



FIGURE 1. AUG. 15, 2024 — A TOLONews ANCHOR PRESENTS A NEWS BULLETIN UNDER TALIBAN RULE IN KABUL, AFGHANISTAN.

Women's Visibility in Afghan Media Before and After the Taliban Takeover in August 2021

Humayoon

Executive Summary

Post – 2001 period, Afghanistan experienced a significant increase in media freedom, culminating in a "Golden Age" for Afghan media. This period, particularly post-2001, saw unprecedented visibility and participation of women as journalists, presenters, and media executives, symbolizing broader societal progress.

However, this progress was fragile, consistently threatened by cultural conservatism and ongoing conflict. Journalists, especially women, faced threats, intimidation, and violence, with many ultimately fleeing the country or navigating a hostile environment.

The Taliban's retaking of power in 2021 led to a severe regression in media freedom and women in this industry. Female journalists are now subject to restrictive dress codes, censorship, and severe limitations on their professional activities, restrictions, and threats, leading to a sharp decline in their numbers and presence. Female journalists face job losses, exile, and significant barriers, including the inability to stay in journalism or participate fully in media activities.

These restrictions lead to gender-based discrimination, self-censorship, and a substantial gap in reporting on women's issues, further marginalizing their experiences and rights. The suspension of crucial legal frameworks has exacerbated these challenges, leaving media professionals in legal limbo.

The international community must urgently support Afghan women in the media to preserve the progress made in media freedom and gender equality over the past two decades. The voices of Afghan women are crucial for the country's progress and must not be silenced.

1. Introduction

Afghanistan experienced a remarkable increase in media freedom post-2001 period, and its media landscape reached its 'climax'¹ During the years that followed. Several audio, visual, and print media outlets and organizations emerged across the country during the "Golden Age" of Afghan media.²

Afghanistan experienced a significant transformation in its media and information environment.³ since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, particularly in terms of women's visibility in the media. As a result of the U.S.-led invasion, media freedom flourished, with women playing a crucial role as journalists and presenters. Anisa Adalat* (Used pseudonym due to security issues), former owner of a media outlet said:" In 2002, I was able to manage my tripe, soon arrived in Kabul, I established a weekly magazine with less financial support, later it upgrade to radio station, where most programs were operating by women,"⁴

Soraya Amiri*⁵, an exiled journalist who has worked as a producer of political programming at Tolonews, stated "They (women) broke taboos through their presence and by facing numerous challenges, working hard to create a space that encouraged other women to engage in media activities."

The media's contribution to promoting the rule of law, reform, and holding government institutions and officials accountable is invaluable. Over the last two decades, media outlets have reached an unparalleled level of quality, maturity, and independence, outpacing much of the regional media landscape during the same time frame. Before the collapse, their effectiveness and impact established the media as the fourth pillar of the state.⁶

According to findings from Reporters Without Borders ([RSF](#)), the fall of Kabul by the Taliban on August 15, 2021, had a profound impact on the media landscape. In just three months, 43% of Afghan media entities disappeared. Initially, there were 10,780 media professionals (8,290 men and 2,490 women) in early August, but by December, only 4,360 remained (3,950 men and 410

¹ Focus Group Discussion, Interview

² Focus Group Discussion, Interview

³<https://peacerep.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/ARN-15-Evolving-Information-Environment-in-Afghanistan.pdf>

⁴ Online Interview, Soraya Amiril, former Tolonews, political producer May1, 2024.

⁵ Online Interview, Anisa Adalat (name has been changed), former reporter, May 2, 2024

⁶ <https://ajso.org/journalism-in-crisis/844/>

women). Women bore the brunt of the fallout, with more than 84% losing their employment, compared to 52% of men.⁷



FIGURE 2. THREE YEARS OF TALIBAN RULE IN AFGHANISTAN: SINCE AUGUST 15, 2021, AFGHAN WOMEN HAVE FACED EXCLUSION FROM POLICYMAKING, BANS ON EDUCATION, AND SEVERE RESTRICTIONS ON PUBLIC PRESENCE AND WORK. A DISCUSSION ON THESE CHALLENGES TOOK PLACE INSIDE THE TOLONNEWS STUDIO

The current Afghan media landscape faces numerous challenges, such as: a shortage of financial support, censorship, lack of access to information, ongoing severe Taliban restrictions on press freedoms—particularly for female media workers—a fear of violence, and a significant lack of research and investigation into the experiences of female media workers. These challenges include threats to media workers' safety, daily difficulties, and overall security concerns, leading to gaps, fleeing the country, and unemployment and career changes.⁸

Additionally, there has been a reported decline in “female students pursuing journalism studies,”⁹ with many abandoning the field or leaving the country due to exile. The imposition of Taliban restrictions further exacerbates these issues, with females prohibited from interviewing males

⁷ https://rsf.org/en/analyse_regionale/698

⁸ Focus Group Discussion, Interview.

⁹ Freshata Khan(Not real name) , Interview.

and reluctance to sit with them, “I felt like I am not a human. I feel like I have committed a big crime which is why God made me a woman in Afghanistan,” A TV presenter told Al Jazeera¹⁰.

The difficult circumstances imposed by the Taliban have forced an unknown number of Afghan journalists including females to leave Afghanistan. Female reporters are not allowed to sit in for interviews with males,¹¹ causing a substantial lack of information on the ground. Remaining journalists are confronted with unemployment or should seek alternative livelihoods, for instance becoming vendors. “With the closure of some media organizations, journalists became jobless and I was forced to work as a vendor as they don’t allow us (women) to work,” Farzana Ayoubi, a woman journalist told Tolonews.¹²

Media outlets that are still functioning are pressured to comply with Taliban rules, often ignoring previous regulations. They (women) either face direct censorship or choose to self-censor to survive. In Kabul, these challenges are most acute, however, media organizations and journalists at the provincial level also struggle significantly, many closing their functions.¹³

¹⁰<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/24/afghan-female-journalists-defiant-as-taliban-restrictions-grow>

¹¹ <https://www.afghanwitness.org/reports/the-stories-of-afghanistan%E2%80%99s-women-journalists>

¹²<https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/attack-mediajournalists-175423#:~:text=Farzana%20Ayoubi%2C%20a%20woman%20journalist.rapid%20political%20change%20in%20Afghanistan.>

¹³ Focus Group, Interview.



