



A Comprehensive Analysis of Female Journalists' State in Afghanistan

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Afghan media, journalists, then and now

Twenty-two years had passed since the day when a woman entered the Radio Afghanistan studio in the morning wearing a burqa, and her voice was heard across the country after many years. Her voice was an incident, the meaning of which Afghans knew very well at that time. It was the first morning after the overthrow of the first Taliban rule.

Later, in the first moments, when national television started broadcasting again, a woman appeared on the screen. These two incidents instigated international reactions and symbolic reception.

From that moment, the active presence of women in the media expanded beyond the National Radio and Television in private media and had women in all programs and shows, including news.

More specifically, thousands of young women studied journalism in universities inside and abroad and attended small workshops and training programs to be more successful in the practical field. Some Afghan women earned their Ph.D. master's degrees in journalism and communication from prestigious universities worldwide.

Female journalists were active members of civil society, and many prominent and well-known Afghan women politicians, including members of parliament, came from journalistic backgrounds.

These women were doing vital work for women's rights and human rights in the media and broader society. The number of women in the workforce was rapidly on the rise. Women were visible everywhere, from education to business, politics, social affairs, and international missions. Women's work in leadership positions in the media was another significant achievement that empowered and inspired more women to lead roles in management, production, public affairs, editing, printing, etc. Furthermore, female activists worked in every field to enhance the quality of women's presence.

According to Afghan journalists' defense societies, until the fall of the Republic, 1,402 female journalists were working in the media sector. This number dropped to 463 after the Taliban's takeover.

Afghan women paid a high price to preserve media freedom and defend women's right to work. Dozens of Afghan women were killed, injured, burned, threatened with death, beaten, acid thrown to their faces, and forced to confinements at home. However, their struggle continued with their media activities, and they were also trying to guarantee future generations' safety and legal security.

Afghan female journalists have won many national and international awards, some of whom have been named the bravest journalists in the world.

The women's presence in the media during the 20 years of the Republic represented the following three rights:

- 1- Liberty of women
- 2- Freedom of speech

3- Freedom of media

Women's activities were not limited to Kabul and big cities but were also on the rise in remote provinces including the traditionally and culturally conservative regions. Neither religion nor tradition could bar these brave women from getting an education and entering the workforce.

Afghan women's active participation in the media brought them to international platforms where they could talk about Afghanistan to global audiences, attract international attention, and raise their voices about human rights and freedom. For a while, when international Afghan women received vast international support, they were well received, and their voices were heard. Unfortunately, this golden victory did not last long for Afghan women, as millions suffered under the Taliban.

However, before the fall of the Republic, when the negotiations between the U.S. and the Taliban began in Doha, a severe concern in public opinion and international circles was Afghan women's rights, work, education, and social contribution. Afghan women and human rights activists seriously raised these concerns in face-to-face meetings and the media.

Many people believed that if the Taliban were brought back to power, they would prevent women from education, work, and social activities. The pulse of society and common sense accepted this. The people of Afghanistan knew the Taliban well. Based on these concerns, women were selected to be members of the negotiation delegations, and women with media backgrounds were also active among these women.

These women boldly expressed their concerns in Doha and other international talks and warned that women would be the first victims of any irresponsible deal. The Taliban had an ambiguous attitude; some made implicit promises in linguistic diplomacy to protect women's rights within the Islamic framework, but "women's rights within the Islamic framework" has not been defined. No one understood what it meant. What was done was to imprison the women at home. The Taliban barred girls and women from school, college, work, and social activities and confined them at home and grave.

What's going on now?

Restrictions on media activities are increasing day by day. First, the independent media have lost their economic resources. Second, the media have stopped or minimized their activities due to severe restrictions. Many journalists and media workers have emigrated from the country, and the remaining are looking for ways to leave. Among them, most female journalists are facing obstacles and problems.

Some of the documented incidents and conducts faced by women journalists after the republic's fall have been the following.

The Ban on women's work in the media in 21 provinces

Figures from the Afghan journalists' defense organizations show that after the return of the Taliban, Afghan female journalists are not allowed to work in 21 provinces, including Baghlan, Takhar, Kandahar, Nooristan, Maidan Wardak, Daikundi, Helmand, Kandahar, Rozgan, Zabul, Paktia, Paktika, Jawzjan, Farah, Ghor, Faryab, Logar, Ghor, Farah, Faryab, and Khost.

Preventing coverage of news conferences in the media in 14 provinces

Based on these surveys, in 14 provinces such as Faryab, Samangan, Bamyan, Ghazni, Khost, Panjshir, Jawzjan, Nimroz, Baghlan, Badakhshan, and Balkh provinces, female journalists have not been allowed to cover news conferences. Women can attend face-to-face news conferences in only six provinces, including Kabul, Herat, Nangarhar, Sarpul, Laghman, and Badghis. Female journalists had no obstacles participating in news conferences during the Republic.

Decrease in the presence of female journalists and an increase in their unemployment.

With the return of the Taliban, there has been a dramatic decrease in female journalists in Afghanistan. During the Republic, there were about 1,402 female journalists and media workers in the country, but now this number has decreased to 463, of which 284 are in Kabul and other places. About 899 women journalists in the provinces have become unemployed due to security threats, financial problems with the media outlet, reduced payment of salaries, and cultural problems.

Lack of access to information

Female journalists need help accessing information, as ministry spokespersons, deputy heads, and most ministries such as education, higher education, mines, economy, and others do not cooperate in providing information to female journalists. Such discriminations lead female journalists to seek help from their male colleagues to obtain information.

