A NEEDS ASSESSMENT OF AFGHAN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

2022–23

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The Afghanistan Human Rights Coordination Mechanism (AHRCM) is a consortium of Afghan human rights–oriented civil society organizations (CSOs) and international organizations. It was established to respond to the emerging challenges faced by human rights defenders (HRDs) following the US withdrawal. The consortium is facilitated by Freedom House, in conjunction with MADRE, the International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH), the Safety and Risk Mitigation Organization (SRMO), and the Afghan-Canadian Civil Society Forum (ACSF).

Acknowledgments

ACRONYMS

ACSF	Afghan-Canadian Civil Society Forum
AHRCM	Afghanistan Human Rights Coordination Mechanism
AHRDC	Afghanistan Human Rights Defenders Committee
AIBA	Afghanistan Independent Bar Association
AIHRC	Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission
AJSC	Afghan Journalists Safety Committee
AWN	Afghan Women's Network
CSA	Civil Society Activist
CSO	Civil Society Organization
FGD	Focus Group Discussions
FIDH	International Federation for Human Rights
HR	Human Rights
HRD	Human Rights Defender
WHRD	Women Human Rights Defender
INGO	International Nongovernmental Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IRoA	Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
MADRE	MADRE
NDS	National Directorate of Security
OSF	Open Society Foundations
SRMO	Safety and Risk Mitigation Organization
UNAMA	UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNHCR	Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees
WJO	Women for Justice Organization

Introduction

HRDs in Afghanistan faced a rise in threats and targeted killings, at the hands of various actors, in the final years of the elected republic's existence. Their circumstances worsened when the Taliban launched a final offensive against the republic's forces in 2021, culminating in that government's August collapse. Since then, HRDs have suffered a decline in protection and support, while activists and ordinary Afghans have witnessed the steady contraction of the country's civic space. Along with the Taliban's ban on women's work and girls' education and free movement, WHRDs have been denied access to public and political processes and systematically deprived of their human rights. In addition to the Taliban's direct repression, HRDs have also suffered from the end of donor-supported projects, bank closures, and the collapse of the economy.

The Taliban have organized assaults on civilians and targeted minority groups in Kunduz, Daykundi, Ghazni, Nangarhar, Faryab, Badakhshan, Panjshir, and Baghlan provinces. Evidence points to tremendous persecution, ethnic cleansing, and other war crimes against Hindu and Sikh citizens, some of which could rise to the level of being considered an act of genocide. Mass graves have been found in Daykundi and Panjshir. HRDs recorded hundreds of assassinations and targeted killings against a variety of victims.[1] The Taliban arrested, tortured, assassinated, and disappeared members of the Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara, Hindu, and Sikh communities, specifically focusing on HRDs and intellectuals from these groups. Attacks on religious and public places such as mosques and educational centers resulted in hundreds of deaths. During the month of Ramadan in 2021, Shiites were targeted in five organized suicide attacks; 700 people were killed.[2] There was little to no accountability for these crimes.

Afghanistan has entered a state of lawlessness. Large-scale detentions, arbitrary arrests, and extrajudicial killings occur despite repeated declarations of amnesty by the Taliban. HRDs' freedom of movement—and their ability to secure their own lives—was impeded when attempts to evacuate were blocked, further demonstrating their vulnerability within Afghanistan. While hundreds of HRDs and activists have escaped, many more remain trapped.[3]

Because of the evolving social, economic, political, and security context, the AHRCM deemed it necessary to collect data on the existing, emerging, and escalating protection needs of HRDs and WHRDs at risk inside and outside of Afghanistan. This assessment and field work—which included a questionnaire allowing for multiple closed and open-ended responses, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions in Afghanistan and abroad—was performed from May 1 to June 25, 2022.

Executive Summary

Afghan HRDs face significant risks as they engage in human rights work and grapple with the aftermath of the August 2021 collapse of their country's elected government. HRDs and WHRDs are not only restricted in their ability to perform their work under the Taliban but must actively guard their survival within the country as the regime and other actors target them with violence, discrimination, and propaganda. This report aims to provide quantitative and qualitative information on the circumstances Afghan HRDs face in and out of Afghanistan, share their stated short- and long-term needs with the partners and agencies who are positioned to fulfill them, and provide recommendations on how to protect the safety and dignity of these brave advocates.

THE CONTEXT: THE STATE OF AFGHANISTAN AND ITS HRDS

Afghanistan's civic space has drastically contracted and is strictly controlled by the Taliban, which employ a radical interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence. Citizens cannot safely exercise their rights to assembly, access to information, or the press under the regime. The threats of forced disappearance, abduction, torture, lengthy imprisonment, and trials—during which defendants may face harsh accusations such as acting as an infidel or blasphemy—all contribute to an environment of fear and distrust for HRDs. HRDs, who face immense gaps in legal protection as well as physical danger, have largely, but not totally, stopped their activities as a result. Reduced access to protection mechanisms, supportive organizations, and resources have made their circumstances much more challenging.

HRDs who have left Afghanistan also experience significant difficulty. Those in transit countries face financial and security challenges. HRDs' journeys out of Afghanistan are traumatic experiences, and escapees have shared distressing stories of these departures. HRDs in transit countries are harassed by local police, while the fear of deportation has persisted as their sword of Damocles.

This report presents and analyzes the results of a needs assessment survey which allowed respondents to answer closed and open-ended questions. The survey, which was carried out between May and June 2022, was answered by 663 Afghan HRDs. These results were supplemented by semi-structured interviews guided by a group of subject experts as well as qualitative focus group discussions. Almost two-thirds of the respondents were men and slightly more than one-third were women. Those surveyed were located inside Afghanistan, in neighboring countries, and across the global diaspora.

OUR REPORT'S FINDINGS

In our discussions and questionnaire responses, HRDs have shared dire information and have expressed clear needs for support. **Some 90 percent of in-country HRDs and WHRDs have reported experiencing multiple risks and threats** such as: kidnapping and imprisonment; physical and psychological harm; defamation; house searches; arbitrary arrest and torture; threats of intimidation and harassment; and violence against activists or family members by Taliban, including murder. Even the 10 percent of respondents who reported no direct threats have suffered from the depressing environment.

HRDs who have escaped the country are not safe; they also face dire risks and lack protection from authorities in nearby countries where they are transiting. Out-of-country HRDs and WHRDs reported psychological harm (45.4 percent), harassment from local authorities and the threat of deportation (33.7 percent), and financial problems for surviving family members (9.9 percent).

HRDs need help and protection wherever they are. Respondents have called for relocation to safer places— inside and outside of Afghanistan—and financial support. A

plurality of in-country HRD respondents (35.9 percent) said relocation was their immediate need. Outside of Afghanistan, 50 percent of those surveyed identified psychological care as an immediate need, and 27 percent of respondents indicated they needed financial support. HRDs residing in neighboring countries and camps reported that they lack permission to work and do not have the means to feed and support themselves and their family members.

Some 46.5 percent of in-country HRD respondents said protection, and specifically the reestablishment and enforcement of a national protection mechanism[4], is the main solution for addressing their security needs. Some 12.7 percent of respondents called for internal relocation and financial assistance. This demand stems from the closure of the Afghan civic space, the lack of a legal framework for HRD protection, and the overall absence of protection structures and capacity. HRDs outside the country, on the other hand, have expressed a strong need for technical support, coordination among themselves and with like-minded international institutions now that they are scattered across so many countries, and an improved enabling environment that includes political and diplomatic support.

These demands indicate a willingness by HRDs, despite the challenges, to continue their human rights work, preserve their civic space, and push for their inclusion in decisions relating to Afghanistan's future.

HRDs, wherever they are, are resilient. Most HRD respondents have not, however, received needed risk-management training. HRDs will need support honing and acquiring those skills, as well as advice in: managing digital safety and security; engaging in safe human rights protection practices in conflict and high-risk areas; and effectively analyzing, managing, and reducing stress and psychological trauma.

The international community—including UN agencies and governing organs, international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), regional and global donors, the operators of whatever protection mechanisms do exist, and governments of transit and destination countries hosting Afghan HRDs and other refugees— should assist HRDs in ensuring that their work in promoting human rights, which spans two decades, was not performed in vain.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on HRDs' stated concerns and the deteriorating situation observed in Afghanistan, this report makes the following recommendations—including needs-based interventions from INGOs, Afghan human rights CSOs, donors, and other stakeholders—to support HRDs and WHRDs inside and outside the country:

General recommendations:

1. **Equip Afghan HRDs with resources to improve their physical and digital security.** Many HRDs lack the technical knowledge and capacity to conduct their own risk assessments and respond accordingly. HRDs also suffer from knowledge gaps in digital safety, psychological and stress management, and safe human rights protection in conflict and high-risk areas, which donors and partners should also address.

2. **The international community should support the creation of a coordinated, nationwide protection mechanism and highlight preexisting services.** Currently, most human rights organizations and INGOs inefficiently address HRDs' needs (emergency grants,

relocations, shelter, and evacuation) on a case-by-case basis, rather than establishing a systematic approach.

3. **Address the psychological needs of individual HRDs receiving assistance.** Support to HRDs who are under direct and severe threat should include psychological support as well as financial assistance and relocation.

4. **Help in-country and out-of-country HRDs collaborate and network.** Coordination and networking among Afghan HRDs inside and outside the country is essential for the continuation of human rights work that benefits Afghanistan. Donors should support efforts to improve coordination among HRDs.