FIGURE 3. FIVE YEARS AGO: A FEMALE AFGHAN JOURNALIST DISCUSSES THREATS TO FEMALE JOURNALISTS WITH A GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL INSIDE THE TOLONews STUDIO.

A female presenter, who evacuated and settled in a new country, shared her experience: "It will take a long time to be a journalist again; overcoming these obstacles is not possible."¹⁴

This report has identified a significant gap in the visibility of female journalists, and found systematic disappearance from the Afghan media landscape, particularly from TV channels. Through observations and interviews with current and former workers from three major TV stations, conducted anonymously, it is evident that female journalism is on the verge of collapse.¹⁵

2. Methodology

The study aims to explore how the visibility of women in media outlets operates under the dire conditions in Afghanistan. Afghan media, once considered among the freest in the region, is now on the verge of collapse, facing numerous challenges such as diminishing financial support and extreme restrictions imposed by the Taliban.

¹⁴ Freshta Khan, Interview.

¹⁵ Focus Group Discussion, Interview.

The study employs qualitative methods, including content analysis, interviews, and focus groups, to gather in-depth insights into women's visibility and experiences in Afghan media. This involves observing the content of three major TV channels: [Tolonews](#), [Shamshad TV](#), and [Ariananews](#). To quantify the presence of women and analyze the type of content featuring women. Additionally, the research monitors and analyzes social media discussions on the issues, such as those on X's spaces and various podcast platforms.

Interviews and focus groups are also used to provide first-hand accounts and collective insights into the media landscape. During the four-month Noor fellowship program, from mid-April, 2024 till July 2024, the fellow conducted 30 interviews with female journalists and media experts, 15 of which were inside the country. These interviews were structured and semi-structured, with a list of questions sent to participants in advance, along with information about the Fellowship. Due to ethical considerations, all interviewees' identities have been changed upon their request because of the current sensitive situation in Afghanistan. Additionally, the fellow organized three focus groups which occurred on WhatsApp group calls, followed and listened to numerous [Twitter Spaces](#)¹⁶ with fellow Afghan journalists, and participated in online debates like [podcasts](#).¹⁷ Which were organized by the Afghan Journalists Support Organization([AJSO](#)).

This report aimed to answer these specific research questions; 1) How has the visibility of women in Afghan media changed following the Taliban's resurgence of power? 2) What specific challenges have emerged for female journalists?

As a limitation, it is challenging to find female journalists willing to reveal their identity for interviews. Conducting interviews anonymously has become a necessity due to the fear of reprisals or job loss. Some interviews have been conducted with exiled journalists, using these qualitative research methods.

¹⁶ <https://x.com/AfghanistanISO/status/1769399822547583145>

¹⁷ <https://www.mediasupport.org/blogpost/the-taliban-wants-afghan-women-in-media-to-become-invisible/>

3. Analysis

3.1 Women's Role in Afghan Media Pre-Taliban

Before the [Taliban's rise](#)¹⁸ to power in the mid-[1990](#)¹⁹s and their [resurgence in 2021](#)²⁰, Afghan women had gradually been carving out [significant roles](#)²¹ in the country's media landscape. During the 1960s and 1970s, [women began](#)²² to enter the media industry as part of broader social reforms under progressive governments, particularly during the era of [Mohammad Daoud](#)²³ Khan's presidency. This period saw [women working as journalists](#),²⁴ news anchors, and media executives, reflecting a burgeoning movement towards gender equality in urban centers.

Following the [fall of the Taliban in 2001](#)²⁵, there was a renewed effort to integrate women into media roles. The international community's support and the new Afghan [constitution](#)²⁶, which enshrined equality between all people, enabled many women to pursue careers in journalism and media. By the 2010s, [women were prominently visible](#)²⁷ on television, radio, and print media, contributing vitally to news reporting, cultural and educational programming, and investigative journalism.

"Women, who were traditionally forced to [live under male](#) domination, were now confronted with a religious extremism that sought to maintain them in submission and the treatment was cruel to an extent that is hard to describe."²⁸

¹⁸ https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-97172-8_2

¹⁹ <https://ojs.revistagesec.org.br/secretariado/article/view/3662>

²⁰ https://www.ijicc.net/images/Vol_14/Iss_8/151012_Tariq_2021_E1_R.pdf

²¹ <https://al-kindipublisher.com/index.php/smic/article/view/6868>

²² <https://ruor.uottawa.ca/items/c144b53a-b4a9-40f3-9ddf-5761c8bf5>

²³ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45181852>

²⁴ <https://core.ac.uk/reader/159344060>

²⁵ https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-1-4039-1840-6_12

²⁶ https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Afghanistan_2004.pdf?lang=en

²⁷ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10304312.2012.630146>

²⁸ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-review-of-the-red-cross/article/abs/an-identity-of-strength-personal-thoughts-on-women-in-afghanistan/4AE1D17E1329607DA3F70D44E56C2AB3>

Notable examples include media outlets like Tolonews, ShamshadTV, and Ariananews, where women played key roles. These developments not only provided a platform for women's voices but also helped to challenge societal norms and inspire younger generations of Afghan women.

However, these gains have been precarious, with the resurgence of the [Taliban in 2021](#)²⁹ posing severe [threats to women](#)'s³⁰ participation in the media. The [current restrictions](#)³¹ starkly contrast with the progress made in previous decades, highlighting the ongoing struggle for gender equality in Afghan media. "As long as the Taliban knows that the West is invisible to support them, the Taliban restrictions list will go up," said Gulnaz Kunduzi, a Local Radio presenter North of the country.

