



A Report on the Status of Afghan Women Journalists in Afghansitan and Exile

By the Advocacy Committee for Women Journalists of Afghanistan Journalists Support Organization (AJSO) – March 2024

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A Report about Afghan Women Journalists, both within Afghanistan and in Exile after the Fall of the Republic and the Rise of the Taliban

Currently, there are no female journalists and media workers in 19 provinces of Afghanistan. This fact shows that in more than half of the country, the voices of women, who constitute half of the society, have been silenced. This is a clear violation of human rights in the country.

After the political transformation and the change of political regime in Afghanistan, from 248 television channels during the republic, only 68 channels are operating. 211 radio stations out of 438 are active, and only 13 print newspapers out of 91 newspapers are still operating in the country and less than 600 women journalists are working in the mentioned media platforms.

This report is written by the Advocacy Committee for Women Journalists of Afghanistan Journalists' Support Organization (AJSO) on the occasion of March 8th the International Women's Day in order to highlight the problems of Afghan journalists, especially women journalists who live inside Afghanistan or in exile, to help international institutions become aware of the chaotic situation of media workers after August 2021.

A- The situation of journalists and media workers inside the country:

Most of the challenges faced by journalists inside the country are restrictions and obstacles to professional work in the media and for the media. In the last two years and seven months after the change of the political regime in Afghanistan, there have been many reports about the closure of many media outlets, attacks on the media and their employees, arrests and tortures of journalists and media employees. The Taliban threaten and imprison journalists and media workers every time with the smallest excuse. The beatings on the bodies of the journalists released from the Taliban are a clear proof of this unfortunate situation and an attack on the values of freedom of expression.

Every time something like this happens, domestic and foreign organizations, both national and international, condemn them and issue announcements, but these actions. Although such reactions show some support and sympathy with the journalists against the ruling power in the country, they do not matter to the Taliban and their totalitarian ruling.

The restrictions and pressures that have been imposed on journalists and media workers, especially on women journalists, in more than two years under the Taliban rule in Afghanistan are listed below:

- Lack of access to information, arbitrary arrest of journalists and media workers.
- Lack of job security and economic problems are among the things that have trapped female journalists and media workers in Afghanistan.
- In the last two years, due to the lack of support from the international community, especially the international media supporting organizations, a large number of women journalists have been fired from their jobs or have resigned themselves due to security reasons. Some of them are now staying at home and are not able to meet their economic needs.

- After the drastic changes in the media society of Afghanistan, 95% of the media have lost their female employees, and the few who are active are struggling with many restrictions and this has caused them to think of leaving their job and profession. These restrictions range from the mandatory covering and wearing of masks during the performance to the manner of speaking and the non-appearance of women next to male colleagues and male guests in round tables and other programs. Additionally, in the audio media, women are not even allowed to talk and interview men over the phone.
- Discrimination against women journalists is also considered as one of the major challenges in the work of journalists in Afghanistan which prevents them from accessing the information on time. Most of the government officials are not willing to talk to the female reporters either in person or by phone. Women have also been banned from participating in press and media conferences.
- Banning the broadcast of women's voices in most provinces of Afghanistan and restrictions on listening to women's voices through audio media.
- Existence of widespread censorship in Afghan media for some subjects and news reports from the services that are against the Taliban's policy or are prepared in criticism of their actions are removed before publication. Journalists do not have the right to prepare critical reports and they are not even allowed to reflect people's critical opinions in their daily reports.
- The guests who connect to the programs through Skype or other online platforms should not say anything against the wishes of the Taliban group, and the organizers of such interviews should discuss this with the interviewees in advance and let them refrain from expressing issues against the Taliban's policy. Otherwise, the manager of the program will be questioned.
- Female guests in the program are forced to wear a mask even online, and in case of non-compliance, the managers of the mentioned media should be held accountable.
- Journalists who are arrested for any reason, their families and colleagues do not have permission to cover such arrests in the media, and in case of non-compliance, media managers and family members of the journalists should be held accountable.
- List of all media employees including their details, identification cards and photos must be provided by the media manager to the Taliban's intelligence. The profile of any new employee involved in the media should also be sent to the Taliban.
- The use of some words such as: Taliban, Taliban group, killing, suicide, militia, terror, explosion, and dozens of other words that are against the will of the Taliban have also been banned in the media.
- Laughing and joking in social programs have been completely prohibited for all media employees, especially women.
- Discussing health topics specific to women and families, such as pregnancy, childbirth, marriage, divorce, etc., has also been banned in the media.
- In some cases, to publish news related to Taliban activities in a positive way, cash is distributed to journalists to publish and broadcast it in their media.
- Intimidation and beating of journalists under the pretext of espionage or propaganda against the Taliban in the past twenty years.
- Attacking the media, inspecting, and checking the media environment without reason and prior notice.