For Afghan HRDs who remain in-country:

1. **Resume support for Afghan civil society, beyond humanitarian assistance.** While many HRDs have fled Afghanistan or have stopped their domestic advocacy, those who remain have altered their focus to address their country's needs and continue to advocate for human rights, albeit in a far narrower context.

International donors should resume and/or continue to provide political, financial, and technical support to Afghan CSOs that persist in their independent activism and project-based work.

2. **Provide sustainable financial assistance to HRDs.** INGOs, international development agencies, and donors at the regional and international level should address HRDs' financial needs over the medium-term. The withdrawal of international donors and INGOs from Afghanistan triggered the closure of projects and has left HRDs—and especially WHRDs—poverty-stricken and unemployed.

3. **Increase awareness among HRDs about existing protection measures.** HRDs and WHRDs who are impacted by the lack of a coordinated nationwide protection mechanism under the Taliban are additionally unaware of national or local-level protection services that do exist. CSOs, INGOs, and other stakeholders should advise HRDs about existing programs.

4. **Offer assistance based on HRDs' expressed needs.** When assistance is offered, it is done so under a top-down model that focuses on social and political elites. Assistance such as emergency grants, relocations, shelter, and evacuation would be more useful and effective if it is responsive to grassroots needs.

5. **Provide protection for HRDs via a single national mechanism that operates under a single overarching framework.** This will foster a collective and coordinated immediate protection response, make access to protection services less challenging, and provide more transparency and accountability.

6. **Support evacuation of at-risk HRDs.** At-risk HRDs must be given priority in evacuation processes carried out by different countries, and countries should not turn away deserving HRDs who lack proper travel documentation and passports.

7. **Apply diplomatic pressure on the Taliban to improve in-country HRDs' circumstances.** Although many foreign governments do not recognize the new regime, the international community should apply diplomatic pressure and use existing leverage to foster an environment in which HRDs can function. This effort requires a long-term commitment and consistent intervention from national CSOs, INGOs, political leaders, diplomats, and other stakeholders at the national and local levels. Any agreements made with the Taliban should include commitments to protect HRDs' rights and support investigations on violations committed against them.

8. **Identify and support new HRDs.** Given the huge brain drain of HRDs, partners can help identify and recruit emerging civil society actors to ensure that human rights work can continue within Afghanistan, even though their room to maneuver will be narrow. CSOs who recruit new advocates should do so confidentially while focusing on their safety, considering the current operational context. Existing HRDs and domestic groups that still function should be favored in terms of recruitment.

9. **Form a protection committee or mechanism inside the country.** This committee or mechanism should include members of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), diplomatic missions, and international organizations. This Committee should be created to take immediate steps to protect or rescue high-risk HRDs.

For Afghan HRDs who now reside in a third country:

1. **Prioritize resettlement of HRDs in third countries.** Donors, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) must expedite the resettlement process of HRDs who are at risk of harm or deportation. The uncertainty of the HRDs in transit, including those in European Union (EU) and Persian Gulf countries who are awaiting onward travel to Canada or the United States, must be addressed by expediting legal processes.

2. **Ensure safe and dignified accommodation for those awaiting relocation processing.** The international community should provide safe and dignified accommodation to HRDs while they await visa processing in third countries. They should not be housed in unsafe places, which defeats the purpose of evacuation. For example, in Pakistan, HRDs are accommodated in Peshawar, where Taliban supporters are active.

Objective and methodology

ASSESSMENT OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this assessment was to collect information on the following:

a) immediate protection needs of HRDs and WHRDs, along with physical- and digital-safety needs, in order to identify life-saving measures and bolster their resilience and protection;

b) longer-term needs of at-risk Afghan HRDs and WHRDs inside and outside Afghanistan; and

c) possible channels for the collection of on-the-ground information, so that protection mechanisms operated by stakeholders like the AHRDC and AIHRC can be adjusted for greater effectiveness.

The assessment framework gathered critical data on the existing, emerging, and escalating protection needs of HRDs and WHRDs inside and outside Afghanistan. The terms "inside Afghanistan" and "in-country" refer to 22 surveyed provinces. The regions covered in this assessment included the central region (Kabul, Parwan, Bamyan, Panjshir, and Kapisa), north region (Balkh, Samangan, Baghlan, Kunduz, and Takhar), west region (Herat, Badghis, Ghor, and Farah), east region (Nangarhar, Kunar, Logar, and Laghman), and south region (Kandahar, Nimroz, Helmand, and Uruzgan).

The term "outside of Afghanistan" includes neighboring countries (India, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) and Afghan diaspora communities in nations and regions farther afield, including Australia; Canada; European countries including Albania, Ireland, and Turkey; Mexico; Rwanda; and the United States (Table 3).

METHODOLOGY

We used semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and a needs assessment survey questionnaire to collect our data.

a) **Semi-structured interviews**
    Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the help of 12 subject experts who possess local expertise and experience on the protection of HRDs and WHRDs in Afghanistan. They were from CSOs and sector-related institutions, such as the AIHRC and UNAMA.

b) **Focus group discussions**
    Ten focus group discussions were conducted in five regions inside Afghanistan and were attended by 67 HRDs (Table 1). Two of the discussions were face to face while eight were conducted virtually to mitigate risks.

    Another six focus groups were conducted outside Afghanistan; two were attended by respondents from neighboring countries and four focus groups were attended by respondents from Canada, Ireland, other EU member states, Turkey, and the United States. The focus group discussions were used to generate qualitative data on the immediate and sustainable protection needs of HRDs, their current working context, and the risks they face. Through these discussions, we obtained their feedback on how to address current challenges and risks.

    Based on a gender disaggregated analysis of the focus group participants (inside and outside of Afghanistan), 38 percent were female and 62 percent were male.

c) **Survey questionnaire**
    A structured survey questionnaire consisting of closed and open-ended questions was sent to 1,100 HRDs, 710 inside Afghanistan and 390 outside. The HRDs were selected from an AHRDC Secretariat list. Some 663 HRDs responded; based on a gender disaggregation analysis, 423 respondents were HRDs (63.8 percent) and 240 respondents were WHRDs (36.2 percent) (Table 2). The components of the questionnaire included immediate protection needs, risks and threats, and their self-resilience capacity.

Table 1: Focus group discussions by region and province

Region	Province	Number of focus group discussions conducted	Participant by province
Central	Kabul	2	8
	Parwan		4
	Kapisa		2
	Panjshir		2
	Bamyan		4
South	Kandahar	1	2
	Helmand		2
	Uruzgan		4
	Nimroz		2
West	Herat	2	4
	Ghor		4
	Farah		4
	Badghis		4
East	Nangarhar	1	4
	Laghman		2
	Kunar		1
	Logar		1
North	Balkh	2	4
	Kunduz		2
	Samangan		4
	Baghlan		1
	Takhar		2
TOTAL	**22**	**8**	**67**

Table 2: Respondents' disaggregation by gender (inside and outside Afghanistan)

Gender	Number of respondents	Percent
Male	423	63.8
Female	240	36.2
TOTAL	**663**	**100**

The survey questionnaire respondents were further disaggregated by residential area (Table 3).

Table 3: Survey questionnaire responses disaggregated by respondents' residential area

Countries and territories	Frequency	Percent
Afghanistan	441	66.5
Pakistan	114	17.2
Iran	24	3.6
Canada	18	2.7
Germany	16	2.4
Turkey	9	1.4
Albania	7	1.1
Netherlands	4	0.6
Abu Dhabi	4	0.6
Uzbekistan	4	0.6
Ireland	3	0.5
Mexico	3	0.5
United States	2	0.3
India	2	0.3
Tajikistan	2	0.3
Rwanda	2	0.3
Sweden	2	0.3
Australia	1	0.2
Estonia	1	0.2
France	1	0.2
New Zealand	1	0.2
Greece	1	0.2
Spain	1	0.2
TOTAL	663	100

The Afghanistan context

THE STATUS OF THE COUNTRY AND ITS HRDS

As July 2021 progressed, Taliban fighters gradually took control of major cities and provincial capitals; Kabul, the national capital, fell on August 15. In captured cities, Taliban-led attacks and violations of residents' basic human rights caused heavy casualties and large-scale displacement, including among HRDs. Women and minorities were the worst affected. Women suffered restrictions on their rights to pursue education, access the labor market, and physically move about. Women also experienced widespread harassment, intimidation, and threats. Minority groups, meanwhile, faced tremendous violence at the hands of the regime and other actors. The chaos and uncertainty made it impossible for CSOs and HR-oriented organizations to deliver urgent services to at-risk activists.

The situation for HRDs in Afghanistan was deteriorating even before the Taliban mounted its final offensive. The highest number of threats, violations, and assassinations of HRDs, CSAs, and media workers ever recorded took place in the first six months of 2021[5]. The country's political environment was characterized by a growing sense of fear and lawlessness, which was perpetuated and instrumentalized by extremist groups. Official and unofficial propaganda by Taliban leaders, military commanders, and religious leaders at different levels of society, who espoused opposition to human rights and democratic rule, gave armed fighters and criminal elements a free hand to attack HRDs. The Taliban's propaganda was instrumentalized by other actors including Hizb-ut-Tahrir, Jamiat Eslah, warlords, and religious figures.

Religious minority groups faced severe violence in 2022 to date, with attacks on a Sikh temple, Shiite mosques, and schools taking place during the period. Thousands of lives were lost in these attacks, and large numbers of injuries were reported. Attacks in Daykundi and Panjshir provinces, the

Andarab district of Baghlan Province, and Balkhab district of Sar-e Pul Province amounted to tremendous persecution, ethnic cleansing, and other war crimes against Hindu and Sikh citizens, some of which could rise to the level of being considered an act of genocide. In addition, activists were reported to have been disappeared or abducted in Nangarhar, Herat, Balkh, and Kabul.