3.2 Media Expansion Post-2001 Period

The incident of the September 11 attacks and the subsequent [U.S. invasion](#)³² of Afghanistan in [2001](#)³³ marked a significant turning point in the country's [media landscape](#)³⁴. This period saw an [unprecedented expansion](#)³⁵ in [media freedom](#),³⁶ supported by international aid and new media laws. "Back in 2001, after a long pause women were able to play an important role alongside men in media activities, again, the voice of a woman was heard as a human being." Kunduzi said³⁷. These changes fostered a vibrant and dynamic media environment, symbolizing [progress and modernization](#)³⁸, particularly through the increased hope of—women's participation in the media.

29

https://books.google.ca/books?hl=en&lr=&id=ZmOtDwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=Taliban+in+2021+&ots=mI0QaKI26c&sig=iknv0g3GRC9hjI-WLyBu-513erg&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=Taliban%20in%202021&f=false

30 <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/675736>

31 <https://www.rferl.org/a/draconian-decrees-taliban-restrictions-afghanistan/32547882.html>

32 <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1575088/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

33 <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/mjss/article/1003949>

34 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0163443708088615>

35

<https://openurl.ebsco.com/EPDB%3Agcd%3A16%3A5803584/detailv2?sid=ebsco%3Aplink%3Ascholar&id=ebsco%3Agcd%3A36527591&crl=c>

36 https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/31423142/Cary_Peter-Afghanistan_-_02-23-12-libre.pdf

37 Kunduzi Interview

38 https://www.khorasanzameen.net/archive/history/n_cullather01.pdf

One of the most notable changes during this period was the increased [participation of women in the media](#)³⁹. This development was not just a sign of media growth but also a broader symbol of societal progress. Women began to appear as reporters, anchors, and even media executives, challenging long-standing cultural norms and gender roles. This shift was significant in a country where women had been systematically excluded from public life under Taliban rule. “The present act against the media is not acceptable not only for women but also for men.”⁴⁰

Prominent female journalists like [Shafiqah Habibi](#)⁴¹ and [Najiba Ayubi](#) became symbols of resilience and change. Najiba Ayubi has been engaged in media work for more than three decades and during this time has faced many problems, enduring a lot of psychological pressure alongside her colleagues. “Yes, it wasn’t easy and it isn’t, but the use of professional skills and adherence to journalistic standards have helped us [to overcome our problems](#)⁴².” They (Prominent female journalists) not only broke gender barriers but also inspired a new generation of women to pursue careers in journalism. As Amiri noted in a recent interview, “After 9/11, the media landscape in Afghanistan reached its peak, even within an extremely conservative and taboo-ridden society.”⁴³ The visibility of women in the media has served as a beacon of hope for gender equality and empowerment, contributing significantly to the social and political development of the country.

Despite the progress after the 9/11 incident, the expansion of media freedom in Afghanistan was not without its challenges, as Ayubi added: “I have faced various threats, but I am determined to continue in this profession⁴⁴,” The media landscape, while vibrant, operated within a context of ongoing instability and cultural conservatism. Journalists, both [male](#)⁴⁵ and female, frequently [faced threats](#)⁴⁶, [intimidation](#)⁴⁷, and [violence](#)⁴⁸. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)

³⁹ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09614520302950>

⁴⁰ Freshta Azizi, Interview

⁴¹ <https://womensenews.org/2002/05/shafiqah-habibi-named-bravery-journalism/>

⁴² <https://yoursosteam.wordpress.com/case-study-afghan-journalist-najiba-ayubis-take-on-the-taliban/>

⁴³ Soraya Amiri, Interview

⁴⁴ <https://yoursosteam.wordpress.com/case-study-afghan-journalist-najiba-ayubis-take-on-the-taliban/>

⁴⁵ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-10-26/afghan-journalists-face-threats-and-beatings-despite-promises/100520424>

⁴⁶ <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghan-women-in-journalism-issues/25195149.html>

⁴⁷ <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-press-freedom-2ff952eb0e3dd95c7d040b6836d77059>

⁴⁸ <https://rsf.org/en/taliban-intelligence-agency-s-arrests-journalists-undermine-press-freedom-afghanistan>

reported numerous [attacks on journalists](#)⁴⁹, highlighting the dangers associated with reporting in a conflict zone.

For women in the media⁵⁰, challenges have been significant and evolving. Between 2001 and August 2021, Societal norms and cultural barriers limited their roles⁵¹ and exposed them to greater risks⁵². It's crucial to distinguish whether these risks were tied to the Taliban's presence post-August 2021 or societal norms between 2001 and 2021.

After the Taliban's return in August 2021, these challenges intensified, with threats now coming from both societal norms and political authorities. making their work perilous⁵³. This climate of fear⁵⁴ led many female journalists to flee⁵⁵ the country⁵⁶, while those who remained⁵⁷ had to navigate a precarious and often hostile environment. Before August 2021, Afghan media made remarkable progress often described as a “golden time”⁵⁸ for media freedom in Afghanistan, characterized by significant progress⁵⁹ and the increased visibility of women in the media.⁶⁰

⁴⁹<https://cpi.org/2024/04/taliban-detain-3-afghan-radio-journalists-for-playing-music-talking-to-female-callers/>

⁵⁰ <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghan-women-journalists/31382287.html>

⁵¹ <https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/39181>

⁵² <https://rsf.org/en/afghanistan-media-landscape-suffocated-repressive-taliban-directives-target-women-particular>

⁵³ https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/afg_Periodic-Briefing-no1_Media_Oct22-s.pdf

⁵⁴ <https://english.elpais.com/international/2024-03-10/journalism-without-women-in-afghanistan-stopping-the-work-of-female-reporters-is-another-form-of-violence-against-us.html>

⁵⁵ <https://zantimes.com/2024/03/25/women-journalists-escape-from-the-taliban-into-a-hellish-life-in-pakistan/>

⁵⁶ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/03064220211068680>

⁵⁷ <https://www.voanews.com/a/female-afghan-journalists-describe-life-under-taliban-misogyny/7248022.html>

⁵⁸ Soraya Amiri, Interview.

