

Taking Myself out of the Darkness: Afghan Women Human Rights Defenders' Fight for Recognition



Millions of women and their families have been displaced within Afghanistan and forced to flee to other countries since the Taliban took over the country in August 2021, decimating the rights of women and girls. Despite their displacement, Afghan women human rights defenders (WHRDs) inside and outside of Afghanistan continue their activism. These women face heightened risks of violence, exploitation, discrimination, and a lack of protection and support, compounding already high levels of violence against women and girls (VAWG) that exist in the region and that displaced women and girls typically face. Those inside Afghanistan face intimidation, harassment, arbitrary detention, and the threat of “disappearance”. WHRDs that have fled or were evacuated from Afghanistan find themselves in prolonged, uncertain stages of displacement, often in countries where their history of activism continues to put them at risk.

For twenty years prior to August 2021, Afghan women worked in partnership with the international community to re-establish their rights and achieve equality in all facets of life. Afghan WHRDs, therefore, feel astonished and betrayed that their former allies - while providing humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan - give only lip service to women’s rights. The sharp decrease in international support for women’s rights work in Afghanistan has resulted in the shutdown of critical services and organizations supporting women and girls. Afghan WHRDs struggle to access basic services regardless of how insufficient they are. When Afghan WHRDs do access services in interim or final destination countries, they are often confronted with case workers and volunteers who lack training and awareness of the unique safety risks that they face as Afghan WHRDs.

“We are tired of all these empty promises and statements. We need action. What is the responsibility of the UN and NATO towards an ally when it is taken hostage by a terrorist group?”

— Former public sector worker, currently residing in Turkey

VOICE’s Multi-Country Assessment Findings

In July and August 2022, VOICE partnered with Afghan women’s organizations and women leaders to assess the safety and protection needs of displaced Afghan women engaged in advocacy and human rights work in Australia, Brazil, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iran, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Pakistan, Spain, Sweden, Tajikistan, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Afghan WHRDs reported extreme challenges in their efforts to defend Afghan women and girls’ rights and in trying to navigate and rebuild their lives during displacement.

- ▶ **Healthcare Access:** Not a single woman in Afghanistan reported access to basic healthcare or reproductive health services.
- ▶ **Financial Aid:** Only 1 out of 4 WHRDs in Afghanistan reported access to any type of financial assistance, humanitarian aid, or psychosocial support; most had not received any support in accessing safe housing, medical assistance, or legal assistance.
- ▶ **Safety Risks by Caseworkers:** Many caseworkers in transit countries are unaware of the risks of domestic violence and honor killings, putting Afghan women and girls at increased risk.
- ▶ **Resettlement:** WHRDs reported that people gained access to Kabul airport based on who had personal contacts and resources. 42% of WHRDs reported not receiving basic assistance during their resettlement journeys.
- ▶ **Violence Against WHRDs:** Domestic violence was a major concern of WHRDs in Afghanistan due to restrictions on women's movement and the requirement of mahram.¹

“Listen to us and use the organizations and structures we have built in the last 20 years for consulting and supporting us to facilitate women’s consultation and mobilization, but do not take away our jobs. Let us and help us to present our needs instead of representing us?”

— WHRD, Afghanistan

¹ A mahram is a male chaperone, typically a male family member. Zahra Nader and Nargis Amini, “The Taliban are Harming Afghan Women’s Health,” Foreign Policy, 2 March 2022.

Recommendations

The international community faces extremely complex political, humanitarian, and logistical challenges regarding its efforts to support Afghanistan. But the same international community used Afghan women's rights as a justification for military and political intervention in Afghanistan for 20 years. It, therefore, has a responsibility to go beyond its platitudes in support of Afghan women's needs, safety, and rights and take concerted, coordinated action in partnership with Afghan women themselves.

Governments, the UN, and Non-Governmental Actors (e.g., NGOs, feminist funders, and others) should:

1. Exert political pressure on the Taliban to recognize and respect the rights of Afghan women and girls, including by refusing to recognize the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan and use all diplomatic tools and accountability mechanisms (e.g., the UN Security Council's travel ban) to hold the Taliban to account for its denial of women and girl's human rights.
2. Center women leaders and women human rights defenders as experts and partners in all aspects of programming and political engagement. Ensure that Afghan women, including Hazaras and Tajiks and those within Afghanistan and in the diaspora are directly engaged in diplomatic and multi-lateral decision-making processes and designing political solutions, overseeing the management of humanitarian aid delivery, and development programming.
3. Prioritize and fully fund humanitarian programming that promotes women and girls' safety, security, and rights and develop and implement longer-term programming that spans the humanitarian-development nexus.
4. Ensure safe access to comprehensive, essential services and basic rights throughout displacement and resettlement tailored for Afghan WHRDs.
5. Develop culturally-appropriate, women and girl centered mechanisms for confidentially and safely reporting VAWG.
6. Provide education, training, and access to sustainable livelihoods for displaced WHRDs to enable them to maintain their dignity, integrate into the community, earn a decent income, and leverage their talents and expertise.
7. Prioritize and urgently expedite resettlement for Afghan WHRDs and provide them with financial and logistical support to continue their activism and support for Afghan women and girls as well as play a greater role in international political and humanitarian efforts to restore peace, human rights, democracy, and development in Afghanistan.