Despite the Taliban's promise to reopen schools and universities for women and girls, most secondary schools for girls remain closed. Women have been prohibited from working in most government jobs and many other sectors. Many media outlets had to close or drastically scale down their reporting. In addition, hundreds of HRDs fled the country for their survival.

The Taliban's radicalized and violent interpretation of Islam endangers social cohesion. The Taliban have deliberately restructured the country's political system to preclude the existence of an inclusive and comprehensive government that is based on representative rule. The Taliban have also narrowed the space in which HRDs can carry out their work, which has contributed to a more threatening environment for HRDs and WHRDs.

Afghanistan has faced a social, economic, and political catastrophe since the return of the Taliban, with the majority of the HRDs seeking to flee the country. But despite these grave challenges, some HRDs inside and outside Afghanistan still endeavor to perform as much of their work as possible, with hope that they can contribute to the country's sustainable political, social, and economic development. They are demanding space and clout to build an inclusive, sustainable, and democratic Afghanistan that will effectively respond to the needs of its citizens and respect their human rights.

ABOLITION OF LEGAL INSTITUTIONS AND PROTECTION STRUCTURES AND ITS IMPACT ON HRDS

The Taliban swiftly restructured, restaffed, and sometimes dissolved government bodies after deposing the elected government. On September 28, 2021, the Taliban repealed the 2004 constitution, which defined the republic's democratic structures and enshrined the rule of law and fundamental human rights. The Ministry of Women's Affairs, ministry-level gender directorates, women's protection offices, and ministerial human rights departments were dissolved. Legislation including the Elimination of Violence against Women Law, Access to Information Law, Law on Nongovernmental Organizations, and Media Law were suspended, though not officially repealed. While other legislation is reportedly under review, civil society, legal experts, and other observers have not been included in or informed of the review process.

The Taliban also rolled back the country's protection mechanisms and entities. In May 2022, the Taliban officially dissolved the AIHRC. Other protection bodies such as the Joint Commission for HRDs' Protection, Anti-Torture Commission, and Access to Information Commission were also dissolved. Moreover, the activities and protection mechanisms of national human rights–oriented CSOs were limited. Most human rights–oriented CSOs, especially those run by WHRDs, were closed by the Taliban. Some groups now operate undercover or from abroad. Many of them narrowed their scope of work, or shifted their focus to humanitarian aid distribution, to remain active. Individual rights and freedoms—like assembly and expression, which are legally and institutionally unprotected—have also been curtailed by this rollback. HRDs now risk not only their physical safety but can stand accused of blasphemy or treason for promoting human rights.

The Taliban have instrumentalized their interpretation of Islam to rule Afghanistan in an authoritarian manner. Any anti-Taliban dissent is prohibited and considered treason. This has led to a relentless campaign against civilians, CSAs, and media workers. HRDs risk execution, assassination, arbitrary detention, and unlawful intrusions into their lives and activities. Taliban deny knowledge or accountability for these violations and attribute them to personal enmity, in a display of impunity. HRDs and WHRDs also face surveillance, monitoring, and crackdowns, which are performed by Taliban-controlled institutions and systems including courts, security forces, local commanders, and Islamic law (Sharia) bodies like vice-and-virtue departments.

SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE AND ITS IMPACT ON HRDS

Through the above-mentioned measures, the Taliban have systematically and swiftly diminished the country's civic space. Any remnants of civil society are strictly controlled and monitored by the Taliban, effectively stopping individuals from exercising their civil, social, and political rights. Social gatherings, demonstrations, other forms of civil activity, access to information, the functioning of free and independent media,[6] and participation in free and fair elections have been severely restricted or are otherwise highly dangerous as a result of the Taliban's campaign.

Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, 40 percent of the country's media outlets have closed, while 80 percent of women journalists have lost their jobs.[7] Taliban have arrested hundreds of ordinary citizens and activists and have suppressed civil demonstrations and protests.[8] The regime's fighters have maintained a near-permanent presence at checkpoints on major highways. Military intelligence has been incorporated into the new regime's central intelligence apparatus. In addition, a new policymaking body led by the Taliban's most conservative faction, the Haqqani Network, has increasingly deployed the military to conduct civil policing, especially during protests, with harsh consequences for protesters. Arbitrary arrest, intimidation, harassment, beating, and other forms of mistreatment are the norm.

The ability of Taliban-controlled intelligence and security forces to interfere in civil society activity and punish participants was evidenced on numerous occasions:

- Peaceful women-led demonstrations, with participants calling for continued rights including education and work, were attacked in Badakhshan, Balkh, Herat, and Kabul provinces on September 9, 2021. We received credible reports of 8 WHRDs who were killed in Balkh. Another 85 HRDs were arrested and tortured.

- In October and December 2021, four Media workers and CSAs were targeted and killed in Nangarhar.[9]

- The Taliban punished, insulted, and tortured 35 HRDs and WHRDs in public displays in Badakhshan, Herat, Kabul, and Balkh provinces.

- Two WHRDs in Kabul and three activists were arrested and tortured in Balkh, Herat, and Kabul during the reporting period.

- In the first quarter of 2022, two HRDs in Herat and one in Kabul were accused of posting anti-Taliban messages on Facebook and received one-to-three-year prison terms.

- The Taliban arrested and tortured two university professors for mild comments; they were warned to refrain from media appearances.[10]

- The Taliban prohibited civil society meetings and conferences in Bamyan, Nangarhar, Balkh, Herat and other provinces and arrested the organizers.

As the months progressed, fewer incidents were reported

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and verification became more difficult, correlating to the crackdown on independent media. Indeed, the Taliban targeted Media workers who were the only remaining sources of independent reporting in Afghanistan.[11] To date, the Taliban attacked, arrested, tortured, or killed more than 57 journalists.

As a result of the above situation, hundreds of HRDs left the country, and a total of 85[12] well-known HRDs and WHRDs were arrested and tortured in the first half of 2022. Most human rights CSOs have closed their offices or have been compelled to stop their human rights work. Our assessment found that most HRDs inside the country left their provinces and moved to other provinces or to neighboring countries. HRDs, CSAs, and media workers live in fear of retribution, killing, arbitrary arrest, detention, and torture.

Afghan HRDs' risks and threats inside and outside the country

Considering the country's security situation as conveyed in Section 2, the assessment first focused on risks and threats being experienced by in-country HRDs.

RISKS AND THREATS FOR HRDS IN AFGHANISTAN

During the assessment, respondents were asked to name the top threats facing HRDs and other activists. Participants were allowed to provide multiple answers. Respondents cited multiple risks and threats varying from intimidation and harassment to arbitrary arrest, torture, and violence against family members by the Taliban.

Despite self-censorship and protection measures, we made the following findings (Table 4):

- 46.8 percent of respondents (and 35 percent of WHRD respondents) indicated risk of intimidation and harassment,
- 24.1 percent indicated risks to their life and physical safety,
- 16.4 percent indicated arbitrary arrest and torture,
- 4.4 percent indicated defamation and house search,
- 3.8 percent indicated violence against family members,
- 3.5 percent indicated physical and psychological harm, and
- 0.8 percent indicated kidnapping and imprisonment.

Table 4: Risks and threats against HRDs and WHRDs under the Taliban

Type of risk or threat	Frequency	Percent
Intimidation and harassment	310	46.8
Life and physical threats	160	24.1
Arbitrary arrest and torture	109	16.4
Defamation and house search	29	4.4
Violence against family	25	3.8
Physical and psychological harm	23	3.5
Kidnapping and imprisonment	5	0.8

During the focus group discussions, respondents described Afghanistan as a high-risk environment, highlighting economic, social, political, and security concerns.

Economic factors limit HRDs' mobility and safety. They are affected by the country's economic collapse, which is marked by rising poverty, capital flight, high inflation, and a banking crisis.[13] These factors impact HRDs' ability to enact protection strategies and manage their personal lives, including their ability to care for immediate and extended family members or secure future employment or financing. The economic downfall of Afghanistan also precipitated a huge migration outflow, worsening HRDs' asylum and resettlement prospects as asylum schemes are overloaded.

Hostility against HRDs has become normalized due to social factors including: a rise in ethnocentrism; discrimination based on factors including ethnicity, religion, gender, and age; religious radicalization; and growing conservatism. HRDs consequently face treatment varying from social ostracism to criminal punishment. Conservative narratives link human rights advocacy with treason, infidelity, immorality, blasphemy, or apostasy. Ordinary Afghans are also aligning themselves with the Taliban or Taliban supporters. Whether this is done voluntarily or out of necessity (for example, as a survival strategy to avoid retaliation and receive protection), community members, friends, relatives, and colleagues monitor and surveil HRDs, reveal information about them, and sabotage their safety. This trend of social distrust has deep and lasting psychological implications on fearful HRDs.

