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Afghanistan: Survivors of gender-based violence abandoned following Taliban takeover – new research

Essential services for women and girl survivors of gender-based violence in Afghanistan have been decimated following the Taliban's takeover of the country, Amnesty International said today.

In 26 new interviews, survivors and service providers told Amnesty International that the Taliban closed shelters and released detainees from prison, including many convicted of gender-based violence offences.

Many survivors – as well as shelter staff, lawyers, judges, government officials, and others involved in protective services – are now at risk of violence and death.

“Women and girl survivors of gender-based violence have essentially been abandoned in Afghanistan. Their network of support has been dismantled, and their places of refuge have all but disappeared,” said Agnès Callamard, Amnesty International's Secretary General.

“It defies belief that the Taliban threw open prison doors across the country, with no thought of the risks that convicted perpetrators pose to the women and girls they victimized, and to those who worked on survivors' behalf.

“To protect women and girls from further violence, the Taliban must allow and support the reopening of shelters and the restoration of other protective services for survivors, reinstate the Ministry of Women's Affairs, and ensure that service providers can work freely and without fear of retaliation.”

Amnesty International is calling on the international community to provide immediate and long-term funding for such protective services, evacuate survivors and service providers facing imminent danger, and urge the Taliban to uphold their obligations to women and girls, particularly those who survive or are at risk of gender-based violence.

On 26 and 29 November, Taliban spokesperson Suhail Shaheen told Amnesty International via telephone: “There is no place for violence against women and girls, according to the rules of Islam... The women facing domestic violence can be referred to the courts, and the courts will hear their cases... and their grievances will be addressed.”

Amnesty International interviewed survivors and individuals involved in protective services in the provinces of Badghis, Bamiyan, Daikundi, Herat, Kabul, Kunduz, Nangarhar, Paktika, Sar-e Pul, and Takhar.

Collapse of the system

Before the Taliban's takeover, many women and girl survivors had access to a nationwide network of shelters and services, including pro-bono legal representation, medical treatment, and psychosocial support.

Survivors were referred into the system from provincial and capital offices of the Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Human Rights Commission, as well as from shelters, hospitals, and police stations across the country.

The system was [far from perfect](#), but served thousands of women each year in Afghanistan, where nine out of 10 women experience at least one form of intimate partner violence in their lifetime, [according to UNAMA](#).

According to service providers, the most common cases of gender-based violence involved beating, rape, other forms of physical and sexual violence, and forced marriage. Survivors often needed urgent medical treatment.

One service provider who was based in Nangargar said: “[The cases] were very extreme. We had a case where a man took the nails off his wife’s fingers... [One] man took a crowbar and peeled off his wife’s skin... There was one woman who faced a lot of abuse from her family. She couldn’t even use the bathroom anymore.”

As the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, the system of protective services collapsed. Shelters were closed, and many were looted and appropriated by members of the Taliban. In some cases, Taliban members harassed or threatened staff.

My brother is my enemy, and my husband is my enemy

*Zeenat**

As shelters closed, staff were forced to send many women and girl survivors back to their families, and other survivors were forcibly removed by family members. Other survivors were forced to live with shelter staff members, on the street, or in other unsustainable situations.

Zeenat* was regularly beaten by her husband and brother before she took refuge in a shelter. When the Taliban arrived, she and several other women fled. They are now in hiding. She said: “We came only with the clothes we were wearing. We don’t have a heater, and we go to sleep hungry... My brother is my enemy, and my husband is my enemy. If he sees me and my children, he’ll kill us... I am sure they are looking for me because they know the shelter has closed.”

One shelter director, currently in hiding with some survivors from her shelter, told Amnesty International: “We don’t have a proper place. We can’t go out. We are so scared... Please bring us out of here. If not, then you can wait for us to be killed.”

