts, no social media. I did something different and set up an underground school in my house with other women. I taught mathematics and science to the girls and told them

about my time at the university. After the first Taliban government was overthrown some of the girls from the school went to the university.

I never had trust in the peace process [between the Taliban and the previous Afghan government]. The government had a very weak position, and the Taliban had a lot of leverage because of the recognition they had [from the US].

The political and security environment will have a direct impact on the threat of gender-based violence. The type of ideology being spread by the Taliban will have a direct impact on society. Gender-based violence was one of the worst crimes committed during the war by all sides. Religion is being used as an excuse.

Afghanistan is not the breaking news anymore. I don't want Afghan women to be part of history. We need everyone to be the voice of Afghan women, calling for their safety and security. This can be done through media, social media, articles and demonstrations. Those whose lives are in danger – it's very important for them to be evacuated safely.

It will be very unjust if we punish 35 million people because of the Taliban [i.e., through sanctions]. The Taliban will find their way to access wealth and money. They will sell drugs and benefit from the war economy. International organizations need to support the people of Afghanistan. Women who have become unemployed because of the Taliban – they should be the ones to be employed by the international organizations. Women and children should be the beneficiaries. Thirty percent of government employees were women and now they are unemployed.

Eventually, if the Taliban are the ones in charge – then we must hold them accountable. I want to challenge them. We must negotiate. They should be held accountable. Their words do not have more value more than their actions. Otherwise, they will do what they want.

Why should we pay the price of war in the world? Enough is enough.”

# FAWZIA AMINI

SENIOR JUDGE, SUPREME COURT  
OF AFGHANISTAN



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THE TALIBAN HAVE INSTITUTIONALIZED DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN; THEY ARE DENYING OUR FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS SUCH AS THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION, THE RIGHT TO POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND THE RIGHT TO WORK.

# FAWZIA AMINI

*Fawzia Amini is a senior member of the judiciary who has held numerous high-level posts in Afghanistan's legal system. Several female judges have been killed in recent years in suspected Taliban attacks. Since the Taliban took control of the government, female judges have been unable to work, and the fate of the whole legal system hangs in the balance. Several female judges have fled the country and others are in hiding. In addition to losing their career and livelihood, women judges are at risk of retaliatory attacks from those who they jailed in the past, many of whom were released or escaped during the Taliban takeover.*



I worked as a senior judge in the Supreme Court of Afghanistan until the Taliban took control on 15 August. I was a member of the Judicial High Council and the head of the Violence against Women Court (VAW Court), which was specifically working on women's cases. Prior to that, I also served as head of the Legal Department of the Ministry of Women Affairs.

I worked for over 20 years in senior government positions. My biggest achievements were that I was a member of the drafting committee of the Elimination of Violence against Women Law, the Family Law, and regulations for protection centres for women at risk. I also worked on articles 22 and 45 of the Afghan Constitution and on the reform of the Shia Personal Status Law. I worked closely with the Ministry of Justice to review laws from a gender perspective and ensured that women's rights were protected to the furthest extent possible. I also conducted hundreds of capacity building trainings on legal issues, including on Afghan laws and regulations that were either directly or indirectly linked to women.

For the past 10 years I have been involved in reporting on the status of the implementation of the international conventions to which Afghanistan is a party. I

have also worked on the informal justice mechanisms to ensure that they respect and protect the rights of women and girls. Furthermore, I worked in both civil courts and criminal procedure courts as a judge.

When the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in August 2021, I was shocked and numb. I was seeing a nightmare and I could not believe what was happening around me. I saw my 20 years of hard work, education and professional experience fall in front of my eyes in a matter of seconds. The moment I saw the Taliban take control was the hardest moment of my life. I knew that things would never be the same for me and millions of Afghan women.

I went into hiding as hundreds of other judges, prosecutors and lawyers did; thousands of criminals were set free, and they pose a serious threat to us. I started receiving death threats, as other judges did, and we lost even the protection system we had with the previous government. Many of the criminals that we had prosecuted are now in charge of the system. We do not know what the future will be for me and my family.

Even before they took control, I received dozens of threats from the Taliban. Many judges and prosecutors were targeted and killed violently; then at least there was a government that we could ask for protection – that is no more in place.

Since the Taliban took control, it seems that criminals are on the loose and the judges are living like prisoners. Our accounts are frozen, and we cannot access our salaries and our own money. The Taliban have institutionalized discrimination against women; they are denying our fundamental rights such as the right to education, the right to political participation and the right to work. They are denying every single right that is given to us by Islam and by our constitution. They want to wipe women from the face of society and make us all prisoners in our own homes. They do not want to see us anywhere except inside our homes.

Extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests and revenge killings are common now and we do not know what law they are following. What is happening now is in total contradiction with what our previous post-2001 governments were doing.

Systematic discrimination against women and girls because of their gender is widespread and is imbedded in the Taliban's policies. The Taliban removed the Ministry of Women's Affairs; they are now blackmailing the international community, using women's rights as a trading point.