- Removal of all foreign announcements, movies, series, and music of happy and entertainment programs.
- Controlling journalists and media through paying money or compensating of media employees.
- Prohibiting the travel of female journalists to other provinces of the country for news coverage.

B- The situation of journalists and media workers living in neighboring countries

1. Pakistan

Since the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, hundreds of journalists have left the country by either migrating to regional countries such as Pakistan and Iran or to European and American countries.

Although exact statistics of journalists living in Pakistan are not available in any official organization, according to the latest report of Reporters Without Borders, about 200 journalists are currently waiting for their immigration cases to European and American countries.

Unfortunately, journalists living in neighboring countries have the worst and most difficult living conditions.

Afghan journalists, especially female journalists living in Pakistan, have expressed their problems as following:

- Difficulty in obtaining or renewing their Pakistani visas. The price of Pakistani visa for Afghans in the black-market ranges from 400 to 1000 dollars, and many journalists are in a bad economic situation due to unemployment and cannot afford such huge amounts.
- Challenges with renting places because of not having valid visas. A large number of landlords in Pakistan do not rent their houses to Afghan citizens who do not hold a valid Pakistani visa.
- Lack of job opportunities for journalists, especially, for female journalists
- Afghan journalists in Pakistan are facing with an uncertain fate due to the lengthy process of investigating immigration cases of these journalists in Western countries and lack of adequate help from international journalistic organizations
- Reduction and in some cases end humanitarian for these journalists
- Lack of familiarity with the official languages of Pakistan
- Harassment by Pakistani police on various pretexts

Farida Maidanwal is a journalist who has about 15 years of experience working in different Afghan media channels and has been living in Pakistan for a year. No countries had helped her flee Afghanistan.

Nasreen Shirzad Bashir, with a 20-year history of working as a journalist in Afghanistan, was finally able to migrate to France in early February 2024 after her immigration case was rejected several times.

A large number of these journalists express that a lack of organization of a transparent mechanism and the double standards in handling immigration cases by international institutions have made them pessimistic about this process and they ask the institutions that defend the rights of journalists to report their problems to the institutions.

2-Iran

With the change of the regime in Afghanistan and after the increase of violent events and restrictions on journalists in Afghanistan, journalists have been forced to leave their homeland in the last two years.

Meanwhile, dozens of Afghan journalists immigrated to Iran in order to save their lives or in the hope of being transferred to a safe European or American country. The majority of these journalists claim that they have faced an ambiguous fate in Iran and spend the nights and days of migration with difficulty.

Journalists living in Iran are complaining about the institutions that support journalists because these national and international institutions have not paid any attention to them, and after two and a half years, only a small number of journalists' cases have been investigated.

Zakieh Alizadeh, a journalist who immigrated to Iran after the fall of the republic, considers the measures taken by media supporting organizations helping journalists stuck in this country extremely insufficient and adds that there is no organization that can respond to the problems of Afghan journalists in Iran. She further declares that they are only in contact with some supporting organizations including Reporters Without Borders (RSF) via email.

At the same time, Zakia Alizadeh describes the current conditions of Iran for Afghan immigrants as much more difficult compared to the past and says: "In most places, we have to buy items with a bank card and need a card to travel by subway as well while most journalists cannot apply for a bank card due to the expiration or lack of visa duration, and this has doubled their problems."

The non-renewal of the visas of Afghan citizens has created problems and challenges in the process of transferring journalists to European countries, and at the same time, not having a legal residence permit, journalists living in Iran have also faced forced deportation, and this is a great fear and concern. These problems have exacerbated the situation for these Afghan journalists and have increased their anxiety and pressure.

Halimah Rezaei, another Afghan journalist living in Iran, complains about the suspension of the transfer of journalists in Iran and says: "The organizations that I am in contact with insist that they take the cases from Pakistan or other countries due to the existed political conflicts with Iran. Thus, it is quite challenging for Afghans citizens to migrate to most of the countries from Iran".

The above-mentioned problems have also been raised by immigration activists.

Asefa Stanekzai, an activist of immigrant affairs in Iran, considers the problems of Afghan citizens in Iran to be worrying and worthy of consideration, and she asks the related international organizations to solve these problems. According to Ms. Stanekzai, "About three million Afghan citizens in Iran do not have legal documents, and in addition to the risk of forced deportation by the Iranian police force, they are deprived of most rights and facilities in this country."

Some journalists whose immigration cases have not gone through this country have agreed to go to European countries illegally and through smuggling because of the fear of being forced to leave.