⁵⁹ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02634937.2014.902181>

⁶⁰ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14616742.2017.1371623>

4. Media Platforms and Female Visibility Under the Taliban

Before the Taliban's return to power, Afghan media platforms such as Tolonews⁶¹ TV, [ShamshadTV](#),⁶² and [Ariananews](#) played a pivotal role in promoting women's visibility and participation. "Visual media began to develop in Afghanistan, attracting not only young men but also many young women interested in working in the industry."⁶³ For instance, these three media platforms provided "female journalists with opportunities to enhance their skills and gain significant recognition."⁶⁴ "These platforms not only employed female journalists but also elevated their promotions⁶⁵ focusing on women's issues, thereby contributing to a more inclusive media landscape. Women in Afghan media were gaining ground, engaging with the public, and advocating for gender equality through their work.

However, the regained of the Taliban has drastically altered this progressive landscape. "The ruling authorities' restrictions have led to a decrease in women's participation in the media,"⁶⁶ "The few appearances of women on Afghan TV are now at serious risk of disappearing." "The change is drastic. Currently, women's role in the media is virtually non-existent,"⁶⁷ In late February, [Mohammad Khalid](#), the Taliban's Minister for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, convened a meeting with media company owners in Kabul. During this meeting, he issued a stern ultimatum: women working in the media must cover their entire [faces](#)⁶⁸, leaving only their eyes visible. Failure to comply would result in women being banned⁶⁹ from working in the media industry entirely.

⁶¹ <https://www.ares.uz/storage/app/uploads/public/659/533/d28/659533d28e96a159471839.pdf>

⁶² <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-journal-of-middle-east-studies/article/abs/television-and-the-afghan-culture-wars-brought-to-you-by-foreigners-warlords-and-activists-wazhmah-osman-urbana-il-university-of-illinois-press-2020-pp-272-11000-cloth-isbn-9780252043550/CF9C8C55ABB163A1C52AEF5213B8A024>

⁶³ Wazhma Fazli, ex Tolonews reporter, interview.

⁶⁴ Wazhma Fazli, ex Tolonews reporter interview.

⁶⁵ https://jcep.ut.ac.ir/article_91304.html?lang=en

⁶⁶ Wazhma Fazli, ex Tolo news reporter interview.

⁶⁷ Wazhma Fazli, ex Tolo news reporter interview.

⁶⁸ <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/20/1100388409/taliban-female-tv-anchors-cover-faces-order-afghanistan>

⁶⁹ <https://pa.azadiradio.com/a/31973462.html>



FIGURE 4. AUG. 2, 2024 — A FEMALE REPORTER FROM SHAMSHAD TV REPORTS FROM A ROAD CONSTRUCTION SITE IN KABUL, AFGHANISTAN.

This directive⁷⁰ marks a significant regression⁷¹ from the progress made over the past two decades. Since the Taliban regained control in August 2021, the restrictions⁷² on women in the media have been steadily increasing. Women’s participation⁷³ in the media, whether as journalists or sources, has been severely curtailed. Female journalism students are no longer allowed to study their craft at universities.⁷⁴ Additionally, women journalists are banned from attending press conferences, reporting from the scene of events, or interviewing men.” Almost all of the women journalists (90%) have had to leave their jobs and some have fled the country,

⁷⁰ <https://ifex.org/the-talibans-13-directives-implications-for-media-freedom-and-access-to-information-in-afghanistan/>

⁷¹ <https://ifex.org/afghanistan-three-journalists-arrested-for-publishing-music-and-communicating-with-female-listeners/>

⁷² <https://dspace.univ-guelma.dz/jspui/handle/123456789/15546>

⁷³ https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Mohammad-Yousaf-Saddiqi/publication/362209737_The_Working_Conditions_and_Challenges_of_Afghan_Female_Journalists/links/62dbe6c73c7d190316a44337/The-Working-Conditions-and-Challenges-of-Afghan-Female-Journalists.pdf

⁷⁴ <https://j-source.ca/i-was-a-university-student-when-i-fled-kabul-now-i-want-to-help-afghan-journalism-survive/>

although exactly how many have managed to flee is not known.⁷⁵ Those who continue to work in the media are mandated to cover⁷⁶ their faces, significantly limiting their ability to perform their duties effectively.

The impact of these restrictions on female journalists is profound. At least [80 percent](#)⁷⁷ lost their jobs or have been forced into exile to continue their profession safely. The threat of violence and persecution has created an environment of fear and repression. “Women journalists cannot participate in a talk show with men or ask them questions. Because of this, many women journalists were forced to abandon their careers. Many chose to leave the newsroom and to stay at home instead of feeling imprisoned at their desks.”⁷⁸

For instance, some exiled journalists have reported that they face constant threats and intimidation, even outside Afghanistan, for their work and activism.” I will never give up, since I settled into my new place, I started to be a female journalist, as I know that many women are waiting for me.”⁷⁹ The absence of female voices in the media leads to a significant gap in reporting on women’s issues, which are crucial for societal development and progress.” Back in Kabul, there is nobody left to report on women and girls’ issues, which means, this is the end of free press.”⁸⁰ This exclusion perpetuates a cycle of marginalization and silence around women’s experiences and rights.

Moreover, the international community has raised concerns⁸¹ over these developments. Human rights organizations and media watchdogs have condemned the Taliban's actions, urging for the protection and inclusion of women in the media. They argue that the suppression of female⁸² Journalism is a violation of fundamental human rights and freedoms, calling for immediate action to address these injustices.

⁷⁵ <https://rsf.org/en/73-women-journalists-will-spend-8-march-behind-bars>

⁷⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-61541064>

⁷⁷ <https://rsf.org/en/taliban-takeover-40-afghan-media-have-closed-80-women-journalists-have-lost-their-jobs>

⁷⁸ <https://rsf.org/en/afghan-journalism-still-resisting-after-two-years-taliban-persecution>

⁷⁹ Freshta Azizi, ex journalist, now in exile, interviewed.

⁸⁰ Wazhma Fazli, ex Tolo news TV reporter, interviewed.