The international community must be incredibly careful to not give international recognition to the Taliban. They must tell the Taliban that you cannot have a single-gendered society and they must have an inclusive government. Women must play a role in different aspects of the government and private sector. If women are part of society, then development can take place much faster than in societies where women are denied participation.”

# DR. MASOUDA FAIZI

MEDICAL DOCTOR AND GYNAECOLOGIST



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THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY HAS LET US DOWN; THEY SHOULD HAVE LISTENED TO THE WOMEN OF AFGHANISTAN. THEY MUST NOW PRESSURE THE TALIBAN TO INCLUDE WOMEN IN ALL ASPECTS OF SOCIETY.

# DR. MASOUDA FAIZI

*Dr. Masouda Faizi is a senior medical professional who has held several high-level positions at medical institutions. Female medical professionals are some of the few women that the Taliban allow to work, but they are now heavily restricted in what they can do. They are only allowed to work with female patients and appear to be largely barred from carrying out management functions. Their prospects for further training or career advancement appear extremely limited or non-existent.*



I am a medical doctor, and my speciality is gynaecology. I am also an Associate Professor at the National Ultrasound Institute and a board member of the Afghan Women's Network (AWN). Before the Taliban takeover in August 2021, I was Director of Medical Research and Clinical Studies, as well as Acting Director of the National Institute of Public Health. Meanwhile, I was also running my own gynaecology clinic.

Over the past 20 years I have been a medical doctor as well as a women's rights defender. I was also a member of the Doctors' Association where I was able to create a safer working environment for women. I have trained hundreds of students who are now working as doctors in various parts of Afghanistan. I worked as the director of the maternity wards of several large hospitals, and I assisted thousands of women, including by performing surgery. I established the breast screening centre and the Laparoscopy department at the Estiqlal hospital in Kabul.

Between 2001-2021 I faced various challenges as a doctor and a medical lecturer at medical university. These sectors are considered to be male dominated, despite the great need for women in this field.

Soon after the Taliban returned, support to the health sector diminished and I saw everything falling apart. Although there are thousands of doctors working and trying to provide health care, without the right equipment and tools it is not possible.

Before August 2021, I was an independent medical doctor who was free to travel and do her work, but after 15 August, I was dependent on male members of my family who had to accompany me travelling and even going to work. In a matter of one day, I turned from a fully independent woman into a fully dependent woman that could not leave her home without a male family member.

If I were a young girl now, I would not have been able to do anything because there is no opportunity for women and girls. During all these years, my struggle was to maintain women's rights and assist as many women as possible. I went through the first Taliban regime in the 1990s, but I could not do that once again.

The international community has let us down; they should have listened to the women of Afghanistan. They must now pressure the Taliban to include women in all aspects of society. Depriving women and men of their fundamental and natural rights must be addressed. The international community must do everything to pressure the Taliban to include women in all aspects of social and political life.”

# SHAMAIL ZAREI

CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVIST



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SINCE THE TALIBAN TOOK POWER, I WAS HIDING, AND I COULD NOT DO WHAT I WAS DOING BEFORE. THERE WAS AND IS NO FUTURE FOR ME AND FOR MILLIONS OF OTHER WOMEN AND GIRLS.

# SHAMAIL ZAREI

*Shamail Zarei is a women's rights activist. Many rights activists and networks are effectively unable to function because of the ban on women working, while many Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) have either fled the country or gone into hiding after being threatened by the Taliban. The Taliban have accused some WHRDs of pursuing a 'Western' and 'anti-Islamic agenda'.*



I am a women's rights and civil society activist, and a board member of the Afghan Women's Network (AWN). I had an active role in the promotion of women's rights, and I was writing for both print and online media outlets. I have won several awards at the national and international level for my human rights work.

Before 15 August 2021, as an Afghan citizen I had rights and freedoms. I was able to study and earn my master's degree in International Relations. I was a member of the Electoral Complaints Commission for Logar and Maidan Wardak provinces.

My biggest challenge was the gender bias of many Afghans and their perspective on what women should do and what they should not. Despite that, I and millions of other Afghan women and girls were enjoying some degree of freedom and independence. No one could stop us from choosing our profession or what we wanted to study. I appeared in the media, and I was working and writing.

Since the Taliban took power, I have been hiding, and I cannot not do what I was doing before. There was and is no future for me and for millions of other women and girls. Our fight and struggle will continue, and we must fight for a better future for the next generations.

I think that the international community must pressure the Taliban to accept equal rights for all citizens of Afghanistan. Women must have the right to education, work, and political participation. The international community must help Afghan women and must help them to gain their rights once again.”

# SEDIQA MUSHTAQ

CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVIST



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WHEN I HEARD THE NEWS THAT THE TALIBAN HAD ENTERED KABUL, I FELT AS IF I FELL AND BROKE INTO PIECES. I FELL FROM A BRIGHT PLACE INTO DARKNESS WITH NO LIGHT TO BE SEEN.

