



# Afghan Women's Ongoing Fight for Rights Alone but Determined

## Two Years After Taliban Rule

On August 15, 2021, Afghanistan collapsed into the hands of the Taliban following a failed and illegitimate peace process led by the United States, which excluded women and marginalized ethnic and religious groups, civil society, and media. As predicted by Afghan women, their hard-won rights vanished overnight. In the past two years, the Taliban has issued over 64 edicts aimed at eliminating women from public spaces. Afghanistan now stands as the only country in the world where women are banned from accessing most forms of formal education, employment, free movement, and even basic services like access parks, restaurants, and public baths. The women of Afghanistan have endured immense loss, pain, and suffering during these years, but they have also shown tireless resistance against the Taliban's oppression. Despite being largely ignored and abandoned by the international community, the women of Afghanistan have courageously fought against the Taliban alone. On the second anniversary of Kabul's fall, Femena has spoken to six women from different walks of life whose lives have been transformed since August 15, 2021, but whose commitment to fight for their rights has only grown stronger. These women, who are all members of Afghanistan's Women Protester Movements Coalition, bravely share their personal stories of the day of the fall of Kabul and reflect on their journeys over the past two years. They recount the challenges, fear, and uncertainty they faced during those fateful moments and how their lives were forever changed. Their stories serve as a testament to the indomitable spirit of Afghan women, who, even in the face of adversity, refuse to be silenced and continue to fight for their rights and equality.

## In the Face of Fear and Despair, I Fight for My Daughters' Future

Zholia Parsi, Protester, Former Civil Servant,  
Former Teacher, Mother



"On August 15th, when Afghanistan fell into the hands of the Taliban terrorist group, I was at my office. My family called me and informed me that the Taliban had entered Kabul. At first, I couldn't believe it and brushed off their concerns, saying it was impossible. However, my mother insisted that I should return home immediately as the Taliban had indeed taken control of Kabul.

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I felt scared and shocked, rushing to my boss's office to inquire about the situation. He initially reassured me that everything was fine and that the Taliban had not returned. However, upon further investigation, he confirmed the unfortunate truth – the Taliban had indeed taken over Kabul. He advised all woman staff members to leave and go home. Fearful for my safety, especially because I wasn't sure if I could adhere to the Taliban's strict dress code, I decided

to pack up and head home.

It was a harrowing experience trying to find a taxi amidst the chaos in the city. People were frantic, running around, and crowding around the airport gates. Men were anxiously waiting outside school doors to pick up their daughters, and families were rushing to government offices and organizations to collect their loved ones. The city was in disarray.

The distance from my office to my home should have taken only 20 minutes, but due to the heavy traffic, it took me six hours to reach home. Throughout the journey, my family kept calling me. Once I arrived home,

I immediately began hiding my work documents, fearing that if the Taliban raided our house, they might harm or even kill me for my previous job. I was also concerned about our TV, as the Taliban had a history of breaking TVs in homes during their previous rule. It wasn't about the TV itself, but the potential danger it posed to us.

Throughout the night, I couldn't sleep, constantly anxious that the Taliban might barge into our house. The following days were filled with fear and uncertainty. Both my husband and I lost our jobs as we were government employees, and we gradually lost everything. To survive, we had to sell our valuables to heat our home and feed our children. The situation left me feeling hopeless. I was once an independent woman with my own earnings, actively participating in society. Now, the future seems bleak and daunting.

In an attempt to demand our rights, I started protesting on the streets. However, the reality is that my protests feel futile, with little hope for change. Many women around me are suffering in silence, confined to their homes for two years. Dreaming for a better future has become a luxury, and my primary focus now is to ensure my daughters receive an education and have a chance at a better life. The Taliban may not change, but I must concentrate on securing an education for my daughters, even if it means leaving my homeland for a country where they can pursue their dreams without fear.

The fear and hopelessness continue, but I remain determined to fight for my daughters' future.