Another Afghan journalist, who did not want to be named for security reasons, says that he has been facing many difficulties in Iran for almost two years and adds: "Only two European countries are responsible for evacuating Afghan journalists from Iran which also are progressing very slowly". For this reason, most journalists are forced to travel to other countries through smuggling due to the inappropriate behavior of the Iranian police and fear of deportation.

C-The situation of journalists and media workers in Canada and the United States of America

1- Canada

- Language barriers and lack of familiarity with journalistic work methods in Canadian media newsrooms
- Not being familiar with the Canadian media system, lack of extensive communication and networking
- Lack of familiarity with the political and cultural history of Canada and not having enough knowledge of the society and audience.
- Not having official documents and work experience in Canadian media and opportunities in journalism and media sector

Khateera Ahmadi, who has been in Canada for three months and has eight years of work experience in the media of Afghanistan, is trying to find a suitable job opportunity in the media of this country. Ms. Ahmadi says that the job market for journalists in Canada is not that wide and also not so many organizations to support journalists in Canada. However Ahmadi considers the new environment and the new language to be part of the difficulties for restarting work in the journalistic profession.

In the meantime, there were some integration opportunities for Afghan journalists in the Canadian media community. The Journalists for Human Rights (JHR) in Canada announced ten fellowships for Afghan journalists living in Canada during the last year 2023, through which ten of them were able to enter the working environment of Canadian media. The purpose of setting up such fellowships was to provide a one-year working opportunity for Afghan journalists in the Canadian media environment to get acquainted with the working methods of journalism in this country and to experience one year working in a media.

Zuhal Ahad, a journalist who has experience working with international media channels such as BBC and Al Jazeera, was forced to leave the country and immigrate to Canada after the Taliban came to power. She was able to win one of these Fellowships and start working as an assistant editor of Chatelaine magazine in September 2023. Mrs. Ahad considers networking and finding sources for reports as a challenge for her new job. She considers the one-year experience of media work under the framework of the fellowship program to be very important and valuable and says: "Although these fellowships were few and the chances of getting accepted was low in such competitive environment, but still these fellowships and work opportunities helped Afghan journalists to use the experience they have gained from these short-term work periods in the

future of work and a long-term or permanent contract in the profession. Otherwise it will be very difficult to get a job without having work experience in Canadian media.”

2- The United States of America

In the United States of America, the situation of Afghan journalists is quite similar to Canada. According to Afghan journalists who have recently migrated to the United States, life in the new environment has made them face the following challenges:

- Lack of access and familiarity with media institutions in the country.
- Language barriers and lack of familiarity with media industry in the US media
- Problem with employment and even joining journalism training programs

Meanwhile, there are journalists who live in the USA and collaborate with online with some domestic or foreign media channels. These journalists also face two major challenges below:

- Lack of access to accurate information from inside Afghanistan
- Self-censorship to maintain the safety of their family members in Afghanistan

D- The challenges of journalists in exile in European countries

The situation of journalists in Europe, America and Canada is somewhat similar to each other and there are similar challenges for both categories, with the difference that the difficulty ratio of European languages is much higher than English. In Afghanistan, the 20-year presence of foreign forces brought media workers to the point where they admitted learning English as a need for their development. Those journalists who had learned English language to some extent are now facing fewer problems in the USA, Canada or even Europe, but even so, in Europe, the emphasis on native languages does not allow these Afghan journalists to use the English language daily. Non-English European countries do allow migrants to rely on English much except in special cases where there is no alternative.

It is a reality that journalists who have immigrated to Europe have to start language training courses from scratch, and until they reach a desirable and acceptable level of language, they are neither allowed to study nor work especially in the media, which requires high eloquence. Therefore, the challenge of language and integration in a new environment with a different culture and specific rules is one of the most important challenges for journalists living in Europe.

As a result, it should not be left unsaid that based on the continuous efforts and the support of media supporting organizations inside and outside of Afghanistan, the Commission on Media Violation (CMV) and of access to information office resumed their activities in Afghanistan, but what is worrying is that the cases that are considered media violations from the Taliban's point of view are undoubtedly against the principles of journalism and international conventions.

In some cases, supporting organizations have been able to release them from the grip of the Taliban by putting pressure on the Taliban and mediating the issue of arresting journalists. There is still no information available about the fate of some of these prisoners.

The common desire of the media community of Afghanistan and Afghan journalists living in exile from the international communities and especially from the international media supporting

organizations is to advocate for Afghan journalists, work diligently to solve their challenges and to prevent the suppression of freedom of speech in Afghanistan.

The Advocacy Committee for Women Journalists of AJSO