A variety of complex political and security factors govern the risk profiles of HRDs and complicate risk-management efforts. These include the absence of a legitimate state, the de facto regime's poor governing capacity, the growing presence of other armed groups, lawlessness, and lack of accountability. In addition, the Taliban are taking systematic measures to cement authoritarian rule, creating optimal conditions for human rights violations, war crimes, and crimes against humanity that are suffered by HRDs and the general population. As many Taliban fighters had gone without wearing uniforms, it was impossible to attribute violent attacks to the Taliban or other groups. In January 2022, UN Secretary-General António Guterres warned that weapons and military equipment left behind after the US withdrawal has fueled a weapons trade between armed groups in Afghanistan and abroad. Moreover, the post withdrawal release of prisoners by the Taliban strengthened Islamic State–affiliated groups in Afghanistan, whose numbers reached 4,000 by January 2022.[14] HRDs are not only affected by the proliferation of armed groups, driven by violent misconceptions of Islam, but also suffer from the regime's impunity, as the Taliban refuse to take responsibility or action when HRDs are targeted.

Almost all focus group participants, inside and outside of Afghanistan, shared their fear of being attacked, detained, tortured, and killed. Even respondents outside of Afghanistan have limited their work and self-censored, as their family members are still living in Afghanistan. They shared that their human rights work has made them targets of the Taliban; they could easily be accused of being an infidel, engaging in blasphemy, or associating with the enemy. Their human rights work and their association to Western organizations and governments are now points of vulnerability. The Taliban and other extremist groups label HRDs as "barking dogs" of the United States and the West and some actors openly call for HRDs to be punished. Taliban commanders commonly espouse such language on media outlets, amounting to incitement of violence under international law. The Taliban also perceive factors including a Western education, former employment in a Western organization, Western-style dress, and knowledge of the English language as indicators of association with the enemy.

Female respondents, meanwhile, highlighted specific security, social, and economic concerns. During focus groups discussions, WHRDs expressed feeling more defenseless and unprotected as a result of their gender. WHRDs are particularly vulnerable as they face accusations of prostitution or immorality, which could be punished by whipping or death by stoning under the Taliban; one WHRD shared that she was accused of prostitution for possessing pictures where she stood next to foreign-born men. WHRDs also receive sexually charged threats, harassment, and defamation.

WHRDs' mitigation strategies are relatively limited as they are dependent on their male relatives, who may not be supportive or cannot address their needs. WHRDs are also less mobile compared to their male counterparts due to movement restrictions and the country's poor security situation. This forces WHRDs, who cannot take independent measures to manage their safety or well-being, to depend more on men. Those who are pregnant or who have young infants are additionally vulnerable, especially if they suffer from chronic medical conditions, pre- or postpartum depression, or other mental health challenges arising from years of work in an extremely challenging field. We also found that women, due to their social roles and caretaking responsibilities, found it harder to make decisions regarding their personal well-being and safety; many focused more on their relatives' needs.

Because the Taliban's ideology equates women's activism to promiscuity, women are perceived to be propagating Western and un-Islamic values, which can carry serious consequences. They are also socially isolated and punished; some are blamed or shamed by relatives and members of their local communities for having been involved in human rights work and may be subjected to social control for those reasons. Some WHRDs who are single, widowed, divorced, or separated have additional vulnerabilities, especially those who were once financially independent and can no longer earn a living due to the Taliban's labor restrictions. Some WHRDs' family members have allied with the Taliban for protection, for political reasons, or to secure work. These WHRDs are thus forced to self-isolate and self-censor.

In-country HRDs face severe physical risks in all surveyed regions of Afghanistan, whether they are dense or sparsely populated. Respondents in the west, east, and south told us that local Taliban officials and commanders have banned all human rights activity and that they face arrest and torture. Respondents in northern and central areas similarly report that their work can lead to torture and death.

Focus groups participants repeatedly mentioned the Taliban's systematic discrimination based on ethnicity, language, and religious identity. Practitioners of Hinduism, Sikhism, and Shiite Islam and ethnic Hazaras, Tajiks, and Uzbeks can face anything from insult to arrest, detention, torture, and death in the most extreme circumstances. HRDs belonging to these minority groups are especially targeted. WHRDs in minority groups, meanwhile, faced additional repression from male HRDs in those same groups. Focus group participants also recounted incidents of ethnic cleansing, massacres, and forced displacement from the provinces of Daykundi, Uruzgan, and Panjshir as well as the Andarab district of Baghlan Province in the seven months preceding our fieldwork.

RISKS AND THREATS TO HRDS OUTSIDE AFGHANISTAN

Table 5: Threats and risks HRDs and WHRDs face in neighboring countries or further abroad

Type of threats and risk	Frequency	Percent
Psychological harm	101	45.4
Harassment by police, forced deportation	75	33.7
Family financing	22	9.9
Harassment	16	7.2
Security threats	8	3.6

HRDs outside of Afghanistan are not immune to threats and risks. Some are similar to those experienced by their in-country counterparts, while others are specific to their circumstances.

Table 5 shows that nearly half of respondents face psychological harm, while 33.7 percent highlighted forced deportation and harassment by police.

The cross-tabulation data analysis indicates that the level of risk and threats that HRDs and WHRDs are facing in neighboring countries compared to countries further away are quite different. The majority of Afghan HRDs in neighboring countries such as Pakistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan experience more psychological harms. These harms stem from the other risks identified by respondents, like police harassment, the risk of forced deportation, the lack of visas or extensions, and the lack of basic living provisions. Psychological harm was noted as an even more acute risk in Western countries, despite the lower risk of deportation and police harassment.

Indeed, psychological harm emerged as a top concern all Afghan HRDs. The focus group discussions among HRDs

and WHRDs in neighboring countries, EU countries, the United States, and Canada revealed that most respondents are suffering psychological effects. Those living in refugee camps are threatened by actors including Taliban supporters because of their human rights activities, social media statements, and public speeches. In Iran and Pakistan, HRDs' background and human rights work have been perceived by authorities as a security risk, exposing them to possible visa expirations and forced deportation. Some respondents shared that have already received visa extension rejection letters, and thus are compelled to live illegally, in isolation, and under constant threat of deportation. Some face a growing inability to afford basic living costs. In countries where there they cannot access formal labor, they must work informally and illegally, risking exploitation. If found in their workplace, they may be deported. WHRDs are especially facing serious financial problems in the neighboring countries. The uncertainty surrounding their asylum applications and complicated approval processes is a major contributor of stress. One HRD who suffers from insomnia shared that he sought medical attention unaware of the cause of his symptoms. His doctor replied, "All Afghans who come to me have complained of the same thing. This is stress."

"The overall responses show that **90 percent of respondents** faced direct and indirect threats from the Taliban since their takeover..."

Some HRDs shared that resettlement procedures endanger them: Applicants are required to leave Afghanistan and remain in a second country for months or years to be eligible to apply for resettlement. HRDs called this process inhumane; potential applicants must risk their lives to leave Afghanistan, part from their families, and exhaust their savings just to attain eligibility. The dignified approach would have been for countries to assess applicants' cases before requiring them to leave Afghanistan.

VIOLATIONS AND ATTACKS COMMITTED BY THE TALIBAN AGAINST HRDS AND WHRDS

According to our assessment, 90 percent of in-country respondents have experienced some sort of violence or threat inside the country.

The most notable of the cross-tabulation results (Table 6):

- 20.2 percent of respondents reported the destruction or confiscation of property, financial losses, and threats against their family;

- 17 percent reported arbitrary arrest, torture, or threats to family members;

- 15.7 percent reported threats to cease their human rights activities;

- 11.9 percent reported physical threats and psychological harms;

- 10.9 percent reported suffering physical attack;

- 2.9 percent reported facing defamation and searches of their homes; and

- only 0.6 percent said that none of these took place.

Our findings align with UN reports on the plight of HRDs across Afghanistan. The gravity and pervasiveness of these attacks is experienced by HRDs across geographic, gender, and ethnic lines, demonstrating that the Taliban's attacks against HRDs are systematic executions of policy and are not isolated or random.

Table 6: Threats and attacks committed by the Taliban against HRDs in Afghanistan

Committed threats and attacks	Frequency	Percent
Destruction or confiscation of property, financial losses, and threats to the family	134	20.2
Arbitrary arrest, torture, and threats to family members	113	17
Threats to cessation of human rights activities	104	15.7
Physical and psychological harm	79	11.9
Physical attack	72	10.9
Threats to family members	37	5.6
Physical threats, psychological harm, and cessation of human rights work	24	3.6
Misbehavior and harassment	23	3.5
Defamation and house searching	19	2.9
No threat or violation committed	4	0.6

HRDs' immediate protection needs

HRDS' IMMEDIATE PROTECTION NEEDS INSIDE THE COUNTRY

The assessment reveals that HRDs' ability to secure assistance or protection has significantly decreased since the collapse of the republic. The majority of in-country focus group participants experienced obstacles and constraints in fulfilling their immediate protection needs. HRDs have also been impacted by the closure and limited capacity of national human rights–oriented CSOs and by their lack of awareness of existing services provided by INGOs and other international actors, especially if they have no connections to major partners. Case-vetting processes and case-referral mechanisms at national CSOs and INGOs were also marred by issues, leading to calls for revision.

The respondents identified their protection and support needs (Table 7) as follows:

- 35.9 percent of respondents called for external relocation and financial support;
- 12.7 percent identified internal relocation and financial support as an immediate need;
  - Responses favoring internal relocation and financial

support may be attributed to the difficulties and complications in securing external relocation. The success of in-country relocation relied heavily on financial support.
  - Respondents who remained shared protection strategies including: leveraging influential people, elders, and family connections for urgent protection support, oftentimes involving direct negotiations with the Taliban; and apologizing for past human rights work and committing to stop their activities.
- 7.4 percent of respondents identified financial support as a specific immediate need;
- 6.2 percent said safehouses and financial support were an immediate need;
- 2.3 percent identified a need for legal support;
- 1.4 percent responded with a desire for shelter and safety-and-security training; and
- 0.6 percent asked for financial and political support from the international community.

