

## **Afghan women, Afghanistan**

The rapid seizure of Afghanistan, including its capital, Kabul, by Taliban forces in August 2021 raised grave fears of a return to patterns of human rights violations previously witnessed in the country under Taliban rule, from 1996 to 2001. The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan poses a particular threat to women's rights and freedoms. Even after 2001, violence against women and girls had continued on a large scale and remained chronically under-reported, but after the Taliban hastily barred all women from participation in government upon their return to power, the situation has degraded further.

The group of 11 prominent Afghan women nominated for the Sakharov Prize have been actively engaged in the fight for their rights, education and inclusion in the construction of Afghan society. They played a part in the political and associative life of Afghanistan under the previous regime and had established strong reputations for their activism in favour of women's rights. These women come from different ethnic backgrounds, but are united in their mutual cause of defending human rights, in particular the rights of women, focusing on the political, educational, civil and cultural spheres.

Shaharзад Akbar is the Chair of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission and was previously Country Director for Open Society Afghanistan, a non-profit organisation that supports Afghan civil society and media in peacebuilding, human rights and promoting tolerance.

Mary Akrami is the head of the Afghan Women's Network. She championed women's rights politically and practically, for instance by establishing the first women's shelters in Afghanistan.

Zarifa Ghafari is the first woman to become mayor in the province of Wardak, in the town of Maidan Shar. She was awarded the International Women of Courage (IWOC) Award in 2020 for staying in office despite death threats. In August 2021, she arrived in Germany where she has continued her fight for human rights in Afghanistan.

Palwasha Hassan is the director of the Afghan Women's Educational Centre. She is a long-time activist with more than 15 years of experience in women's development and empowerment projects.

Freshta Karim was only 23 when she launched a mobile library on a bus that tours the countryside. She is one of the Afghan women who had gone back to help Afghanistan after studying abroad at Oxford University.

Sahraa Karimi, the first female president of the Afghan state film company, is also the director of the award-nominated film *Hava, Maryam, Ayesha* (2019). After fleeing Afghanistan, she has continued her campaign for the protection of Afghan filmmakers and women in general.

Metra Mehran is the co-founder of the Feminine Perspectives Movement, and was working with the Women's Scholarship Endowment programme, providing scholarships for women to pursue their education.

Horia Mosadiq had to leave Afghanistan because of her activism but she has continued to work for human rights and women's rights from abroad.

Sima Samar, Afghanistan's former Minister of Women's Affairs, received the Right Livelihood Award in 2012 for 'her longstanding and courageous dedication to human rights, especially the rights of women, in one of the most complex and dangerous regions in the world.'

Habiba Sarab was Minister of Women's Affairs from 2002 to 2004. In 2005 she became the first woman to be appointed as governor of Bamyan province, while at the same time continuing her activist work training girls and immigrant women in Pakistani camps.

Anisa Shaheed began her career as a political reporter, covering stories on human rights, security and the country's political situation. In 2020 she received a prize from Reporters Without Borders (Sakharov Prize laureates in 2005) recognising her as one of 30 international 'information heroes'.

The European Parliament has recognised the plight of Afghan women and in September 2021 it adopted a resolution in which it called for a special visa programme for Afghan women seeking protection.