



Human Rights Defenders and Their Challenges



Who and what do we mean by “human rights defenders” (HRDs) in Afghanistan?

War, violence, and upheaval have been everyday realities of life in Afghanistan for the last 40 years. This period of violence has included the Soviet occupation, the Afghan Civil War, the US-led invasion and war against the Taliban and, most recently, the evacuation and withdrawal of US forces.

Since the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan in mid-2021, the situation has worsened and thousands of people have fled the country or attempted to leave, fearing violence, persecution, and the loss of basic human rights.

Human rights defenders (HRDs) – including peace activists, women’s rights activists, journalists, intellectuals and professionals, local staff of embassies, and other civil society members – are people working in a variety of different capacities to address, protect, and advocate for the human rights of people impacted by war, conflict, and insecurity. In Afghanistan, HRDs have been specifically targeted and killed because they challenge the religious, cultural and gender norms, and political views of groups like the Taliban.



What specific challenges, barriers, and abuses have HRDs in Afghanistan been facing?

- ▶ Harassment, intimidation, threats, attacks, and targeted murders of human rights defenders, and particularly women’s rights defenders, have been on the rise in Afghanistan, particularly over the past year.
- ▶ In 2020, there was a five-fold increase in killings of HRDs compared to 2019. This dramatic increase coincided with the start of preliminary peace negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

- As stated in our **May 2021 joint call for the end to these attacks on HRDs**:
 - From September 2020 until May 2021, a total of 17 human rights defenders have been killed...based on information compiled by the Afghan Human Rights Defenders Committee (AHRDC).
 - Over 200 human rights defenders and media representatives reported that they were receiving serious threats to the AHRDC and the Afghanistan Journalists Safety Committee.
 - A report published by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) in February 2021 noted that 65 media practitioners and human rights defenders have been killed since 2018.
 - In most of these cases, no perpetrators have been held to account.



What is WILPF's focus concerning human rights defenders in Afghanistan?

Established in 2015, WILPF Afghanistan is devoted to working with women, men, and young people to advance the role of women in Afghan society, promote peace-building, and develop women's active social, economic, and political participation for a future of inclusion and prosperity.

WILPF Afghanistan is also deeply committed to working with communities to prevent gender-based violence and to promote environmental initiatives that improve the health and security of all citizens of Afghanistan.

As a global organisation, WILPF is working through a variety of different channels to protect and elevate the voices of HRDs within and outside of Afghanistan.

Action and Recommendations

- The attacks and murders of human right defenders in Afghanistan must end.
- The international community – including NATO member states – must act immediately to support and protect the safety, security, and human rights of human rights defenders themselves. This should include expedited access to other countries. WILPF has brought to the urgent attention of the Human Rights Council (HRC) the alarming situation of HRDs in Afghanistan and has urged this Council to:
 - Establish an appropriate and robust monitoring mechanism that can regularly report to the HRC on the situation.
 - Monitor the peace talks and any future peace agreement and call for women's meaningful participation in the talks, as well as for human rights standards and the protection of HRDs and women and girls' rights to be articulated as key benchmarks for any peace process and subsequent peace agreement.
- We call on all states to ensure the withdrawal of armed forces that took place earlier this year is now being followed by alternative security and transitional measures towards peace.
- WILPF urges the government of Afghanistan and other relevant international actors to collaborate with HRDs and civil society organisations in the design and implementation of robust protection policies with a gender perspective and an intersectional approach.
- There must also be effective representation of HRDs, especially women, in any peace process and related conference.

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