Table 7: Immediate protection needs identified by in-country HRD respondents

Types of immediate protection needs	Frequency	Percent
External relocation and financial support	238	35.9
Internal relocation and financial support	84	12.7
Financial support	49	7.4
Safehouses and financial support	41	6.2
Legal support	15	2.3
Shelter and safety-and-security training	8	1.4
Financial and political support from international community	4	0.6

Cross-tabulation data analysis suggested an immediate need for protection inside the country. The overall responses show that 90 percent of respondents faced direct and indirect threats from the Taliban since their takeover, showing a significant protection needs gap.

Our cross-tabulation analysis also shows that WHRDs and their male counterparts identified similar immediate protection needs (Tables 10, 12). Female respondents were less likely to utilize safehouses than men; this could be attributed to closure of safehouses, social and cultural associations of safehouses for women, and the Taliban's open and public condemnation of safehouses for women as places of prostitution and immorality. WHRDs' protection needs are urgent in the second and third category of provinces and remote regions because women face strict restrictions on labor and social participation, which isolate them further. Some WHRDs also face physical and sexual harassment by the Taliban. Because of social and political constraints, WHRDs often feel unable to discuss such harassment and to seek support. This has repercussions for their mental health and well-being.

Top Needs of Afghan human rights defenders inside Afghanistan:	
	Protection services
	Reinstitute national protection commission
	Relocation support inside Afghanistan
	Legal support and protection
	Taliban agreement on a protection mechanism for human rights defenders
	Financial support (institutional and individuals)
	Training in security and digital security
	Trauma counseling

Top Needs of Afghan human rights defenders in exile:	
	Technical assistance from international donors
	Improved coordination of evacuation/resettlement
	Transit/host countries agree to aid and protect Afghans
	Expand UNHCR and IOM services for refugees and migrants
	Financial support (particularly in third countries)
	Trauma counseling

HRDS' IMMEDIATE PROTECTION NEEDS OUTSIDE THE COUNTRY

Some 50 percent of out-of-country HRD respondents identified mental health treatment as an immediate protection need (Table 8). This could be attributed to a myriad of compounding factors, which indicate a persistent protection gap:

1. Living conditions, especially in camps

Out-of-country respondents often live in unhygienic, unsafe, and uncertain conditions. HRDs in these circumstances, including in camps, are revictimized and have difficulty coping. For example, evacuees and relatives who transited in some countries were packed in large halls, with each family separated only by curtains. Some camps were crowded; families had to share common, and unsanitary, toilet facilities. Some camps did not have proper insulation, heating, or air conditioning, and therefore were affected by extreme temperatures. Many people suffered from mental illnesses or depression in the camp. Many families witnessed traumatic situations including the deaths of infants, residents suffering mental breakdowns, sexual violence, and other crimes. Poor families who live outside camp quarters nourish their young children with street food because of cost and because they have no access to a refrigerator to store fresh food. Women reportedly engage in sex work out of necessity. Others see family members turn to drugs to cope with the situation or turn to illegal or informal labor to fund their migration to the next country.

2. Deportation and other difficulties in transit countries

HRDs also witness cruel deportations of other Afghans by security forces, for example in Iran and Turkey. Some suffer secondary traumatization as a result. Many of those whose visas have expired or whose family or friends have been deported isolate at home for fear of being deported themselves. HRDs in the Pakistani city of Peshawar also reported feeling physically unsafe due to the rise of Islamic extremism and radicalization among some of the city's residents, as well political support for the Taliban and other extremist groups.

Afghans have sought refuge in neighboring countries, where the costs of housing and food are higher. Other basic needs are similarly difficult to obtain. For example, access to cellular service is connected to the HRD's visa validity in Pakistan. Once an HRD's visa expires, their local SIM card is automatically made inactive, further isolating HRDs and preventing them from easily accessing services.

3. Fears for family members and difficulty coping with pregnancy

Most countries require HRDs to choose between their own safety or their family's safety. While the Western conception of a nuclear family refers to immediate family members, the definition of family is extended to include parents and siblings, or relatives in even wider circles, in Afghan and other cultures. In addition, while adulthood is culturally attained at the age of 18 in much of the West, many Afghan HRDs would find it inconceivable to leave children or siblings who are older than 18, especially single women. Because the Taliban are known to use family members as targets, HRDs find it torturous to leave family members behind. In one case, the home of the parents of four activists was seized by the Taliban. The parents had to shelter in another apartment for five months; the activists were forced to leave their parents and prioritize their own personal safety.

Reports of mental health breakdowns were elevated in WHRDs who are pregnant, new mothers, or mothers of young children; they are also at high risk of falling into prolonged postpartum depression or otherwise have difficulty coping with the demands of parenting in a highly insecure environment.

4. Difficulty accessing care or dignity in care

Psychological assistance and mental health support is also scarce, even in well-equipped countries like Germany and the United States. Language is another significant barrier, though mental health support is unavailable regardless of language in many camps. Some HRDs report that practitioners who are assigned to provide psychosocial and medical support are not trained in conflict- and gender-sensitive approaches. Some practitioners are described as rude and patronizing to their patients. Others discriminate more openly. In one case in Germany, a health practitioner refused to speak English, a language both the practitioner and patient understood, and demanded that the HRD speak to him in German. Deficiencies in translation also lead to confusion and shock. One woman who was diagnosed with pneumonia was wrongly told by a translator that she was suffering from cancer.

5. Shift in the international community's attention

Some HRDs who led dignified lives in Afghanistan and were constantly active both in mind and body suddenly found themselves feeling devalued and unrecognized. After the Russian regime's war against Ukraine began in February 2022, Afghan HRDs felt further dehumanized as Ukrainian refugees received preferential treatment, though most Afghans greatly empathized with them.

In addition to mental health needs:

- 27 percent of respondents identified financial support as an immediate protection need;

    o This was especially highlighted among HRDs in neighboring countries and transition camps where the HRDs do not have the permission and means to work, support, or feed themselves and their family members.

- 8 percent of respondents indicated a need for safehouses in neighboring countries;

- 7 percent of respondents indicated legal support as a pressing need, especially to pursue asylum applications and document their cases in transit or destination countries; and

- 2 percent indicated a need for political support from the international community.

Table 8: Immediate protection needs of out-of-country HRDs

Types of immediate protection needs	Frequency	Percent
Psychological assistance	100	50
Financial support	61	27
Safehouses	14	8
Legal support	14	7
Political support from international community	4	2

HRDs' human rights work and sustainable protection needs

WHAT HUMAN RIGHTS WORK LOOKS LIKE AFTER AUGUST 2021

The assessment findings shows that the convergence of the economic crisis, normalization of social discrimination, targeted attacks against HRDs, lawlessness, and the nation's unstable political environment has and will change the nature of human rights work in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future.

HRDs have no immediate remedy or avenue to pursue legal accountability for the atrocities committed by Taliban or other armed groups against them or ordinary Afghans. At this time, it seems almost impossible to imagine a day when justice might be possible. The majority of HRDs and WHRDs in neighboring countries have stopped their human rights work due to the environment of repression and risk to their families in Afghanistan.

Those who continue have had to reorient their work. Human rights work in Afghanistan has taken new forms, owing to innovative strategies taken by HRDs responding to the country's new political and security environment. For example, some HRDs have taken their work undercover, working with like-minded groups and trusted persons in the community. They are quietly monitoring and documenting human rights violations, meeting inconspicuously in small local groups, and sending their findings to HRDs abroad who advocate at the regional and international levels. Many in-country HRDs send information to Afghan or Persian-speaking media outlets registered abroad so that reports of human rights violations are reported in local languages and the public remains informed.

Afghan media workers and journalists continue to document and report on sensitive stories and some of them do so openly. These journalists have become savvy in disseminating their stories on Twitter and Facebook and in multiple languages, knowing that urban Afghans use Twitter and Facebook for information. Local television anchors in Afghanistan are more restricted and cannot report news which disfavors the regime or exposes Taliban repression. A few journalists still challenge Taliban spokespeople in interviews, asking direct questions on topics such as

women's rights. These interviews are of value since they reveal the Taliban's mindset and become part of the evidential basis for subsequent advocacy. Citizen reporting has also proliferated since August 2021. HRDs rely on citizen journalists to get leads to human rights–related stories, to analyze and understand circumstances in the provinces, and to build evidence that informs their advocacy. Citizen journalists' reports can go viral with collective retweets and reposts. HRDs discover others in need and extend help and support based on this flow of information.

Many HRDs have shifted their focus to humanitarian activities, demonstrating their adaptability and relevance while significantly reducing risk. Their lower risk profile also enables them to collect critical information about social, security, and political developments in the country without raising suspicion.

A few in-country human rights–oriented CSOs still maintain their mission; they are pacing themselves to gradually understand the situation, determine key actors, assess safety of female staff, and find entry points to support their beneficiaries and clients. Though their work is risky, they manage and mitigate their risk by changing how they communicate their work, orienting their advocacy around less controversial themes and topics, and proving their relevance and utility to Taliban actors. Through this strategy, HRDs carve out and hold their space in society.