# SEDIQA MUSHTAQ

*Sediqa Mushtaq is a successful businesswoman and the director of a health institute. After the Taliban takeover, she and other businesswomen were initially forced to stay at home, and it remains unclear how new Taliban regulations will affect women in the private sector. Restrictions on the freedom of movement and the general attitude that women should only concern themselves with domestic matters mean that women in business are likely to face major obstacles for the foreseeable future.*



I have been the director of the Farabi Health Institute since 2014, and I started running my own kindergarten school in 2021. I am also a board member of the Women’s Chamber of Commerce. I was involved in political activities and am a member of the board of the Women’s Political Participation Network. Alongside these activities, I had just started my postgraduate education when the Taliban took over.

I have been an active woman for the better part of my life; my days were filled with programmes and work. Then suddenly I turned into someone with nothing, and I sit at home all day without having anything to do.

In 2021, I was recognized by the Ministry of Commerce as one of the 10 most accomplished businesswomen in Afghanistan. I received the award for “Businesswomen of the year” along with nine other women. While I was running my own business, I was also blogging. One of the biggest achievements of my life is that through my health institute I trained hundreds of health workers, mostly women, and I was also giving scholarships to women and girls.

Between 2001-2021, I enjoyed equal rights in access to education, employment, and political participation. My family were all supporting me and my work; they were helping me get through any challenges that I was facing, especially the male members of my family.

There were challenges before the Taliban takeover as well, and it was not easy. But then I was trying to change every challenge into an opportunity for myself and other women. There were men who didn't want women in decision-making positions, and women faced various forms of discrimination and harassment. When I started my work at the health institute, one of my male colleagues did not want to work with me, and he was refusing my orders. Even when we were dealing with property purchases or rentals, some people wouldn't sign an agreement with a woman. Despite all these challenges that existed, I was working, and I was leading the entire institute, and no one could legally object or deny me the right to do that. I took a lot of pride in being able to run one of the biggest private health institutes in the country, and in helping other women and girls to access higher education. The situation then was not pleasant, but there is a massive difference from now. The discrimination mentality was present in some men in the society, but now such behaviours are legal and part of the Taliban's official policies.

I lost everything since the Taliban returned. I am not able to go to work. When I heard the news that the Taliban had entered Kabul, I felt as if I fell and broke into pieces. I fell from a bright place into darkness with no light to be seen.

Our institute was closed for several weeks before the Taliban allowed us to work under new restrictions. Despite the restrictions, I went to my office and started my work. It is painful to see that from 1400 students, only 300 can come to work. Many of them are not able to come due to financial issues, the disruption of bank services and families not having salaries to afford education for their children. I tried hard not to close my institute despite the pressure that is mounting on all of us. The rent, the salaries, the other expenses; it all put so much pressure on me and the institute. I had to close

my kindergarten school because women are at home now and they are not allowed to leave for work. Now they just sit at home and look after their children. These were the most painful moments of my life.

The systematic discrimination that the Taliban are using amounts to gender-based violence. They have stopped women lecturers from teaching in the universities; they are not allowed to work anywhere in the government or private sectors. They are imposing dress codes and limitations on movement for women and girls. They are forcing families to marry their daughters to members of the Taliban. I know families who are marrying their daughters to their own relatives fearing that otherwise the Taliban will marry them.

The international community must pressure the Taliban to allow women to work. They cannot paralyze half of the population by imposing restrictions on them. Any aid to Afghanistan must be conditional on women's full participation in government and non-government sectors."

# HAFIZA BAHMANI

SPORTSWOMAN



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AFTER THE TALIBAN TAKEOVER IN AUGUST 2021, I HAVE NO ACTIVITIES. MY GYMNASIUM WAS FORCED TO CLOSE, AND I AM DEPRIVED OF MY SPORT AND MY PROFESSION. I WAS FORCED TO ESCAPE FROM MY COUNTRY OUT OF FEAR FOR MY LIFE.

# HAFIZA BAHMANI

*Hafiza Bahmani is a successful sportswoman and medal winner who has represented her country in international competitions. Taliban officials have said that women ‘do not need’ to play sports and that if they did it might result in them showing their hair or their bodies. Several Afghan women’s national sports teams have been evacuated from the country because of fears that they would be persecuted by the Taliban authorities.*



I am a sportswoman and a member of the Afghanistan National Muay Thai team. My biggest achievement is the silver medal that I won at the Asian Championships in Macau in China. I was incredibly happy to represent my country at the international level.

In recent years, I had many freedoms—I could study, travel, and play sport and follow my dreams, with the support of my family and my sports coaches. Even then I faced many challenges including financial pressures and harassment just because I am a girl. Obviously, now things are worse. I will not be able to continue my sport and cannot represent my country. I am now living in Pakistan and to be away from my family is a big challenge.

After the Taliban takeover in August 2021, I have no activities. My gymnasium was forced to close, and I am deprived of my sport and my profession. I was forced to escape from my country out of fear for my life.

I received many threats by telephone; the callers threatened to kill me. On 8 September 2021, I was attacked and suffered injuries when I was returning home. My sister is also a sportswoman and a medalist for Afghanistan; she also received death threats

several times. I faced gender discrimination on a daily basis, and therefore was forced to abandon my family and country and take refuge in Pakistan.