⁸¹ https://unwlobstorage.blob.core.windows.net/csw/4beb3a1d-2301-47e6-b021-a7f628101748_Concept%20note.%20Side%20event.%20Afghan%20Women%20Journalists%20Under%20the%20Taliban.pdf

⁸² <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/afghanistan-87-of-women-journalists-have-suffered-discrimination-under-taliban-rule>



FIGURE 5. A FEMALE AFGHAN JOURNALIST WAS REPORTEDLY STOPPED FROM TAKING PICTURES DURING A WOMEN’S DEMONSTRATION IN AFGHANISTAN.

The situation for women in Afghan media has drastically deteriorated under the Taliban's rule. The strict mandates imposed by the [continue](#)⁸³, not only hinder the professional work of female journalists but also contribute to the broader suppression of women's rights in the country. “The international community must continue to advocate for the rights of Afghan women and support efforts to restore their presence and participation in the media.” Said Bushra Osman, a former Afghan journalist, who worked on a TV channel as a reporter. “The voices of Afghan women are crucial for the country's progress and must not be silenced.”⁸⁴

5. Three Major Outlets Snapshots:

5.1 Tolonews/Tolo-TV

Afghanistan's first 24-hour news network, which delivers breaking news, and in-depth reports, and encourages political discourse. Before the Taliban seized power in 2021, [TOLONews/ Tolo-TV](#) “was known among many for meeting the nation's demand for fast, credible, and reliable information,”⁸⁵ broadcasting on TV, online, and social media. Before the Taliban takeover, the

⁸³<https://afjc.media/english/index.php/killed/the-taliban-s-13-directives-on-freedom-of-media-and-access-to-information>

⁸⁴ Bushra Osman, ex journalist, interview.

⁸⁵ Unnamed source within Tolonews, Interview.

media in Afghanistan experienced incredible achievements⁸⁶ and steady growth from 2001 to 2021, despite persistent insecurity⁸⁷. This growth was bolstered by relatively generous international funding.⁸⁸

As an extension of TOLO-TV, TOLONews is trusted for its apolitical format and comprehensive coverage of Afghanistan's political, cultural, and regional interests. It frequently breaks stories that gain regional and international attention, reaching audiences in remote provinces and the global Afghan diaspora from the Middle east to Europe.

"TOLONews, is a reliable and reputable source of news, has been my go-to for updates during the last decades of insecurity in the country. After each bombing incident in Kabul, I turn to TOLONews to find out what happened."⁸⁹

Over the years, with substantial financial support from donors, TOLONews has produced remarkable programs that include women. For example, the show "Black and White" (translated to "Seyah wa Safed" in Dari) featured prominent elites and key figures such as former Afghan Presidents Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani. This platform allowed people to ask any type of questions, something that women under Taliban rule in Afghanistan are not permitted to do. A source, who wished to remain anonymous, provided this information for the research. "Our female colleagues collapsed as Ghani's government did in a shorter time frame when he made a joke."⁹⁰

According to the source, TOLONews had talented journalists, many of whom left the country, while a few remaining had to quit [their jobs](#) due to ongoing restrictions. "It's incredibly challenging for female journalists to survive in such conditions." With the largest newsroom in the country, TOLONews employs hundreds of professionals across all provinces of Afghanistan. It was established in 2010, it broadcasts in Dari and Pashto and offers content in English on its website www.tolonews.com.

5.2 Shamshad TV

[ShamshadNews](#) Television Network stands as the premier Pashto TV channel in Afghanistan, According to Shamshad TV's [Youtube](#) channel it caters to the majority of the Pashtun Population, accounting for 85% of the audience. It offers a diverse range of programming,

⁸⁶ <https://www.cceol.com/search/article-detail?id=1034523>

⁸⁷ <https://www.indianjournals.com/ijor.aspx?target=ijor:ijpss&volume=3&issue=7&article=029>

⁸⁸ <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/60996b757eb6521a42f3839d/t/625e79f09943b93cd4970cd6/1650358789023/Afghanistan+Media+Landscape+Guide+En-CDAC.pdf>

⁸⁹ Gul meina, ex Afghan diplomat, interview.

⁹⁰ Sadaf Afghan, Tolonews employee, interview.

including educational shows, news, music programs, women's empowerment programs, religious content, and political discussions. Furthermore, Shamshad TV is accessible across various regions, spanning the Middle East, Central, South, and West Asia, Africa, Europe, and Australia. In 2017, Shamshad's TV channel was targeted in an attack, later claimed by ISIS.⁹¹

An anonymous source within Shamshad TV revealed that following the Taliban's assumption of power, programs featuring women were banned. For instance, during the two celebrations of Eid 2023, the TV channel used to invite singers, but women were prohibited from unveiling their faces and participating. Additionally, after the Taliban tightened their restrictions, “even news presenters were required to [wear masks](#) and were not allowed to [attend news conferences](#).”⁹² This crackdown has led to the loss of professional female journalists at the TV station. Moreover, “many families are now hesitant to allow their daughters to pursue careers as reporters.” Consequently, the source added that the industry is facing a bleak future with the risk of losing its female talent and eventually fading away.⁹³ Including so many financial challenges, another significant obstacle is “the access to information. Some information from official sources needs to be double-checked before being disseminated, which raises questions about the freedom of the press.”⁹⁴

5.3 Ariana Television Network (ATN) ArianaNews

Ariana Television Network (ATN), so-called [Ariananews](#) is a privately owned television and radio network headquartered in Kabul, Afghanistan. Established in 2005, ATN stands as the largest media network in the country. With a focus on preserving Afghanistan's traditions and culture, ATN delivers a wide range of informative, entertaining, and educational content. “Our coverage areas such as education, Islam, health, sports, and children's content,”⁹⁵ Shah Jan, a program assistant at Ariananews said, “We take pride in delivering accurate and impartial news to our audience in real-time, without any affiliation to political entities or destabilizing elements within Afghanistan.”

