



Annual Report 2023: State of Human Rights Defenders in Afghanistan

The Safety and Risk Mitigation Organization (SRMO)

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Introduction

This report provides an overview of the state of Human Rights Defenders and civic space in Afghanistan in the year 2023. Since becoming the de facto authorities governing Afghanistan, the Taliban has imposed a brutal clampdown on Afghans' fundamental human rights and civil liberties. The vibrant civil society and media landscape that emerged between 2001 and 2021 has been decimated. Women/ Human Rights Defenders (W/HRDs), Civil Society Activists (CSAs) and media workers have been the most vocal opponents of the Taliban's authoritarian rule and as a result these groups have been targeted with harassment, beatings, detentions, disappearances and even killings.

SRMO's key focus is on monitoring civic space and documenting human rights abuses against W/HRDs and CSAs. However, given the scale of the human rights crisis that followed the Taliban's armed takeover of the country in August 2021, and the limited capacity of civil society organisations (CSOs) to cover the extent of the abuses taking place, SRMO also monitors, documents and reports on key trends in the broader human rights situation.

2023 Key Statistics

Number of Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) and close relatives detained: 29
Number of WHRD relatives killed: 2
Number of HRDs detained: 2
Number of CSAs detained: 17
Number of CSAs killed: 3
Number of media workers detained: 37
Number of media workers beaten: 5
Number of university professors detained: 13

In addition to detailing the extent of abuses targeting civil society, this report therefore highlights several other key areas of concern. These include the dire situation for women and girls, abuses committed against civilians the Taliban accuse of involvement in or sympathy for resistance activities, ongoing reprisals against people who worked for the previous government, and widespread abuses of power such as fatal shootings at checkpoints. Drawing on all of these findings, the report ends by providing SRMO's recommendations to the international community.

Methodology

This 2023 Annual Report is based on SRMO's monitoring and documentation of abuses targeting members of civil society from January to December 2023. Unless otherwise specified, the data contained in the report comes from SRMO's database.

SRMO maintains a database of incidents, in which cases are only entered if they have been verified by SRMO staff. SRMO uses a variety of primary and secondary sources to gather information about human rights abuses and verify reported incidents. In addition to media and social media monitoring, SRMO is regularly in touch with a wide network of civil society

activists and media workers around the country through which it verifies information and conducts additional research.

SRMO's Early Warning System, which was developed prior to the Taliban takeover, has also facilitated the regular and systematic monitoring of incidents affecting civil society, with over 300 Afghans in regular contact with the organization to share information about cases and the deteriorating operating environment for W/HRDs and CSOs.

A note on the figures used in the report

It is important to note that the cases documented below likely represent a small proportion of the total number. SRMO believes that the exact number of incidents is much higher. Intimidation and repression targeting civil society, restrictions placed on some women activists by their families, poor infrastructure in rural provinces (e.g. frequent power cuts and poor mobile network coverage), and heavy restrictions on media reporting have together severely limited the documentation and reporting of incidents.

In many instances, victims and their family members are too fearful to report cases or speak out about the abuses they have suffered. Often victims of arbitrary detentions and abuses in detention have been forced to sign statements in exchange for their release, stating that they would not speak out or reveal the details of the violations to the media or human rights organizations. Nevertheless, the data recorded by SRMO provides an indication of the patterns and trends of abuse that members of civil society suffer due to their peaceful work.

Political and civic context

2023 was characterized by the deepening stranglehold of the de facto authorities over all aspects of political, public and civic life. Supreme Leader of the Taliban and head of the de facto authorities Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada remained unseen in Kandahar, from where he rules by decree. Taliban spokesmen occasionally report on meetings that he has had with officials but there is no public information about his day to day activities; decision-making within the de facto administration is a highly opaque process.¹

Occasional public disagreements among other senior figures within the Taliban leadership on specific issues such as girls' schooling caused media flurries² but no major changes in personnel or policy within the Taliban de facto authorities. Repressive trends that began in 2022 leading to extensive self censorship in the media and intelligentsia deepened during the course of 2023, giving the de facto authorities almost total control of the media narrative in the country.³