The international community should do everything they can to put pressure on the Taliban by not recognizing their authority unless they respect women's rights. But in my view, it is impossible for the international community to do that. Over the past two months the Taliban have demonstrated that they will not respect women's rights; they are suffocating the voices of Afghan women by showing brutal violence against women during several women's demonstrations in Kabul."

# NAJEEBA BAQI

HUMANITARIAN AND SOCIAL WORKER



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THE PREVIOUS SYSTEM WAS NOT PERFECT BUT AT LEAST THERE WAS A SYSTEM; NOW IT HAS COLLAPSED COMPLETELY. THE ECONOMY IS SEVERELY AFFECTED, PROJECTS AND ACTIVITIES HAVE STOPPED, AND PEOPLE ARE BECOMING POORER AND MORE VULNERABLE.

# NAJEEBA BAQI

*Najeeba Baqi is an experienced social worker and humanitarian. Women like Najeeba now face immense problems carrying out their important work; restrictions on movement and the need for male guardians make it even harder for social workers to respond to the growing economic and humanitarian crisis.*



For more than 20 years I have worked as a social worker, providing social support, human rights and general education, and health and protection services to women and children in the western region of Afghanistan.

I have provided capacity building and skills training for women and street children, teaching them skills to help them find work and earn money. I helped to provide education facilities for illiterate women and children. With my colleagues, we also provided protection and legal aid support for children who had been used as child soldiers, and assistance to internally displaced women and children. I took part in the implementation of immunization campaigns and supported the Covid-19 hospital in Herat province.

The best opportunities women had included participation in the government, job and education opportunities for girls and women of any age, support from human rights and social organizations, donors' trust and support for women's rights focused projects, and women's rights protection laws and policies at the national level.

Of all the challenges that we had, security was the biggest one. Others included cultural and behavioral change in communities, a shortage of resources compared to people's needs, weak governance, and insufficient infrastructure.

The previous system was not perfect but at least there was a system; now it has collapsed completely. The economy is severely affected, projects and activities have stopped, and people are becoming poorer and more vulnerable. Women have been forced to stop working and have been banned from participating in governance, and education opportunities are not available for them. Furthermore, we have lost the support provided by the organizations focusing on social and economic empowerment of women, the media's work is limited, and security is getting worse, especially for women. The number of child soldiers has increased, and the Taliban are using children in their forces.

Almost all our projects have stopped. Donor organizations have left Afghanistan or stopped their assistance. For example, the World Bank, USAID, and other governments running foreign aid programmes, like Canada, South Korea, Japan, and Germany, have all left.

The restrictions imposed by the Taliban and the increased violence against women are stopping women from work and education. Women are not allowed to move without a Mahram (male guardian) especially for long trips. Forced marriages and child marriages have increased.

The abuse and violence are affecting all women and girls including in my family. Stopping my daughters from education is violence, stopping women from work is violence, putting limitations on women's freedom of movement is violence.

The United Nations and developed countries should put diplomatic and political pressure on the Taliban and the countries that are supporting them. Humanitarian assistance needs to be continued for women living in poverty. Those women and children who are at risk and who have been subjected to violence need to be supported. Women and girls who were forced to leave Afghanistan also need to be supported and provided with education opportunities.”

# MARIA KABIRI

SCHOOL DIRECTOR AND PROFESSOR



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IN THE CURRENT SITUATION, GIRLS ABOVE GRADE 6 ARE BANNED FROM GOING TO SCHOOL, AND FEMALE STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITY ARE ALSO DEPRIVED OF THEIR EDUCATION. THIS ACTION IS A GROSS VIOLATION OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS.

# MARIA KABIRI

*Maria Kabiri is an experienced educator, professor and school director. After the Taliban takeover she was told to stay at home, as were many female teachers across the country. Removing female teachers from the workforce not only means that many women will lose their career and livelihood, it will also create a huge teacher shortage and negatively affect children's access to education.*



I was the headmistress of a high school in Kabul between 2009 to 2018 and a professor at a private university from 2018 to 2021. I was responsible for leadership, providing a safe educational environment without any discrimination, improving education quality, and conducting capacity building for teachers. I was a member of the academic and scientific board, providing educational programs for the advancement of the education system and cultural programs.

My achievements include advocacy, finding and providing educational scholarships for graduate students, capacity building (especially for women teachers) and enhancing the quality of education. I worked hard to improve the quality of education and prevent discrimination in the working environment. In addition, I tried to establish an environment of trust between the students and teachers so that they could continue their education in a professional way. I received several awards and letters of commendation for my achievements.

Under the previous governments I had the right to participate in social activities, had access to job opportunities, was able to build my career and actively participate in community development. I had the right to work at a high level in educational institutions, but there were still several challenges such as gender, ethnic, and linguistic discrimination. Other problems including poverty, a male-dominated society

and a discriminatory attitude towards women's rights and their participation in society were barriers towards the advancement of women. I should remind you that in spite of those barriers, women had the right to advocate for their rights with the former government – but now women have no right to work and no right to conduct advocacy.

Since the Taliban takeover, I, like other employed women, am sitting at home and have not been given permission to work. Working in such a closed environment embedded with discrimination is impossible.