## The Only Path is to Continue the Struggle for Freedom

Zakia Zahadat, Former Civil Servant, Protester

It was 10:00 in the morning, and I was at the office when the news spread that the Taliban had taken over Kabul. It was a surreal and shocking moment for all of us, and we hesitated to believe it. We clung to the hope that perhaps there would be some power-sharing arrangement with the government, and everything would be fine. Despite our reluctance, all the women in the office were asked to go home, and eventually, my two colleagues and I left as well.

On our way home, we received alarming calls from our families, describing the presence of Taliban soldiers throughout the city and their flags flying high. Fear gripped us, and we chose not to carry any documents or laptops with us, afraid that such possessions might endanger our lives.

As I walked through the streets, passing by the US embassy road and the security directorate, I encountered former military personnel playing patriotic music, holding guns, and shedding tears. The sight was deeply impactful, and I couldn't hold back my emotions—I broke down in tears. The chaos in the city was evident once I managed to find a car to travel in. It was a dark day, one that every woman would remember.

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That night, I went to bed hoping for a better tomorrow. However,

when I woke up, it felt like the darkness had extended into an endless night that has persisted for two years now. Despite the challenges, I tried to keep hope alive in the following days. I stayed indoors for three days, occasionally glancing out the window, only to see Taliban soldiers patrolling the streets, which filled me with fear.

During those early days, the Taliban announced bans on girls' education and women's employment in their first press conferences. The impact of these restrictions was immense, and we had to be incredibly strong to endure those trying times. It was during this period that I learned about women forming protest groups, and I decided to join them. Participating in protests was daunting, but it provided a sense of empowerment. We formed different groups and vowed not to give up.

However, with each new edict from the Taliban restricting women's rights, we faced another wave of hopelessness. Despite the physical attacks, humiliations, and obstacles we encountered during the protests, we remained resilient. Some of my friends endured imprisonment and torture, but their courage and determination have inspired me to keep fighting. Two years later, there is no other path but to continue our fight until freedom.

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## All My Hopes Were Shattered That Day

Deebah Farahmand, Civil Society Activist, Education Expert, Ministry of Education

On the date of August 15th, 2021, I was at my workplace, and all my colleagues were busy with their work. It was 10:20 in the morning when suddenly a coworker rushed in and said we had to leave the office and go home. I asked with great dismay what was happening, and they replied that the Taliban had entered Kabul city and advised us to go home to avoid any harm. So, my female coworkers and I left the office.

Tears were streaming down our faces as we waited for a taxi to take us home. I finally reached home. My daughter and sons were at school. My husband brought them home. The roads were chaotic with people trying to escape and reach their homes. It was the darkest day for women and girls of Afghanistan. Everyone was crying and saying there was no hope left in life. We were all afraid of losing our jobs and education.

My husband, who was in the military, had gone into hiding at home and was very worried. The Taliban came to our block and took away a soldier, making all the neighbors cry. From that moment on, they were searching for soldiers and government vehicles.

With fear and anxiety, we left our home the next day. I, being an advocate for women's rights, and my husband, being a soldier, had to flee. With broken hearts and despair, we went to an unknown place, but I will never forget how this terrorist group brought so much suffering and bloodshed to the people.

**I could only shed tears and worry about my daughter's future, who had a passion for education, and her school was her second home. Every time she asked if the Taliban would allow us to go to school, I said yes, but deep down, I felt the fire of doubt because I knew the Taliban wouldn't change. All my hopes were shattered that day because I knew the Taliban wouldn't change their ways.**

My children kept asking where we were going, and I couldn't answer them due to fear. I could only shed tears and worry about my daughter's future, who had a passion for education, and her school was her second home. Every time she asked if the Taliban would allow us to go to school, I said yes, but deep down, I felt the fire of doubt because I knew the Taliban wouldn't change. All my hopes were shattered that day because I knew the Taliban wouldn't change their ways.