Officials from the de facto authorities' standard response to questions about the legal framework is that it is based on Sharia.⁴ The fact that the latter is not codified and is open to diverse interpretations means that in practice, legal judgements are ad hoc and vary considerably depending on local officials' personal interpretations of Islamic law.⁵

¹ <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Taliban-supreme-leader-s-existence-remains-a-mystery>

² <https://www.voanews.com/a/infighting-within-taliban-as-frustration-grows-over-international-recognition-/6968055.html>

³ <https://www.info-res.org/post/an-afghan-journalist-on-censorship-misinformation-and-poverty-under-the-taliban>

⁴ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2023/afghanistan-taliban-islamic-law-rights/>

⁵ <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/ijudiciary/statements/2023-01-17/202301-stm-sr-ijl-sr-afghanistan-day-endangered-lawyer.pdf>

Occasional statements from the de facto authorities suggest that some debate is occurring over the reorganization of the legal system, but there is no clarity over procedures, standards of evidence, or appropriate punishments.⁶

The constitution, legal system and legal protections that had been gradually built up during the former government have all been dismantled. The Taliban's justice system is highly restrictive and problematic for women. In some parts of the country Taliban courts may hear women's complaints or petitions in areas such as inheritance disputes⁷, but in others Taliban police won't even let women report criminal cases, including thefts, and women have no access to recourse for any violations they have suffered.

The international community's efforts to influence the Taliban to reverse their repressive policies towards women and end suppression of fundamental freedoms had a very limited impact in 2023. Each new Taliban restriction was met with a chorus of international disapproval which the Taliban effectively ignored, at least publicly. Consistent messaging from international stakeholders that international recognition of Taliban de facto authorities will remain out of the question in the face of the Taliban's cruel gender policies has done almost nothing to date to soften the de facto authorities' stance. Rather in 2023 the de facto authorities have added additional restrictions (such as banning women working for UN agencies in April 2023), punished girls' education activists with lengthy detentions, prevented women accessing essential health services and blocked the training of female healthcare workers, among many other destructive policies.

Key Findings 2023

An overview of patterns of abuses targeting civil society

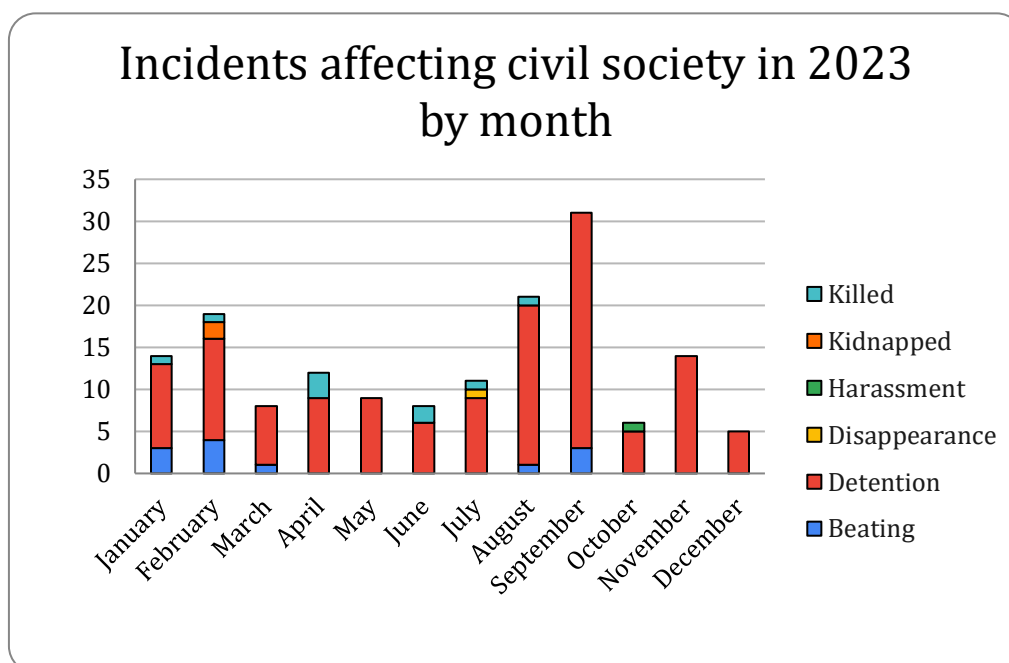
During 2023 the de facto authorities consolidated the grip they had imposed on civic space since August 2021. Not content with the muzzling of media enforced over the course of 2022⁸, the de facto authorities further harassed, threatened and/or detained anyone that dared to exercise their fundamental right to freedom of expression to voice an independent view. Of the total 159 abuses targeting members of civil society that SRMO recorded during 2023, 134 were detentions. As the graph below shows, detentions occurred steadily throughout the year. A spike of incidents in September reflects the arrest of 18 employees of an international NGO that had been providing medical assistance, the reasons for which remain unclear.