⁹¹ <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/afghanistan-gunmen-storm-tv-station-shamshad/28839767.html>

⁹² <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-183803>

⁹³ Ruqia Shariati, an employee, interviewed.

⁹⁴ Ruqia Shariati, an employee, interviewed.

⁹⁵ Shah Jan, programs assistant, Ariananews, Interview.



FIGURE 6. THE TALIBAN’S NEW BAN ON YELLOW TAXIS AND PRIVATE CARS DISRUPTS TRANSPORTATION IN KABUL. (FRESHTA AZIMI, ARIANA TV, AUGUST 9, 2024)

Ariananews's broadcasting services cover all 34 provinces of Afghanistan, "A Window to a Brighter Future," suggests an opportunity or opening through and reaching over 34 million viewers daily. "After the Taliban seized power, my co-workers and I had to take risks to survive and access accurate information." otherwise, "for a woman working in TV, it is a total taboo."⁹⁶

6. Ends to Free and Independent Media

Free and independent media⁹⁷ are vital⁹⁸ For any functioning democracy, in the case of Afghanistan, over the past 20 years, the media and free press in Afghanistan have been instrumental in shaping the nation's narrative amidst relentless conflict, profound political shifts, and significant social upheaval where—visibility of women in media is taboo. "The media role has surpassed mere reporting, serving as a beacon of truth, accountability, and education in a

⁹⁶ Shah Jan, programs assistant, ATN, Interview.

⁹⁷ <https://dspace.cuni.cz/handle/20.500.11956/46938>

⁹⁸ <https://openurl.ebsco.com/EPDB%3Agcd%3A1%3A20543249/detailv2?sid=ebsco%3Aplink%3Ascholar&id=ebsco%3Agcd%3A36527591&crl=c>

turbulent environment.”⁹⁹ Through women's courageous efforts, they have given a voice to the marginalized, exposed [corruption, chronicled](#) the harsh realities of unrest, and fostered a more informed and [engaged society](#).¹⁰⁰ “We had the presence of women in many segments of the media.”¹⁰¹

The media's steadfast presence has not only documented Afghanistan's struggles but also its resilience and aspirations for a better future. It serves as a check on power and a conduit for diverse voices. However, the landscape for women journalists and TV presenters¹⁰², particularly in Afghanistan, has been fraught with [challenges](#), exemplified by the oppressive [restrictions](#)¹⁰³ imposed by the Taliban. Despite these obstacles, women in the media have persisted, advocating for their right to report and cover events in Afghanistan. “They [women] broke taboos by their presence and by accepting many challenges, efforts hard to make the space conducive for other women to engage in media activities.”¹⁰⁴

“Here and now, we fear for the safety of media workers, in particular women and minority journalists...women journalists being able to work and a dialogue on how to strengthen freedom of expression, will remain intact,” said Jesper Højberg, director of IMS (International Media Support)¹⁰⁵

The Taliban's return to power brought renewed concerns for the safety and [freedom of journalists](#).¹⁰⁶ especially women. The Taliban's restrictive rules campaign severely curtails women's rights and freedoms, including their ability to work outside the home and participate in public life. “Bit by bit, all public spaces get closed off to women.”¹⁰⁷ Journalists, particularly women, face heightened risks of violence, beating¹⁰⁸, intimidation, and [censorship](#).

⁹⁹ Sofia Hadmal(pseudonym), interview

¹⁰⁰ <https://ejournal.uit-lirboyo.ac.id/index.php/tribakti/article/view/4418>

¹⁰¹ Soraya Amiri, ex Tolonews, interview

¹⁰²https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Mohammad-Yousaf-Saddiqi/publication/362209737_The_Working_Conditions_and_Challenges_of_Afghan_Female_Journalists/links/62dbe6c73c7d190316a44337/The-Working-Conditions-and-Challenges-of-Afghan-Female-Journalists.pdf

¹⁰³<https://zantimes.com/2024/03/18/how-taliban-restrictions-on-women-and-media-are-crushing-women-journalists/>

¹⁰⁴ Soraya Amiri, ex Tolonews, interview.

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.mediasupport.org/news/protect-afghanistans-journalists/>

¹⁰⁶<https://rsf.org/en/four-journalists-arrested-two-tv-channels-closed-latest-taliban-crackdown-afghan-media>

¹⁰⁷<https://msmagazine.com/2024/04/16/taliban-canadian-women-for-women-in-afghanistan/>

¹⁰⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58500579>

In the face of such adversity, women journalists and TV presenters have shown incredible resilience and bravery. "Many brave women have been arrested, detained, and even beaten, but they never stop fighting for their rights and free media."¹⁰⁹ Their determination to keep reporting despite the threats highlights the essential role of a free and independent media in amplifying marginalized voices and holding those in power accountable. As Freshta Azizi once stated, "This is a systematic dismantling of free media by the Taliban. They don't believe in democracy, and this is a gradual process to stop independent media in the country." The situation marks the end of press freedom in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, where any media that criticizes them is no longer tolerated.¹¹⁰

According to Shabir Hussain, PhD in Media Studies at Bahria University Pakistan¹¹¹, "I think a tough road is ahead. Women in journalism will find it very hard to operate in the field." He further explains, "Taliban resistance is one issue, but bad economic conditions leading to the closure of media houses and hence lesser opportunities, along with the chaos and disruption in society, are contributing to a significant brain drain."

6.1 Taliban's media regime

Afghanistan's history is rife with political instability and social turmoil, often characterized by struggles over access to information. "During the era of the Republic, the introduction of new mass media laws and policies created substantial opportunities for women journalists" (Participant in Focus Group Discussion, Balkh Province). However, the Taliban's resurgence has undone these significant advancements. "A series of edicts has drastically limited access to information, particularly for women. Women have become almost invisible in the media, facing stringent dress codes and other severe restrictions."¹¹²

Over the last two decades, the media played a crucial role in driving social change by promoting equality and social inclusion. Consequently, "Women journalists were able to address and challenge the widespread issues of domestic violence, gender disparities in health, education, marriage and overall gender discrimination in all 34 provinces of the country."¹¹³

After the US and its allies swiftly left Kabul on August 15, 2021, the Taliban's return to power marked a significant shift in the country's media landscape. Following their swift takeover, "the

¹⁰⁹ Freshta Azizi, ex TV anchor, Interview.