Today, I lead my own underground movement of women and persistently raise my voice for the rights of women in my country. I will continue the struggle until we, as women, can breathe freely and live dignified lives.

## I Felt the Darkness of the Night in the Under the Blazing Sunlight

Nasrin Hamidi, Former Staff of Ministry of Education



On Saturday morning, like any other workday, after having breakfast and getting ready with my husband, who is also my colleague, we left home to go to our workplace in the eighth educational district in Kart-e Now area. Everything seemed normal and routine as we arrived at our workplace on time. As my colleagues gathered, I heard conflicting news about the Taliban entering the Qalacha-e Kabul area and disarming the soldiers, police, and security forces of the eighth district. However, we didn't believe the rumours and proceeded to our respective schools according to the assigned schedule given by the management of the eighth educational district.

On that day, I went to the girls' high school in Tootia area to handle daily affairs. When I reached the school, everything seemed normal. Both teaching and administrative staff, as well as students, were present. Until 12:40 PM, I was at the school. After ensuring everything was fine, I left the school and visited my mother's house, which was in the neighborhood next to the school. I spent only ten minutes there before checking Facebook. Unfortunately, I learned about Ashraf Ghani's escape from the presidential palace. At the same moment, my brother, who was in the city, came to our house and told us that the Taliban had reached the Kuta Sangi area and surrounded Kabul.

**With a commitment to seeking justice and fighting, I continued to raise my voice through protests, underground meetings, conferences, interviews, and more. I became the voice of oppressed Afghan women.**

In a state of disbelief, my eyes widened, but I managed to control myself and reassured my mother that there was nothing to worry about. However, I decided to hurry back home as soon as possible before the roads got blocked or there was a confrontation. With my brother's help, I got on a minibus. In the Shah Shaheed area, traffic restrictions didn't allow me to go towards the city. I had to walk the remaining distance. The congestion was too much. The influx of people from the city, mostly male government employees carrying

briefcases and laptops, made it even more difficult to get home.

I rushed through the crowd, trying to get ahead. Suddenly, I noticed others moving even faster in the opposite direction. These people looked very different, wearing old, dirty clothes, carrying bags on their shoulders, and wearing worn-out flip-flops. They had serious faces, long messy beards and hair, and seemed like they wanted to pass right through me. Later, I found out they were former prisoners of Pul-e-Charkhi freed by the Taliban. I felt a shiver as I realized how I was dressed. I thought I was going to melt from the intensity of fear and heat right there. I felt the darkness of the night during the day, scorching under the blazing sun. I wanted to sit down on the spot. But I shook myself and said, "This isn't right." I clenched my fingers between my palms, pressed my lips together harder under the grind of my teeth, and kept moving. Just as my heartbeat faster and my breaths quickened in my chest, I started to take faster and quicker steps, preparing myself to confront and face any situation.

**After a year and a half of struggle and being pursued by the Taliban's intelligence, we were forced to leave our homeland and hide in Pakistan. And now, in exile, I continue the fight and remain the voice of oppressed Afghan women and people in my homeland.**

After getting off the bus, I don't know how fast I crossed the intersection and found a relatively safer spot. At that moment, a Toyota Corolla parked next to me, and the driver immediately shouted, "Sister, get in the car!" When I looked at him, I felt like he understood my situation and wanted to help. I trusted him and got in the car. The distance from Deh Mazang to Shor Bazaar felt like it passed in the blink of an eye. I thanked the driver and got out of the car, walking towards my neighborhood.

As I approached the inside of the alley and my house, I felt a greater sense of calm and safety. However, suddenly my eyes fell upon three strong and unusual-looking men who were approaching me from the opposite direction. It was around two-thirty in the afternoon. The alley was deserted. Fear surged again, but there was no escape. I was just a few steps away from my house. I kept walking. Suddenly, the loud voice of one of these three men shook my heart. The man said, "Grab this woman by her tight coat and pants and give her a lesson by doing what needs to be done (rape), so other women won't dare to go outside without a veil." I ran towards the house. I pressed the gate's handle. To my utter disbelief, it was open. I entered the house and forcefully shut the door, locking it from the inside.