Perpetrators freed

As the Taliban advanced, they also systematically released detainees from prisons, many of whom had been convicted of gender-based violence offenses. Testimony from witnesses and others with first-hand knowledge, as well as [credible media reporting](#), indicate that members of the Taliban were responsible. A Taliban spokesperson denied this to Amnesty International, insisting the previous government had opened prisons.

A legal professional who specializes in gender-based violence said she had been involved in the conviction of more than 3,000 perpetrators of gender-based violence in the year preceding the Taliban’s takeover.

She said: “Wherever [the Taliban] went, they freed the prisoners... Can you imagine? More than 3,000 released, in all the provinces of Afghanistan, in one month.”

Amnesty International also received credible reports that survivors have also been transferred by the Taliban into the detention system, including to Pul-e-Charkhi prison, near Kabul.

Protectors now in need of protection

Many working within the system of protective services said that although they faced significant risks before the Taliban’s takeover, their lives are now in greater danger, and they are in desperate need of protection.

One service provider who was based in Badghis explained: “All of these women who worked on this [the support system] – now we need a shelter... We live each day in anxiety and fear.”

A service provider who was based in Nangarhar said: “I am getting threats from the Taliban, ISIS, perpetrators and the family members... on a daily basis.”

Another service provider who was based in Bamiyan said: “I was getting three calls each day from men who had escaped the prison. After I received a call from the Taliban as well, I switched to a new number.”

These women were devastated to see the system they had painstakingly built collapse. A former judge told Amnesty International: “For 20 years, I was working to build everything from scratch – pushing, running, from this office to that office. I was trying to convince everyone, so that we have a framework in place to protect women... It takes a lot of courage, a lot of sacrifice and energy to build something from nothing – and then it becomes nothing again.”

“We are not safe anywhere anymore”

There is nowhere to turn for women and girls who have faced violence since the Taliban's takeover. One psychologist who worked with gender-based violence survivors in Kabul told Amnesty International: "The Taliban doesn't have any procedure of how to deal with these cases."

A prosecutor for cases involving gender-based violence explained: "In the past, women could go to the Ministry of Women's Affairs. They could go alone and report their case. But now that women are not allowed to go anywhere without a *mahram* [male guardian], this will make it really complicated."

Fariha* was regularly beaten by her husband and his relatives. She said: "[My husband] would pick up whatever he could find, and he would hit me with it... Whenever he beat me, his family would get together and watch... It happened almost every day... The first time he beat me with a wire... I had bruises all over my body. My hands and my nails were scratched, all of them. After that, he beat me from my waist down only. He'd tell me, 'I will hit you in these places [your genitals and buttocks] that won't be seen'."

Fariha was nine months pregnant when she spoke to Amnesty International, and desperately seeking a safe place to live. She added: "Before, there was a shelter, and I went to that place. I requested that they take me in. They said it's not running now, and we can't accept any new cases... There are no options for me."

Adilia* was forced to marry an 80-year-old man at age seven. She said: "I spent a year living with him, and he beat me every single day, saying, 'Why are you not getting pregnant?'"

Adilia fled, but was remarried and regularly subjected to beating and other forms of violence and abuse by her second husband and his relatives. When she spoke with Amnesty International, she had recently been transferred to one of the few shelters still in operation in Afghanistan.

She said: "We are very scared now... For how long are we going to stay? The Taliban came to the shelter at 12am, at 1am, and many times during the day. We told [them] this is a safe place for us, but they wouldn't believe us... We are not safe anywhere anymore."

Methodology

From 26 October to 24 November 2021, Amnesty International conducted telephone interviews with six survivors and 20 individuals involved in the system of protective services, including shelter directors and staff, prosecutors, judges, psychologists, doctors, and representatives of the Ministry of Women's Affairs.

Amnesty International also interviewed 18 local activists, journalists, representatives of NGOs and the United Nations, and other experts on gender-based violence in Afghanistan.

Note: *Names have been changed to protect identities.

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Narrowing access to supportive services for women and girls who survived gender-based violence

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