Many of the Afghan HRDs who have been evacuated to EU member states, the United States, and Canada—and are closer to those who make foreign policy—are exceptionally active and resilient in advancing their work, despite suffering personal calamities and trauma. Some have registered new entities abroad or have mustered new coalitions with members of the diaspora. HRDs in these circumstances also work towards joint cooperation with INGOs to address human rights issues at international level and with leading stakeholders, including the IOM and the UNHCR. They are regrouping in their host countries to establish new spaces for advocacy, demanding access to bodies that make foreign policy, and creating new

alliances with foreign governments to keep them invested and attentive to developments in Afghanistan. These efforts, which are shaping foreign policy and engagement in Afghanistan, are especially vital as governments demonstrate fatigue and must contend with competing events like the war in Ukraine, the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, and the uncertain outlook for the global economy.

At the same time, HRDs outside the country are facing various challenges such as: the absence of comprehensive coordination platforms and networks to undertake collective action and advocacy efforts, waning support from the international community, and personal challenges as they start over in new countries[15].

Despite the daunting challenges and risks this report has detailed, Afghan HRDs inside and outside the country can and do perform considerable work. The women-led protest movements and civil society adaptations are heroic examples of HRDs holding their ground against all odds. Their resilience warrants greater political attention and support from the international community.

IN-COUNTRY HRD PROTECTION AND SUPPORT NEEDS

Nearly half (182 out of 391) of in-country HRD respondents selected the provision of protection services and the enforcement or reestablishment of a national protection mechanism[16] as their preferred methods to receive protection, followed by internal relocation and technical assistance (Table 9). Male and female responses were consistent (Table 10).

Table 9: Protection needs and services requested by in-country HRDs to continue their work

Responses by category						
	Access to protection services and reenforcing or reestablishing a national protection mechanism	Safety and risk training	Access to internal relocation and technical assistance	International diplomatic pressure on Taliban	Investigation and follow-up of violence against HRDs by International community and Taliban	Legal support and agreement on legal framework for HRD protection with Taliban
Responses	182	9	90	41	27	42

Table 10: Protection needs and services requested by in-country HRDs, by gender

Responses by category						
	Access to protection services and reenforcing or reestablishing a national protection mechanism	Safety and risk training	Access to internal relocation and technical assistance	International diplomatic pressure on Taliban	Investigation and follow-up of violence against HRDs by International community and Taliban	Legal support and agreement on legal framework for HRD protection with Taliban
Male	118	8	70	27	15	25
Female	64	1	20	14	12	17
TOTAL	182	9	90	41	27	42

OUT-OF-COUNTRY HRD PROTECTION AND SUPPORT NEEDS

Some 50 percent (85 of 192) of out-of-country respondents expressed a need for technical assistance and cooperation with stakeholders to continue their human rights work. This recommendation was made by diaspora HRDs in all countries surveyed (Table 11) and was equally stressed by both male and female HRDs (Table 12). Out-of-country HRDs also desired a well-structured coordination mechanism among HRDs and

in cooperation with international institutions (43 of 192). In focus group discussions, out-of-country HRDs cited a lack of coordination among Afghan HRDs abroad and lack of cooperation with INGOs as impediments to their work. This was repeatedly pointed out by participants, stating that such cooperation was necessary to call attention to the atrocities being committed by the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Table 11: Cross-tabulation of out-of-country HRDs' current location with identified needs for protection and support

	Establishing a coordination mechanism among HRDs and with international institutions	Establishing a coordination mechanism	Political and diplomatic pressure on host countries	Technical assistance and cooperation from international institutions	Financial support
Australia	0	0	0	1	0
Canada	2	2	3	11	0
Estonia	1	0	0	0	0
France	0	0	0	0	1
Pakistan	19	15	30	37	12
Germany	2	2	0	9	3
Netherlands	1	0	0	3	0
Ireland	0	1	1	1	0
New Zealand	1	0	0	0	0
United States	1	0	0	0	0
Abu Dhabi	0	1	0	2	1
Uzbekistan	0	1	0	2	0
India	0	1	0	0	1
Iran	7	1	3	11	2
Tajikistan	0	1	0	1	0
Rwanda	1	0	1	0	0
Mexico	1	0	1	0	1
Greek	0	0	0	0	1
Albania	1	2	0	4	0
Sweden	0	1	0	1	0
Turkey	5	2	0	2	0
Spain	1	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	**43**	**30**	**39**	**85**	**22**

Creating an enabling environment for Afghan HRDs outside the country, especially in neighboring countries such as Pakistan, was also a critical demand identified by HRDs. Some 15 WHRDs, for example, called for political and diplomatic pressure to be placed on host countries. WHRDs also recommended the creation of an evacuation coordination mechanism involving Afghan HRDs and international human rights institutions, along with financial support (Table 12).

Based on our comparative analysis and focus group discussions, we believe that HRD respondents' stated needs and demands are strongly affected by their place of residence.

For continuation of human rights work, in-country HRDs reported they needed sustainable protection assistance and an improved enabling environment. The focus group findings link this demand to: Taliban actions that narrowed the country's civic space, the related increase in risk for HRDs, the absence of a legal framework to protect HRDs in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and a lack of protection entities and capacity.

HRDs outside the country, on the other hand, expressed a strong need for technical support, help fostering coordination among themselves and with like-minded international institutions, and an improved enabling environment brought about by building political and diplomatic support. These demands indicate a willingness by HRDs, despite the challenges, to continue their human rights work and push for their inclusion in decisions relating to the future of Afghanistan. Their responses also demonstrate their relative safety and security, especially among those who have been relocated or evacuated to EU countries, the United States, and Canada.

Table 12: Out-of-country HRDs' identified needs for protection and support, by gender

	Establishing a coordination mechanism among HRDs and with international institutions	Establishing a coordination mechanism among HRDs	Political and diplomatic pressure on host countries	Technical assistance and cooperation from international institutions	Financial support
Male	27	21	24	42	15
Female	16	9	15	43	7
TOTAL	43	30	39	85	22

HRDs' capacity-building needs

SELF-RESILIENCE CAPACITY

The assessment surveyed the ability of HRDs to reduce or mitigate risks through their own efforts. The common components of self-reliance capacity considered in this assessment were: risk assessment and response, digital safety and security, mental health and stress management, and safe human rights activity in high-conflict and high-risk areas.

Some 83.4 percent of respondents said they did not receive self-resilience capacity-building trainings in the past (Table 13). Only 16.6 percent had received at least one training session, through INGOs, national CSOs, or capacity-building initiatives implemented by other institutions. This aligns with our assumption that the majority of HRDs inside and outside the country have not received such training. As HRDs appear to possess little self-resilience capacity, few HRDs are prepared to focus on possible risk and mitigation strategies.

The focus group discussions revealed that HRDs who do possess that capacity can successfully engage in successful risk identification and mitigation, reducing the likelihood that they would be victimized in or out of Afghanistan. This includes possessing the skills and ability to effectively analyze, reduce, or manage stress and mental health issues which are central to a successful risk-reduction approach. Indeed, the assessment findings show that a desire for self-resilience training is high among HRDs inside and outside the country.

Table 13: Have you ever received self-resilience capacity-building trainings?

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	110	16.6
No	553	83.4

Recommendations

This section makes recommendations to Afghan human rights–oriented CSOs, INGOs, the United Nations, embassies, donors, and other stakeholders to support HRDs and WHRDs inside and outside the country. The recommendations focus on the need for sustainable protection over the short and long term, as well as the creation a safe and secure environment for HRDs to continue their work.

SHORT-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

1 The international community should support the creation of a coordinated, nationwide protection mechanism and highlight preexisting services.

Currently, most human rights organizations and INGOs inefficiently address HRDs' needs (emergency grants, relocations, shelter, and evacuation) on a case-by-case basis, rather than establishing a systematic approach.

Our respondents called for a more coordinated, overarching, and responsive approach that includes grassroots level coordination in the absence of national and international organizations in the country. To enable a cooperative and collective approach, the new design should be driven by local leaders and be a "bottom-up" approach. This demand for a protection mechanism [17] was expressed by experts and HRDs alike. In addition, this approach should provide consistency, transparency, and accountability to the HRDs and public. The new approach should reinforce rather than replace the existing protection services and continue to enhance the capacity of existing institutions and groups inside the country.

Improvements and adjustments to existing protection services and to a rapid response mechanism should similarly be informed by on-the-ground assessments, though this depends on the capacity of domestic CSOs and preexisting in-country and out-of-country nonstate mechanisms.

Deserving HRDs who were working with national and international organizations were left behind without any information or connections to find resources and pathways to safety. Access to current information and services available from the partners and international stakeholders is vital to HRDs safety and protection.

2 Stakeholders should provide emergency support to protect HRDs and other Afghans who seek to leave Afghanistan or have relocated in neighboring or transit countries.

Specifically:

- A protection mechanism consisting of members of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, diplomatic missions, and international organizations should be created to directly help at-risk HRDs

- Those who operate evacuation and relocation efforts should vet applicants and monitor the programs to ensure that they prioritize evacuees based on risk, evidence, and information about threats.

- The HRD support organizations inside the country should provide safe and dignified accommodation to HRDs with the support of international partners.

- Donors, who often play an active role sponsoring and supporting in-transit HRDs, should provide more support for evacuation efforts and provide evacuees with sufficient financial resources. Donors can also play a more active role in helping those who lack travel documentation or passports.

- Donors, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and the International Organization for Migration must expedite resettlement for HRDs in neighboring countries who are unsafe or risk deportation.

- International community must expedite their evacuation efforts for HRDs and others who qualify for US Special Immigrant Visas (SIV), are considered Priority 1 or Priority 2 in the US Refugee Admissions Program or qualify for other migration or refugee schemes.

- Legal processes must be improved and expedited

to address the uncertain situation of HRDs in third countries, including those in temporary accommodation in the United States, European Union member states, and Persian Gulf countries.