After getting home, I cried uncontrollably for a week, mourning the loss of our dreams and aspirations for freedom and our country, together with my family members.

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August 15th was the most bitter day of my life, the day when all my dreams were shattered. We were in Takhār province. I could never have imagined that Takhār, my beloved homeland, would fall so quickly. Just a few days before, there had been intense fighting between the government and the Taliban.

My father insisted that we stay inside our house, as we were in a dangerous area, close to the frontline of the war. After three days of continuous night battles, there were several instances where shelling hit our house, but fortunately, none of us were harmed. However, two boys from our neighboring house were martyred on the same day. We were terrified, and that day turned out to be a dark chapter in history.

My father came in from outside looking very sad and said that Takhār had also fallen, and the Taliban had taken control. It was heartbreaking because I had so many memories and information about the Taliban from my parents over the past 25 years, and they were not pleasant. I felt a deep sense of hatred towards them.

I used to be a teacher, but after the fall, the Taliban took even that away from me. A young Taliban member, who had been a student in the same place where I taught, forced me out of my job and replaced me. I was the breadwinner for my family, and life became incredibly difficult for me and my family. Soon, my two sisters were also banned from continuing their education.

**Despite the suffering and pain endured by the women of Afghanistan over the past two years, I have not given up. I have embarked on a journey to seek justice for our rights. I organize public and indoor protests to demand my rights. However, the Taliban constantly attempt to silence me and my colleagues. Many of my friends have been detained and tortured because of me. Nevertheless, I am still young, and I hold onto numerous dreams for my future. I firmly believe that one day, my fellow countrywomen and I will attain the freedom we yearn for.**

We became prisoners in our own homes. The Taliban imposed forced veiling on us, which terrified us all.

For the past two years, many girls in my community have been forced to marry Taliban members. I am worried about my future and the future of my own sisters, fearing we will be forced to marry them. One Talib fighter has been pressuring my family to marry my 17-year-old sister, even though he is already married and has children. He keeps harassing us daily, and my sister has tried to commit suicide twice.

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## Through Women's Narratives, I Shine a Light on the Injustice of the Taliban

Shamayel Tawana, Former Civil Servant, Journalist

Like any other day, I woke up early in the morning, prepared for work, and headed to the office. However, something felt different about the city that day; it was quieter than usual. Upon reaching the office, I noticed that not many of my colleagues were present. Around 15 minutes later, a colleague approached me and delivered the shocking news that the Taliban had reached the gates of Kabul, and it was unsafe for me to remain at work. The reality of the Taliban's presence in Kabul left me speechless and unable to process my emotions. I left the office immediately, witnessing chaos on the streets as people, especially women, hurriedly left their workplaces, seeking safety.



Struggling to find a taxi, I realized that the drivers were frightened and unwilling to provide rides. Consequently, I embarked on a three-hour walk to reach my home. That day marked the beginning of a challenging time for women in Afghanistan. Little did I know that it would be my last day at work. Soon after, the Taliban

revealed their true intentions, issuing edicts to curtail the rights of women.

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On September 3, 2021, I decided to take a stand by joining street protests to raise my voice and demand my rights. However, this act of defiance came at a cost, as I endured beatings and lashings from the Taliban. During one of the protests, the beatings were so severe that I was bedridden for three weeks.

Two years have passed since then, and now I run my own media website, sharing the stories of women and shedding light on the atrocities committed

by the Taliban. Despite being forced to leave the country recently, I refuse to give up. I am determined to continue amplifying the voices of women in Afghanistan and advocate for their rights from wherever I am. The struggle continues, and I remain resolute in my commitment to uplifting the voices of Afghan women.



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Femena's country and regional briefs provide analysis about trends in the region, especially those that pushback on women's rights and movements.