After the Taliban takeover, my colleagues and I were banned from working. Even women who worked at girls' high schools were not allowed to go to their jobs. In the current situation, girls above grade six are banned from going to school, and female students at university are also deprived of their education. This action is a gross violation of women's rights.

The international community must put pressure on the Taliban authorities to recognize and respect women's rights.”

# ZAHRA YAGANA

**AUTHOR AND CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVIST  
FOCUSING ON ETHNIC MINORITIES**



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**I FEEL I HAVE LOST ALL MY RIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES THAT I  
WORKED SO HARD FOR ALL THESE YEARS. EVERYTHING IS DESTROYED  
NOW, AND I CANNOT DO ANYTHING FROM OUTSIDE OF THE COUNTRY  
FOR THOSE WHO ARE STILL IN AFGHANISTAN.**

# ZAHRA YAGANA

*Zahra Yagana is an author, civil society activist and environmentalist. Her activism has focused on providing support to the Shia Hazara minority, an ethnic and religious minority group that has been targeted by both the Taliban and Islamic State - Khorasan Province (IS-KP). Although the Taliban claim that their attitude to non-Pashtun ethnic groups has changed, and that they will govern for all Afghans, there have been credible reports of ethnic and religious minorities including the Hazara community facing reprisal attacks and having their homes confiscated.*



I was the founder and director of the Green House Organization, an NGO with 2000 members which was focusing on environmental protection and teaching people how to protect the environment through awareness raising programmes. We also had a network of volunteers who conducted humanitarian and environmental activities. These volunteers consisted of 1200 young activists (boys and girls) who were introduced by us to education centers to continue their education and also to study English. A large number of women and girls who are victims of war and suicide bombers' explosions were also supported by us. We also worked with Afghanistan Mechanism for Inclusive Peace (AMIP) in 34 provinces in relation to peace building and advocacy on conflict resolution and the inclusion of women in civil society.

My biggest achievement initially was to provide medical treatment to war victims. By establishing a charity network at the national and international level, I was able to provide medical treatment for war victims and facilitate their treatment outside the country. I also helped girls from families affected by war to access education. My other achievement is that I published a book titled 'Light of Ash' (Roshenahee Khakister) which explains the miseries of Afghan women. It was my attempt to change men's attitudes and encourage women to fight for their rights. It focuses on several issues

including religion, culture, traditions, and laws which are used as a tool against women; most of the book represents the story of my life. It was published eight times within four years, the book has sold over 11,000 copies in Afghanistan.

I was a victim of domestic violence and early marriage. I experienced a lot of difficulties and fought for my independence. After I got my divorce, I came to Kabul. At that time there were lots of job opportunities available with national and international organizations. I succeeded in getting a job and managing my life. This opportunity was available under the umbrella of women's human rights civil society activities. As I changed my life, I also started to work to change the lives of other women who had been victims in similar circumstances. I have been actively fighting for women's rights, women's access to work, our rights to life and freedom of expression.

As a single young woman, I faced a lot of challenges in my working environment, from renting a house to handling matters in my normal daily life. When I came to Kabul, I was not able to rent a house because no property dealer would sign an agreement with a woman but after a while this issue was resolved. I faced harassment in several working institutions, but I could manage it and overcame all these challenges. I was able to manage all kinds of challenges as I had my rights.

Now when I think about it, I feel I have lost all my rights and opportunities that I worked so hard for all these years. Everything is destroyed now, and I cannot do anything from outside of the country for those who are still in Afghanistan. I think I have gone back to zero and I do not know where to begin. Do I have the strength? Is there any opportunity to rebuild everything? I feel I have lost everything. I have no tools to use for the betterment of the situation. The only way for me is to write a second book and I am busy with it. We had opportunities at that time, now our problems have doubled, and no opportunities are available.

My office which worked for young women and men is closed. Most of the boys and girls whom we introduced to private education centers are forced to sit at home. The