¹¹⁰ Freshta Azizi, ex TV anchor, Interview.

¹¹¹ Shabir Hussain, PhD in Media Studies at Bahria University, Pakistan, Interview.

¹¹² Sawba Ahmady, participant in Focus Group Discussion, Balkh Province.

¹¹³ Jajla Nilofar, participant in Focus Group Discussion, Balkh Province.

Taliban moved quickly to exert control over the media, aiming to shape public perception and suppress dissent.”¹¹⁴

According to Shabir Hussain¹¹⁵The Taliban follow different ideologies and do not believe in democracy and free media. This lack of belief in free media is not unique to the Taliban; all governments have their red lines. The Taliban do not allow criticism because they feel it would endanger their existence in Afghanistan. “Women journalists are not allowed because it contradicts their political and sociocultural values, which is a negation of free media.”¹¹⁶

Initially, the Taliban attempted to project a more moderate image compared to their previous rule in 1996-2001. “They (The Taliban) held press conferences, engaged with local and international media, and assured journalists of their safety, pledging that the media would remain free within the bounds of Islamic law and Afghan cultural values.”¹¹⁷ However, these assurances soon proved hollow. The Taliban's media control strategy involved a mix of direct and indirect measures. “Directly, they imposed strict regulations on content, censoring material deemed un-Islamic or contrary to their interpretation of Sharia law.”¹¹⁸ This led to the immediate shutdown of many television channels, radio stations, and news outlets, especially those that promoted women's rights or pro-Western values.

¹¹⁴ Jajla Nilofar, participant in Focus Group Discussion, Balkh Province.

¹¹⁵Shabir Hussain, PhD in Media Studies at Bahria University, Pakistan, Interview.

¹¹⁶ Shabir Hussain, PhD in Media Studies at Bahria University, Pakistan, Interview.

¹¹⁷Sawba Ahmady, participant in Focus Group Discussion, Balkh Province.

¹¹⁸Unnamed, Participant in Focus Group Discussion, Kabul province.



FIGURE 6. ATIQULLAH AZIZI, DEPUTY MINISTER OF CULTURAL AND INFORMATION AFFAIRS, ISLAMIC EMIRATE 2023: TALIBAN’S CELEBRATION OF WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY, EXCLUDING FEMALE JOURNALISTS.

Many media outlets faced financial difficulties due to the withdrawal of international aid and advertising revenue. “Indirectly, the Taliban leveraged economic pressures to control media narratives.”¹¹⁹ [The Taliban used social media platforms to disseminate propaganda](#), presenting a controlled narrative of stability and governance. “The Taliban monitored and [censored](#) online content, [targeting activists and journalists critical of their regime](#).”¹²⁰

Independent journalism was stifled, and fear of retribution led to widespread self-censorship among the remaining media professionals. “This not only restricted the flow of information and female journalists within Afghanistan but also hindered the global community's understanding of the ground realities in the war-torn nation.”¹²¹ Despite the Taliban's ongoing restrictions on women journalists and their systematic exclusion from the media scene, meetings took place between Taliban officials and the remaining journalists to discuss potential improvements in the information landscape. According to Hayatullah Mahajer Farahi, Deputy of the Ministry of Information and Culture, who was recruited in August 2022 the directorate aims to enhance journalists' access to information. “Efforts are in progress to furnish journalists with timely information through seminars scheduled across various ministries, independent agencies, and

¹¹⁹Unnamed, Participant in Focus Group Discussion, Kabul province.

¹²⁰Unnamed, Participant in Focus Group Discussion, Kabul province.

¹²¹Unnamed, Participant in Focus Group Discussion, Kabul province.

provinces.”¹²² However, Shabir Hussain commented on the situation, stating, "The conservative ideas hamper women's participation in public life."

6.2 Measuring Women’s Visibility and Dress Codes

The decline in female journalists in Afghanistan can be attributed to various factors such as lack of job security, censorship, detention, and torture. Mandatory hijab coverage, coupled with limited access to firsthand information, further exacerbates the challenges faced by women in the media.¹²³ Arbitrary detentions and gender discrimination only compound these issues, making it increasingly difficult for female journalists to thrive in their profession. Moreover, severe security concerns for both female journalists and their families loom large, contributing to the overall decline in their numbers.

Assessing women's visibility in Afghan media necessitates a comprehensive examination of their presence in key roles. This includes not only journalists but also editors, producers, presenters, leaders, and CEOs. “By measuring women's representation over multiple roles, we(women) gain insight into the extent of gender diversity and inclusion within the media landscape.”¹²⁴

The Taliban's imposition of strict dress codes on female journalists, as documented by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), “has tightened the dress restrictions for women journalists by ordering them to wear black covering revealing only their eyes, on pain of being banned from working.”¹²⁵

Requiring women to wear black garments that conceal their entire bodies, save for their eyes, “is not only a form of gender-based discrimination but also a means of exerting control over the media landscape.”¹²⁶ As the RSF highlights, such measures have far-reaching implications, stifling freedom of expression and perpetuating a climate of fear and self-censorship among journalists.

In a Focus Group Discussion, Kamela Jahani¹²⁷, a participant from Kabul, pointed out that measuring women's visibility is not just about being seen in media outlets; it's about being heard,

¹²² <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/provincial-189102>

¹²³ Gulnaz Kunduzi, ex reporter, Interview.

¹²⁴ Freshata Azizi, Ex TV reporter, in exile, Interview.

¹²⁵ <https://rsf.org/en/afghanistan-media-landscape-suffocated-repressive-taliban-directives-target-women-particular#:~:text=More%20broadly%2C%20at%20national%20level,of%20being%20banned%20from%20working.>

¹²⁶ Freshata Azizi, Ex TV reporter, in exile, Interview.