- Psychosocial support should be provided to HRDs, many of whom are in distress due to their plight.

- All actors and stakeholders should expand the scope of assistance eligibility to include other categories of at-risk persons such as former members of the government (including judicial staff)—especially if they have a demonstrable history of human rights work. Individuals who may not be narrowly considered HRDs but engage in vital social activity, like educators and artists, should also be supported.

3 Donors, CSOs, INGOs, and other stakeholders should fulfill the unique needs of WHRDs.

WHRDs have expressed specific material and safety-based needs, which partners can effectively address.

- WHRDs, like HRDs generally, lack safe accommodation and need spaces that provide additional security.

- WHRDs lack sanitary products, formula, and childcare-related medical products.

- WHRDs who have no partner, are widowed, are single parents, care for relatives living with disabilities, and otherwise function as caregivers could benefit from additional financial support.

- WHRDs who are exposed to gender-based violence need specific resources and support, including safehouses, psychosocial support and tailored safety-and-security protocols.

4 International partners in collaboration with local CSOs should provide capacity-building trainings for Afghan HRDs with a focus on making them more resilient and self-reliant.

Afghan HRDs who remain in-country needs training so they can better protect themselves. HRDs expressed need for training on the following:

- how to conduct their own assessment of threats, measures for institutional safety and response capacity,

- digital safety and security,

- psychological and stress management, and

- human rights monitoring in conflict and high-risk areas.

5 International partners should foster coordination and networking among HRDs and human rights groups to improve their practices and effectiveness.

HRDs who wish to continue their advocacy can be trained on how to produce and share their findings more effectively. HRDs' insights otherwise risk going undiscovered or ignored by domestic groups and international actors. Specifically, HRDs would benefit from training in data accuracy and field monitoring.

LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

1 Foster an enabling environment for HRDs to continue their work.

Stakeholders should work to secure enough space for in-country HRDs to function under Taliban rule. Foreign governments can help accomplish this by:

- placing diplomatic pressure on the Taliban to allow HRDs to operate freely and safely;

- ensuring that political agreements with the Taliban include pledges to protect HRDs' rights and investigate violations committed against HRDs;

- supporting investigations of such violations, with the aims of identifying perpetrators and holding the Taliban leadership accountable; and

- assisting in the creation and maintenance of a formal protection mechanism for HRDs.

2 Identify and support emerging HRDs.

Given the huge brain drain of HRDs, partners can help identify and recruit emerging civil society actors to ensure that human rights work can continue within Afghanistan, even though their room to maneuver will be narrow. CSOs who recruit new advocates should do so confidentially while focusing on their safety, considering the current operational context. Existing HRDs and domestic groups that still function should be favored in terms of recruitment.

3 Improve protection services for HRDs and make them more sustainable.

CSOs, INGOs, donors, development agencies, and other international actors who offer existing protection services should improve them based on in-country and out-of-country HRDs' reported needs and via collaborative

initiatives. Over time, these international actors should add sophistication and infrastructure to their protection systems.

4 Improve financial support for HRDs, wherever they are.

The assessment reveals that a lack of financial support is an overwhelming issue for HRDs. The sudden closure of donor-supported projects in Afghanistan created a huge financial crisis for most HRDs. HRDs have been clear about the consequences; a total of 62.8 percent of in-country respondents highlighted financial concerns (Table 7). While 90 percent of HRDs were employed before the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, the current unemployment rate for HRDs stands at 85 percent. Donors should provide financial support for individual in-country HRDs so they can survive and continue their work.

5 Provide financial support for civil society organizations still operating in Afghanistan.

The allocation of sufficient funds to support human rights advocacy has always been problematic, even before the August 2021 collapse of the elected government. A strong focus on long-term financial support needs to be adopted by all donors. National and international actors should consider a coordinated multi-donor financing coordination mechanism or collaboration to ensure there is increased and coordinated support for domestic groups. The AHRDC, AHRCM, and other national and international actors should consider a multi-donor financing approach for Afghan human rights oriented CSOs. This way, CSOs' capacity to perform their work and address HRDs' needs can be bolstered.

Further action for advocacy

The current mechanisms for protection and emergency responses, varying in scope from regional to international, can and should be supported through advocacy as well as direct action and funding. Based on our findings, we believe that advocacy should revolve around several major goals.

- Create a direct line of communication between HRDs and the international community.
- Influence political processes and events to address HRDs' and WHRDs' demands.
- Encourage diplomatic representatives of supportive countries to help Afghan HRDs wherever they operate.
- Facilitate HRDs' efforts to speak on human rights issues in Afghanistan at regional, national, and international venues, including via financial and political support.
- Voice support for HRDs who are under direct and severe threat morally, financially, and politically, regardless of their location.
- Increase resettlement of at-risk HRDs through direct visa allocation or via INGOs and other international bodies' efforts.
- Negotiate with local authorities to provide protection facilities including shelters and safehouses within Afghanistan.
- Support CSOs and INGOs inside and outside the country on the establishment of a coordination mechanism and on agreements with the Taliban on the protection of HRDs and WHRDs.
- Call for the intensification of the resettlement process with the help of the IOM and UNHCR, with a heightened focus on those facing security and deportation risks in neighboring countries.

Relatedly, international actors can foster information sharing with HRDs inside and outside the country to maintain and increase global attention on Afghan HRDs' circumstances, risks, and needs and to inform engaged partners and stakeholders of grassroots needs.

Annexes

ANNEX 1: KEY TERMINOLOGIES AND DEFINITIONS

Arbitrary arrest and arbitrary detention
Meaning the arrest and deprivation of liberty of a person outside of the confines of nationally recognized laws or international standards. The notion of 'arbitrary' measures whether or not said deprivation is taken in accordance with applicable law and procedure and whether or not it is proportional to the aim sought, reasonable, and necessary. 'Arbitrariness' is not to be equated with 'against the law', but must be interpreted more broadly to include elements of inappropriateness, injustice, lack of predictability, and due process.

In context of Afghanistan, arbitrary detention can be considered a crime against humanity (Article 7 of the Rome Statute), a war crime (Article 8), or genocide. Arbitrary detention is systematically used as a political tool of intimidation, often in combination with other violations, such as the suppression of individual liberties, extrajudicial executions, and enforced disappearances.[18]

Capacities
Capacities refer to strengths and resources a group or an individual can access to improve their security or survive an attack.[19]

Civil/social movement
Any self-motivated or organized movement, shaped and mandated by a member of civil society, to protect and promote collective causes in a nonviolent and peaceful way.

Context
A status that matches the current circumstances, giving a meaning or introduction to specific happenings and ongoing issues.

Defamation
A written or spoken statement that is purported to injure a third party's reputation and can thus result in criminal or civil sanctions, such as death, whipping, a custodial sentence, or a fine. The charge of defamation is often used to repress and punish free expression, which is guaranteed under Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Democratic movement
A movement organized to promote causes in a nonviolent and peaceful way.

Emergency situation
It is a situation where HRDs are collectively at risk, or where a HRD is attacked, threatened, abused, or otherwise mistreated.

Harassment
Harassment is a form of discrimination; it includes any unwanted physical or verbal behavior that offends or humiliates the target. Generally, harassment is a behavior that persists over time. Serious one-time incidents can sometimes be considered harassment.[20]

Human rights
Rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status. Human rights include the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to work, and education. Everyone is entitled to these rights, without discrimination.[21]

Human rights defenders (HRDs)
HRDs are people who, individually or with others, act to promote or protect human rights.[22] In this assessment, the term HRD encompasses CSAs, human rights activists, Media workers, NGO workers, and social activists who believe in nonviolent work to seek the promotion and protection of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. This report also uses the term **woman human rights defender (WHRD)** to highlight their specific responses and needs.

Human rights–oriented CSOs
Those organizations or entities that work to promote human rights and protect HRDs.

Immediate protection needs
When an HRD faces serious immediate harm or death, an agency with statutory protection powers should act quickly to secure their immediate safety upon receipt of a referral, or at any point in involvement with an HRD and their relatives.

Policy

A set of ideas or a plan of what to do in particular situations that has been agreed officially by a group of people, a business organization, a government, or a political party.[23]

Risk

Refers to the possibility of events, however uncertain, that will result in harm.[24]

Self-resilience capacity

The ability and capacity of an HRD or WHRD to reduce or mitigate their risk on their own.

Threats

Threats are indications that someone will harm somebody else's physical or moral integrity or property through purposeful and often violent action.[25]

Vulnerability

Vulnerability refers to factors that can make it more likely that an HRD or a group will suffer an attack or will suffer greater harm as a result of an attack.

ANNEX 2: SEMISTRUCTURE INTERVIEW

The main questions asked during semistructure interviews:

1. What is/are the main risk/s facing HRDs and WHRDs in Afghanistan, in neighboring countries, and in the greater diaspora?

2. What are the immediate protection needs of HRDs and WHRDs and how can families preserve their life savings?

3. What kind of protection assistance do you need to continue your human rights work?

4. In general, what type of assistance could be considered essential for HRDs and WHRDs to survive in the current emergency situation?

5. What types of assistance/support might enable HRDs and WHRDs to reduce risk and continue human rights advocacy inside Afghanistan?

6. What will be the best mechanism/approach to eliminate and reduce violence against HRDs and WHRDs in the current situation?

7. Do you think capacity-building programs focused on physical and digital safety will increase the resilience of HRDs and WHRDs?