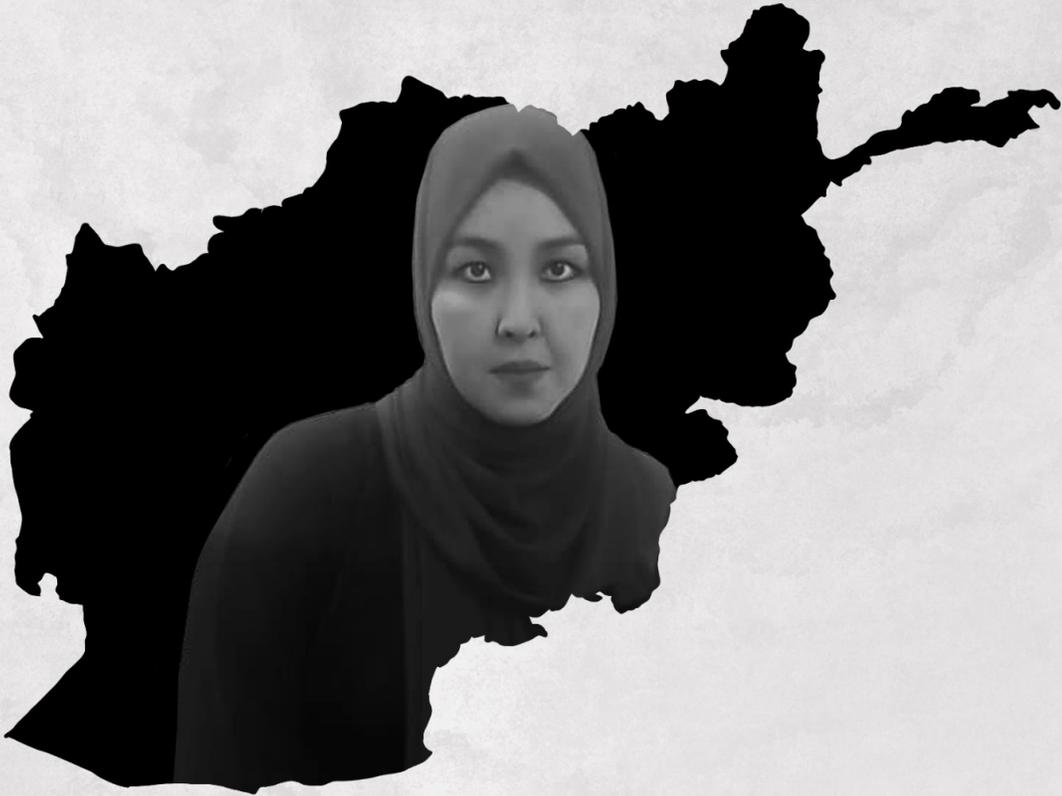
volunteers have gone to their villages. Because my office worked with ethnic minorities from the Hazara and Shia community, we had to stop our activities for security reasons.

We only cooperate with organizations who provide humanitarian assistance. All our ongoing projects have stopped. I am a single woman and the only breadwinner of the family. When I cannot work, I cannot support my children and my life is doomed. Right now, there are no work opportunities for women in any organizations or institutions. My elder daughter who used to go to university has no right to study anymore. These factors have affected and shadowed my life. I had to leave the country the day after the Taliban took control of Afghanistan.

The international community should establish a group for the support of women's rights among international organizations and donors who are interested in women's activities in Afghanistan. The group can put pressure on the Taliban to respect women's rights and include women in Afghanistan's political and social affairs.”

# AZAM AHMADI

LAWYER



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I FEEL LIKE I AM IN PRISON. EVEN PRISONERS HAVE RIGHTS  
BUT NOT WOMEN UNDER THE TALIBAN.

# AZAM AHMADI

*Azam Ahamdi is a lawyer and civil society activist. Female legal professionals are unable to practice law under the Taliban. They have lost their jobs and livelihood. Many have faced threats of violence linked to cases they previously worked on. They risk being targeted in retaliatory attacks committed by those who were previously jailed but were released during the Taliban takeover. Women lawyers that represented women victims of domestic violence have reported receiving threats from the husbands or families of their clients.*



I am a lawyer and was an active member of the Afghanistan Bar Association since 2015. I have defended many cases in the Afghan courts since then. In 2017, I established my own NGO called the Voice of Law and Welfare Organization. I was working as a pro bono lawyer for women and girls who were victims of domestic abuse and other forms of violence. In some cases, I would introduce them to protection centres and shelters and then I followed their cases through the whole process, representing them during court procedures.

Our NGO worked on a voluntary basis; many lawyers worked with us for free taking five to ten cases free of charge per year, most of which were related to women. Between 2017 and 2021, my NGO worked on at least 300 cases of violence against women.

Ever since the Taliban took control of the country, everything changed for us. I feel like I am in prison. Even prisoners have rights but not women under the Taliban. I feel like everything I did and earned in the past 16 years was a dream and now I have woken up to the reality of living under the Taliban, a reality that doesn't feel true to me. I feel useless and this sense of emptiness and worthlessness is given to us by the Taliban. They don't even consider us to be half of a human. I often question myself. What did we do to deserve this situation? Why should Afghan women face so many

restrictions? What did women do to the Taliban to deserve such punishment? I have so many questions, and I can't find any answers to them.

Since the Taliban have been back in power, they have released thousands of prisoners and convicted criminals, making our lives difficult. We receive death threats; we are being summoned by the Taliban and they are seeing us as an enemy and someone to be punished severely. Because of the death threats I had to change my phone number, I had to change my home and finally I had to deactivate my social media accounts. Because of the death threats I had to close my office and I couldn't even go to collect my personal things. I asked my male colleague to do so for me. As a defence lawyer I was helping other people to access justice. Now I cannot even defend my own fundamental rights and cannot access justice myself. I can't even defend my right to work. This is hurting me a lot. This is not just discrimination, it's a systematic violation of the rights of half of the population and this is gender-based violence.

The international community itself can see that all our gains of the past 20 years are now gone, the rights to freedom of expression and assembly are non-existent. The international community must show solidarity with Afghan people. They must tell the Taliban that they will be isolated if they do not create an inclusive government where the rights of every Afghan from all ethnicities, languages and genders are respected and protected.”