¹²⁷ Kamela Jahani, Participated in Focus Group Discussion, Kabul.

understood, and respected. She remarked, "Even though I'm still working as a TV anchor, wearing an unnecessary mask feels like I can't breathe. If I stop my job, none of my family members can take on the financial responsibility. Facing such undefined severe dress codes, where no media law exists, access to accurate sources is impossible. Women are not allowed to sit with males for interviews. Journalism is nothing." Covering issues like "insecurity, human rights, and corruption"¹²⁸ are off-limits, said a Kabul-based editor who works for a major broadcaster.

Enforced dress codes for female journalists have broader repercussions beyond appearance, affecting media content. Threats of censorship and reprisals force journalists to self-censor, steering clear of sensitive or controversial topics. This self-censorship compromises journalistic integrity, depriving the public of accurate and unbiased information.¹²⁹

According to sources, the Taliban have imposed new dress codes.¹³⁰ Female reporters are not allowed to interview women without a proper hijab. All female news presenters must wear masks, otherwise, they will risk severe consequences, including the shutdown of media outlets. Compared to a few years ago, when women were fully free and there was a democratic environment for Afghan women to practice journalism, "the visibility of women is diminishing day by day."¹³¹ As the Taliban's restrictions continue, they (The Taliban) have recently intensified their actions by suspending two media outlets¹³² and arresting several journalists. "We can't compare our current media landscape with the previous one, where we had a uniquely freer press in the region."¹³³

¹²⁸<https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-taliban-press-freedom-journalists-media/32925395.html>

¹²⁹ Kamela Jahani, Participated in Focus Group Discussion, Kabul.
<https://afjc.media/english/index.php/events/press-release/taliban-s-acting-minister-of-vice-and-virtue-alerts-media-of-potential-ban-on-women-s-work>

¹³⁰<https://www.afghanwitness.org/reports/taliban-issues-further-restrictions-on-afghan-female-journalists-in-tv-and-radio>

¹³¹ Shah Jan, programs assistant, ATN, Interview.

¹³²<https://www.afghanwitness.org/reports/media-environment%3A-two-outlets-suspended-and-other-journalists-arrested>

¹³³ Shah Jan, programs assistant, ATN, Interview.

Conclusion

The resurgence of the Taliban has dealt a severe blow to the visibility and involvement of women in Afghan media, resulting in a notable decline in their numbers and presence. Female journalists are confronted with job losses, constraints, and threats, precipitating a concerning trend. This regression not only undermines the media's capacity to advocate for reform and accountability but also poses a long-term threat to gender equality within the industry. The media landscape finds itself at a critical juncture, contending with myriad obstacles and uncertainties in the wake of the Taliban's return to power.

The Taliban's imposition of stringent dress codes on female journalists carries significant repercussions, perpetuating gender-based discrimination and curtailing freedom of expression. This, in turn, hampers the ability of female journalists to fulfill their roles effectively, leading to self-censorship and a diminished flow of accurate and reliable information to the public. With the Taliban's resurgence, the media industry faces substantial constraints, characterized by pervasive censorship and self-censorship as journalists and media outlets navigate a precarious terrain of permissible content. Instances of threats, intimidation, and violence against media personnel have fostered an atmosphere of fear.

Addressing these challenges necessitates immediate international support and intervention to safeguard the strides made in media freedom and gender equality over the past two decades. The significant headway achieved by Afghan women in media roles prior to the Taliban's revival underscores the imperative of sustained advocacy efforts. The voices of Afghan women are indispensable for the nation's progress and must not be stifled. Therefore, the international community must rally behind initiatives aimed at reinstating women's presence and engagement in Afghan media, ensuring their continued visibility and contributions.

The pervasive climate of fear has precipitated a mass exodus of skilled journalists, stifling investigative journalism—a cornerstone of accountability—and resulting in a dearth of impartial information, thereby leaving citizens uninformed. The closure of media outlets has had far-reaching ramifications, including restricted information dissemination, curtailed free speech, and diminished content diversity. Notably, a glaring disparity in media freedom persists between Kabul and the provinces, where female journalists are notably absent, underscoring entrenched gender disparities within the field.

In Afghanistan's evolving media landscape, the absence of robust legal frameworks has exacerbated existing challenges. The suspension of critical laws, such as the Mass Media Law and the Access to Information Law, during the transitional phase has left media professionals in legal limbo. Inclusive consultations with media stakeholders are imperative to shape these laws effectively.

It is evident that safeguarding the media's role as a conduit between the government and the people is paramount. Collaborative endeavors involving the Taliban, the international community, and media support organizations are essential to avert the collapse of Afghanistan's media landscape. Moving forward, addressing ongoing challenges and fostering an environment

conducive to media growth, diversity, and transparency are imperative. This entails establishing adaptable legal frameworks, implementing gender-inclusive policies, and steadfastly upholding press freedom. Only through such concerted efforts can Afghanistan's media reclaim its vibrancy, empowering citizens and enabling well-informed participation in the nation's future.

Annex: Interview Questions

1. How has the Taliban's return to power affected your role as a female journalist?
2. How would you describe the visibility of female journalists in Afghanistan before the Taliban regained power in Kabul?
3. Can you share any specific experiences or observations regarding the roles and contributions of female journalists in the Afghan media landscape prior to the Taliban's resurgence, considering factors such as the requirement for female journalists to wear/cover their whole body excluding their eyes while conducting interviews with males?
4. Since the Taliban takeover, have you noticed any significant changes in the visibility or representation of female journalists in Afghanistan?
5. In your opinion, what factors have contributed to the increased or decreased visibility of female journalists following the Taliban's return to power?
6. How do you think the current media environment under Taliban rule has impacted the ability of female journalists to work and be visible in Afghanistan?
7. Have there been any notable initiatives or efforts to support and amplify the voices of female journalists in Afghanistan amidst the new political realities?
8. Looking ahead, what do you envision for the future of female journalists in Afghanistan, considering the challenges and opportunities they face in the current context?