Lack of journalistic professional capacity

Before the Taliban's takeover, highly educated staff and professional journalists worked in the media, many of whom had fled the country. Recent graduates and those with little experience in the media field are currently carrying out journalistic affairs in the country. There are no suitable work and practice environments and trainers to prepare the current journalists and those studying in this field.

Increasing violence against female journalists

Compared to the Republic era, violence against female journalists has increased drastically. In 2022 alone, 15 incidents of violence against female journalists were registered, which included arrests, beatings, and harassment. Female journalists are arrested while reporting on the streets and covering protests under the Taliban.

Restrictive decrees of the Taliban against women journalists

During the two years, the Taliban has restricted female journalists' activities by enforcing restrictive laws.

After nine months of Taliban rule, that is until May 21, 2022, the Taliban government announced that female TV anchors must wear facemasks or niqab to cover their faces. In November 2021, women were banned from appearing in entertainment programs. At the same time, the offices of male and female reporters were separated.

The Taliban forced the media managers to ask female guests living abroad to wear masks or cover their faces with a niqab while talking on television. The other restrictive orders stated

that female journalists cannot interview men; they must have separate documents for each report. Female journalists cannot use certain words in reports and television programs, they are banned from reporting without a Muharram, women are not allowed to laugh in radio broadcasts, and even in some provinces, broadcasting women's voices in the media is prohibited. Female-run entertainment radio and TV programs are prohibited, and women are not permitted to attend the journalism faculty entrance exam.

The restrictions that happened in July 2023

Incidents of violence against female journalists

Two cases of violence against female journalists were registered in July 2023.

Gender discrimination

Gender discrimination continues at the center and in the provinces. In July, a series of exhibitions were held in Herat City, but female journalists were not allowed to report on these exhibitions.

Access to information

A major challenge for journalists, especially female journalists, was being denied access to information. The Taliban authorities discriminate against female journalists and refuse to provide information.

Censorship of information

The Taliban government strictly monitors the media. Journalists say the media cannot publish cases and incidents that show the government's weaknesses. Journalists said that topics such as poverty, unemployment, violence against women, and the closure of schools and universities for girls are not allowed to get covered in the media. On the other hand, the government views publicizing women's health issues as obscenity and does not allow the media to talk about them.

Poverty

Poverty and unemployment are the challenges all journalists face in the country, including female journalists, after the return of the Taliban. In September 2022, according to some investigations of the Afghan Journalists' Support Organization, 899 female journalists became unemployed for various reasons, including the economic weaknesses of the media. An Afghan journalist who declined to be named due to security concerns said: "We are unable to pay the salaries of our employees due to the lack of funds."

Also, many news agencies in Kabul, such as Farhat News Agency, Hama News Agency, Tawana, Paigard, Roidad, and Yek TV, need more financial means to pay their employees' salaries.

On the other hand, women journalists work without receiving any salaries in media outlets in Nangarhar and Badakhshan provinces. Media officials say that the country's media community is facing a crisis. If this situation continues, the media can no longer continue their work in the country. Female journalists are worried because many of them are the sole breadwinners of their families. With their unemployment, not only them but the whole family suffers.

Afghan female journalists in exile

Journalists who have left the country also face many problems, especially those living in neighboring countries of Pakistan and Iran, who are in dire situations. Pakistani police raid the residences of Afghan journalists, detaining and insulting them and extorting money from them.

The situation in Iran is even worse. Several female journalists live in such an ambiguous limbo, trying to go to Western countries that neither their immigration fate is predictable nor they can return to Afghanistan. Journalists who have gone to Western countries are facing serious concerns that they may need more time to continue their careers because there is no media capacity to hire them. Thus, most journalists may need to work in other fields and hourly labor.

What should be done?

First, we must share first-hand information about Afghan women's grievances, miseries, and authentic situations, especially female journalists. All those institutions, organizations, societies, and influential personalities who can do something in this area are encouraged to find a practical solution for women journalists in Afghanistan.

In light of the complete investigation, we can understand what to do for Afghan women journalists within the country, in the region's countries, and overseas.

The Afghan Journalists Support Organization has given priority to this issue in its primary activities and has established its most active department, named Women Journalists Support Committee, which:

- To raise the voice of Afghan women journalists for legal, economic, and humanitarian support
- To connect those Afghan journalists in need to the world to find help and solutions for their problems. This includes all female journalists in Afghanistan and those spending nights and days of exile in neighboring countries as well as around the world
- To maintain the active presence of women in the media. If their active participation in the country is limited, alternative possibilities should be found. In other words, a dynamic media may be created for Afghan women in exile.
- To find solutions for accurate media coverage of the situation of women in Afghanistan.
- To pave the way for the skills, experiences, and scientific-specialized education of Afghan women journalists and journalists; to increase the existing capacities and open up new capabilities; and to explore employment opportunities for them in their professional fields in exile.
- To develop mechanisms of women supporting women and listen to the voices of Afghan women to support and help them practically and to raise the attention and friendship of all women, female activists, famous figures, international institutions, associations, and organizations

- To establish a legal wing that can assist every Afghan female journalist anywhere in the world.

In sum, this committee in the organization has been established and operated by women journalists and experts. Other members of the organization support the committee in advisory and support areas.

We work on specific and scientific plans in these areas, which will soon be discussed with various institutions.

We call on all Afghan and international organizations to stand with the organization and act to save Afghan women journalists.

With the hope that once again, like 22 years ago, Afghan journalists can get behind the mic and camera without any restrictions, produce news, and spread the message of progress, peace, and human rights to the world.

Afghan Journalists Support Organization