# NAHID RAHIMI

MEMBER OF THE AFGHAN ROBOTICS TEAM



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WOMEN COULD TRAVEL AND COULD HAVE ANY JOB THEY WANTED.  
NOW THE GIRLS CANNOT EVEN GO TO SCHOOL AND THEIR  
FREEDOMS HAVE BEEN HARDENED.

# NAHID RAHIMI

*Nahid Rahimi studies and works in the field of robotics. Under the Taliban regime, girls like Nahid have had enormous restrictions placed on their ability to continue their studies, let alone actually work in the field of science and technology. The Taliban has said that girls can only resume university-level education once separate classes can be established for men and women, but the limited number of women teachers in particular subjects mean it will be very difficult to implement this in practice. Moreover, senior Taliban leaders have criticised the concept of academia, saying the country doesn't need people with master's degrees or PhDs, and that madrassa-style (religious) education is preferred. The Taliban authorities have replaced the directors of various academic institutions with madrassa educated Talibs with little or no academic experience, resulting in the resignations of numerous university staff.*



I am a member of the Afghan national robotics team named “Dreamers”. I work in the robot mechanics department. Before August 2021, we were busy with competitions as usual, working on robots that were needed for the First Global 2021 competitions, and working on various other projects.

“Dreamers” is the first team in the field of making intelligent robots, which was formed in 2017 by the Digital Citizen Fund, led by Roya Mahboob and Alireza Mehraban in Afghanistan. We won various awards and took part in competitions around the world. Our robots are made in two parts; firstly, competition robots that are made according to competition standards and secondly robots that we build to solve society’s problems. These are designed to help in a wide variety of areas including health, agriculture and security. We have made some robots in the field of artificial intelligence, for example wheelchairs that are controlled by the pupil of the eye. One of the biggest achievements was when we built a ventilator during the Covid-19 crisis.

We had many freedoms, including the right to education and social participation, the right to property, the right to education, right to freedom of expression. Our government was a democratic government. Afghan women and girls could defend their rights. Now we are not sure that we will have them anymore.

In the first years of democracy and the republic in Afghanistan, women were given a lot of attention. Their honours are written in golden script in history. When I grew up, I thought I should also bring honour to my country and its people, although I was not aware of its dangers in this society. Disbelief arises because there were people who doubted the abilities of Afghan women, but in any case, our team participated in the First Global Championships. This was a clear example of progress and fighting the challenges of the last 20 years in Afghanistan.

In the past, the way of life was different because society was freer and everyone lived as they wished. Schools were open, every Afghan girl could continue her education in the field she was interested in, and any course they wanted could be pursued. Women could travel and could have any job they wanted. Now girls cannot even go to school and their freedoms have been hardened. Women are the body of a society. If they do not study, how can they have a stable society?"

# NAGENA AZIMI

ARTIST AND MEMBER OF ARTLORDS GROUP



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THE TALIBAN DO NOT ACCEPT ARTISTIC WORKS, ESPECIALLY BY WOMEN. THEY DESTROYED ALL THE GRAFFITI AND PAINTINGS WE HAD PREVIOUSLY DRAWN ON THE WALLS OF KABUL CITY.

# NAGENA AZIMI

*Nagena Azimi is a street artist who has used her artwork to raise public awareness on a variety of issues. Since returning to power, the Taliban has painted over lots of Kabul's street art, much of which they view as un-Islamic. During its first period in power, the group banned images of the human form, saying they represented idolatry.*



I am a member of the Artlords Group, a grassroots movement of artists and volunteers motivated by the desire to pave the way for social transformation and behavioral change through employing the soft power of art and culture as a non-intrusive approach. I was busy with street art such as painting, graffiti, and murals for public awareness purposes. Some of my painting focused on raising awareness on issues such as health (polio vaccine), peace, violence against women, gender equality, and in support of the former Afghan security forces. I was conducting these activities in Kabul and the rest of the provinces.

I achieved a lot in my profession, including holding several photo exhibitions and receiving commendation letters from different organizations. I also received an award (She Builds Peace) from the Afghan Women Skill Development Centre (AWSDC). I think my biggest achievement is to encourage and motivate young girls who want to play a positive role in society and to do arts activities.

During these years I was enjoying all my basic rights, freedom of choice, education and social activities and I was able to get my BA degree in Arts and political science. I had the right to work, get an education and fight for gender equality between 2001 and 2021.

It is obvious that having achievements in a traditional and male-dominated country such as Afghanistan had its own challenges. We were facing a country which experienced decades of war and was affected by ignorance and a lack of education. As a young girl and a street artist I faced a lot of difficulties and discrimination. But our main purpose was to expand the art of painting and to struggle against negative attitudes towards women in our society. But now the challenges we are experiencing after the Taliban takeover are more serious. Now women are confined and imprisoned in their houses. No woman dares to go outside or does any activities in society.

Unfortunately, after the Taliban takeover the working environment for women has become very difficult, particularly in the art sector. The Taliban do not accept artistic works, especially by women. They destroyed all the graffiti and paintings we had previously drawn on the walls of Kabul city. They wrote 'Congratulations on your Independence' over our graffiti. However, I do not know which independence they are talking about.