ANNEX 3: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Main questions guiding focus group discussions:

1. What is/are the main risk(s) facing HRDs and WHRDs in Afghanistan, in the neighboring countries, and in the diaspora?

2. What are the immediate protection needs of HRDs and WHRDs, and how can families preserve their life savings?

3. What kind of protection assistance do you need to continue your human rights work?

4. In general, what type of assistance could be considered essential for HRDs and WHRDs to survive in the current emergency situation?

5. What types of assistance/support might enable HRDs and WHRDs to reduce risk and continue human right advocacy inside Afghanistan?

6. What will be the best mechanism/approach to eliminate and reduce violence against HRDs and WHRDs in the current situation?

7. Do you think capacity-building programs focused on physical and digital safety will increase the resilience of HRDs and WHRDs?

ANNEX 4: AFGHAN HRDS AND WHRDS NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

Part I:
Personal information

All personal information shall remain highly confidential.
* Required

1. **Email address**

   _____

2. **Gender***
   Mark only one oval.
   ◯ Male
   ◯ Female

3. **Please identify and describe your field of activity.***
   ☐ Human Rights Defender
   ☐ Woman Human Rights Defender
   ☐ Civil Society Activist
   ☐ Media Worker
   ☐ Writer and Researcher
   ☐ Independent Defense Lawyer
   ☐ Social Activist/Worker
   ☐ Other: _____

4. **Please describe your current residence/location.***
   Mark only one oval.
   ◯ Afghanistan
   ◯ Pakistan
   ◯ Tajikistan
   ◯ Uzbekistan
   ◯ Iran
   ◯ Turkey
   ◯ India
   ◯ Albania
   ◯ UAE
   ◯ Canada
   ◯ USA
   ◯ Germany
   ◯ Other: _____

5. **Please kindly identify level of current and past human rights activities.***
   Check all that apply.
   ☐ City District Level
   ☐ Village Level
   ☐ District Level
   ☐ Provincial Level
   ☐ National Level
   ☐ Regional Level
   ☐ International Level
   ☐ Other, please describe _____

Part II:
Emergency safety and protection needs

1. **Length of time working as a human rights defender, civil society activist, or media worker?***
   Mark only one oval.
   ◯ Less than One Year
   ◯ One or Two Years
   ◯ Three to Five Years
   ◯ Five to Ten Years
   ◯ More than Ten Years
   ◯ Other: _____

2. **What are the main threats and risks for human rights defenders (male/female), civil society activists, and media workers in your place of residence?***
   Check all that apply.
   ☐ Physical and Life Threat
   ☐ Threat of Property Destruction and Damage
   ☐ Torture, Intimidation, and Misbehavior
   ☐ Physical and Mental Trauma
   ☐ Threat of Violence to Family Member/Relatives
   ☐ Captivity and Torture
   ☐ Defamation/Detraction, Kidnapping, and Prison
   ☐ Other, please describe _____

3. **What are the main threats and risks from your point of view for human rights defenders (male/female), civil society activists, and media workers who are in neighboring countries or out of Afghanistan?** *

   Please share your experience.

   Check all that apply.

   ☐ Visa and Travel Facilities
   ☐ Police Harassment
   ☐ Extension of Visa in Third Country
   ☐ Financial Supply
   ☐ Security Threat
   ☐ Fear of Mandatory Return/Deportation
   ☐ Other, please describe _____

4. **What are the main three threats and risks for human rights defenders (male/female), civil society activists, and media workers in Afghanistan?**

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

5. **Have you experienced any kind of violence or threat in your residence, work place, or any other place during the last nine months?**

   Mark only one oval.

   ◯ Yes
   ◯ No

6. **If yes, what kind of threat?**

   Check all that apply.

   ☐ Threat of Property Destruction and Damage
   ☐ Physical Violence
   ☐ Torture, Intimidation, and Misbehavior
   ☐ Physical and Mental Trauma
   ☐ Threat of Violence to Family Member/Relatives
   ☐ Captivity and Torture
   ☐ Defamation/Detraction, Kidnapping, and Prison
   ☐ None of the above
   ☐ Other, please describe: _____

7. **How did you decrease or eliminate threats?**

   Check all that apply.

   ☐ Through Self-Action and Measurement for Protection
   ☐ Through Referring to Social Structures
   (Jirga, Shura or Tribal Elders)
   ☐ Through Referring to Governmental Legal Support Centers
   ☐ Through Civil Society Protection
   ☐ Through Change in Living Area
   ☐ Though Leaving the Country
   ☐ Others, please describe _____

8. **Did you receive any assistance/support while being threatened or tortured?**

   Mark only one oval.

   ◯ Yes
   ◯ No
   ◯ Other: _____

9. **If yes, did anyone or any organization support you?**

   _____

   In cases of threat or risk, what type of support and emergency protection do you need in Afghanistan? *

   Check all that apply.

   ☐ Security Trainings
   ☐ Financial Support
   ☐ Shelter or Safehouses Inside the Country
   ☐ Internal Relocation
   ☐ Security Personnel
   ☐ Access to Legal Protection
   ☐ External Relocation
   ☐ International Protection
   ☐ Other, please describe _____

10. **In the current emergency situation facing Afghanistan, what do you need to continue your work? Please prioritize your need. Select (1) for first grade, (2) and (3) subsequently for next grades.** *

    Check all that apply.

    ☐ Emergency Financial Support
    ☐ Access to Shelter and Safehouses
    ☐ Legal Protection
    ☐ Internal Relocation
    ☐ External Relocation
    ☐ Safe and Secure Office Space
    ☐ Secure Intermediary Vehicle or Security Personnel
    ☐ Self-Safety and Security Training
    ☐ Digital Safety and Security Training
    ☐ Others, please describe _____

Part III:
Continuous protection and other vital needs

1. **Which protection and sustainable services make you capable to continue human rights activities inside Afghanistan?***
    Check all that apply.
    ☐ Financial Support
    ☐ Technical Support and Training
    ☐ Risk Reduction and Security Trainings
    ☐ Internal Relocation
    ☐ Establishing of Protection Mechanism and Pressurizing Taliban for Security
    ☐ Political and Diplomatic Pressure for Providing Proper Security to Defenders
    ☐ Legal Pressure and Follow-Up by International Political Forces, United Nations, and International Justice Organizations to Pursue Criminals
    ☐ Other, please describe _____

2. **Which protection and sustainable services make you capable to continue human rights activities outside Afghanistan?***
    Check all that apply.
    ☐ Financial Support
    ☐ Technical Support and Training
    ☐ Support of International Organizations in Establishing Protection Mechanism
    ☐ Diplomatic Pressure for Providing Proper Security to Defenders by Host Country
    ☐ Other, please describe _____

3. **What approaches and actions can eliminate violence against human rights defenders (male/female)?**

    _____
    _____
    _____
    _____
    _____

Part IV:
Capacity-building needs for HRDs and WHRDs

1. **Have you ever attended a safety and security training cycle?**
    Mark only one oval.
    ◯ Yes
    ◯ No

    If not, please describe which of the below capacity-building trainings can be more effective for your safety and security?
    Check all that apply.
    ☐ Self-Protection Training
    ☐ Risk Mitigation or Evaluation and Rapid Response Training
    ☐ Digital Safety Training
    ☐ Others, please describe _____

2. **What is your recommendation for protection (especially women)?***

    _____
    _____
    _____
    _____
    _____

Notes

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4   The protection mechanism means an entity or a commission that is supported by the international community and UNAMA overseen by the diplomatic missions to monitor the situation of HRDs and WHRDs on a regular basis. The mechanism should engage in protection, legal aid support and relocation of the HRDs at risk or under threat inside the country. This request is similar to the Joint HRD Protection Commission established in January 2021 in an official decree by the former government. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2020/12/afghanistan-new-commission-a-major-step-toward-protection-of-human-rights-defenders/ https://ps-af.facebook.com/2vp.af/posts/1721097238094392/.

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7   RSF, "Since the Taliban Takeover, 40 Percent of Afghan Media Have Closed, 80 Percent of Women Journalists Have Lost Their Jobs," https://rsf.org/en/taliban-takeover-40-afghan-media-have-closed-80-women-journalists-have-lost-their-jobs.

8   Specific data regarding post-takeover arrests and killings of WHRDs is difficult to collect, though the circumstances of some deaths are known. Many WHRDs who were found dead in a Mazar-e-Sharif suburb, for example, were arrested and reportedly raped before their deaths. Additionally, others died by suicide or were the victims of so-called honor killings conducted by relatives. Social media also reported targeted killings of WHRDs in Herat, Badakhshan, Nangarhar, and Kabul.

    See also:
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16 Violence against HRDs, CSAs, and media workers had been increasing since mid-2017. In 2019, the AHRDC proposed the establishment of a National Protection Committee to address these populations' needs. In December 2020, with the support of UNAMA and the EU, former Afghan president Ashraf Ghani signed a decree to establish a joint HRD and media protection commission, chaired by the former vice president. The justice, interior, and defense ministers were members, as were the heads of the AIHRC, AHRDC, AJSC, and AWN.

17 The protection mechanism means an entity or a commission that is supported by the international community and UNAMA overseen by the diplomatic missions to monitor the situation of HRDs and WHRDs on a regular basis. The mechanism should engage in protection, legal aid support and relocation of the HRDs at risk or under threat inside the country. This request is similar to the Joint HRD Protection Commission established in January 2021 in an official decree by the former government. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2020/12/afghanistan-new-commission-a-major-step-toward-protection-of-human-rights-defenders/ https://ps-af.facebook.com/2vp.af/posts/1721097238094392/

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