The Taliban mentality is against women's rights and citizenship rights. The Taliban not only limited women's activities but also the right to education and work. After the Taliban takeover I could not continue with my activities and cannot play any role in society. The Taliban closed all girls' schools and universities. They banned education for girls above grade six and this is the biggest violation of human rights and discrimination against women.

The Taliban's mentality is based on war, killing, and violence. They will not change their views on women. I believe there will not be any positive change in regard to women's work or education and I am sure I would not be able to achieve anything under Taliban rule.

Since the Taliban takeover, I have witnessed gender-based violence and other human rights violations against my family and my friends by the Taliban. These violations include banning my mother from work - as if women do not have the right to work and

feed their family. I also witnessed violence against my friend for not wearing 'proper' clothes.

The international community must know that the Taliban have not changed, and they have the same thinking and views now as they had 20 years ago. Back then, they did not allow girls to get an education and now they are doing the same. If the international community recognized the Taliban regime, it would be a big blow after 20 years of our struggle and achievements. This will destroy the dreams of millions of Afghan girls. The international community should not recognize the Taliban as a legitimate government.”

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Amnesty International urges the Taliban authorities to demonstrate a clear and solid commitment to respect, protect and fulfill the rights of women and girls.

## THE TALIBAN AUTHORITIES MUST:

- Create an enabling environment to allow women to return and fully participate in the political, social, and economic spheres.
- Adopt urgent measures to ensure the full and meaningful participation of women in all areas of work and public life including governance. Such measures must be directed at all women, including rural, internally displaced and returnee women and women with disabilities, who face multiple forms of discrimination exacerbated by the restrictions in accessing these spheres.
- Allow complete access to education to women and girls. Immediately re-open all secondary schools to girls, put a stop to all harassment, threats and attacks against teachers and students, avoid any discriminatory policies that affect the right to education of girls and cease any military use of schools in Afghanistan.
- Ensure women and girls' rights are respected and protected from violations committed by third parties including in the home, community and at the workplace, as per Afghanistan's international human rights obligations under ICCPR, ICESCR, CEDAW, CRC and other relevant treaties.

- Take immediate steps to implement the recommendations of the UN Special Procedures and treaty bodies to ensure women's safe participation in public and private life.
- Cooperate fully with the soon to be established UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Afghanistan, including by providing full, unfettered access to the country.
- Ensure that all acts of gender-based violence and other human rights violations and abuses against women and girls are thoroughly investigated and prosecuted, and perpetrators brought to justice in fair trials in conformity with international standards and without recourse to the death penalty or other cruel punishments. Access to justice and adequate remedies as per the specific needs of women and girls who are victims of gender-based violence must be provided in a timely manner.
- Re-establish and strengthen government infrastructure to promote and protect women's rights, including the Ministry of Women's Affairs. Ensure that former employees of this ministry are able to return to their roles, and that any vacancies are filled by individuals with knowledge and commitment to women's rights.

#### **AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL URGES THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY TO:**

- Listen and engage with women human rights defenders and activists from Afghanistan to understand the ground realities, their pragmatic recommendations and work with them to support women's rights in Afghanistan.
- Use available leverage during negotiations and discussions with the Taliban authorities to address women and girls' rights as a non-negotiable issue. Ensure women are part of all delegations meeting with the Taliban and raise concerns with the absence of women within the de facto government of Afghanistan.

- Allocate adequate and specific funds towards and implement women's rights programmes and projects as part of a comprehensive and long-term commitment to support human rights and women's rights in Afghanistan.
- Ensure humanitarian funding is accessible through a functioning banking system, provided to credible INGOs, NGOs and community-based organizations operating in Afghanistan, including local women's organizations, in a flexible manner. Provide international cash assistance if necessary, to prevent the collapse of the banking system, to avoid further deteriorations of all Afghans' economic, social and cultural rights, especially women.
- Actively arrange and support safe passage and evacuation of Afghan women and girls who are at heightened risk of violence and abuse from the Taliban forces, non-state armed groups, community or family members, and who wish to leave the country.
- Consider all Afghan women and girls as prima facie refugees, on the grounds of high risk of gender-based persecution upon return to Afghanistan.
- Immediately stop deportations and other returns to Afghanistan, or to third countries where they might be at risk of being returned to Afghanistan.
- Ensure the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has the resources, staffing, and diplomatic backing necessary for robust monitoring of human rights on the ground throughout the country, including additional staff fluent in local languages. UNAMA should engage in regular discussions with the Taliban on meeting Afghanistan's obligations under international human rights law, including the duty to ensure full gender equality, and regularly brief the UN Security Council on the human rights situation.

- Ensure the UN Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan has the necessary resources and support to fulfil their mandate effectively, including by ensuring dedicated expertise on women's rights and gender.
- Consider further action at the UN Security Council, General Assembly and Human Rights Council to ensure adequate scrutiny of the human rights situation facing women in Afghanistan, including the creation of more robust mechanisms and processes as appropriate.

# AFGHAN WOMEN

**THEY ARE THE REVOLUTION AND NOW FIGHTING  
FOR THEIR FUTURE**

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