During 2023 SRMO recorded the detention of 24 WHRDs, 5 close relatives of WHRDs, 2 HRDs, 17 CSAs and 37 media workers. In addition, 13 university lecturers, 4 school principals, 3 school teachers, and 2 writers were detained. The SRMO database also recorded 8 killings of members of civil society: 3 CSAs were killed, as were two relatives of a WHRD who had refused to stop criticising the Taliban after her release from detention, 1 writer and 2 school teachers. Civilians who posted on social media about the challenging situation in the country also faced arrest; highlighting the total intolerance of the de facto authorities to even the faintest criticism, in some cases people were detained even if their posts didn't contain direct criticism of the de facto authorities but just described the difficult situation in the country.

⁶ See for example <https://rawadari.org/250320231387.htm/>; <https://www.jurist.org/news/2022/08/afghanistan-dispatch-attorney-generals-office-no-longer-investigating-and-prosecuting-crime/>

⁷ [A Look Inside a Taliban Courtroom, The New Yorker Documentary: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYL-UuNE_9w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYL-UuNE_9w)

⁸ https://srmo.uk/?page_id=1069



The detentions of members of civil society are conducted arbitrarily, people are often held incommunicado, and with no due process; most members of civil society who are detained are transferred to unknown locations, are kept in complete isolation and are subjected to violence; their families remain entirely uninformed about their conditions. Detainees have very limited access to legal representation and there is a lack of safeguards and protection against torture.

Former detainees describe conditions of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment in Taliban detention centres. These include beatings including with whips and rifle butts, electric shocks, threats to kill close relatives, withholding of food, being kept in extreme cold, denial of access to basic hygiene facilities such as showers, and having to use the toilet in front of Taliban soldiers. Some detainees report having been drugged with sedatives.

Testimonies from former detainees suggest that the most egregious abuses take place at detention facilities run by the de facto intelligence forces, with conditions improving if they are moved to regular prisons. This is consistent with research findings published by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) in September 2023⁹; in a report documenting the treatment of detainees between January 2022 and July 2023, UNAMA documented 466 cases of ‘credible instances’ of torture or other forms of ill treatment while in custody. Of these, only 5 were attributed to prison authorities, while 170 were attributed to the de facto police forces and 291 were attributed to the intelligence forces.¹⁰

The de facto authorities use detentions or the threat of detention as a tool to intimidate or torture individuals active in civil society into stopping their activities. The strategy of detaining family members alongside activists, and the perception in some parts of Afghan society that women detainees have brought shame upon their family honour, also increases the likelihood that

⁹ https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_report_-_eng_-_treatment_of_detainees_sept_23_0.pdf, p.3

¹⁰ Ibid

relatives will impose restrictions on activists and WHRDs to prevent them being detained in the first place or to end their work upon their release. Women activists face double repression – with restrictions being imposed on them in both the public and private sphere.

As a condition of their release, members of civil society are routinely threatened not to speak about their detentions or continue their activism. The de facto authorities tell activists any indication they have spoken to the media or human rights organisations will result in their rearrest. The de facto authorities also threaten to detain or physically harm close relatives of detainees. Other testimonies report that family members have been forced to hand over property deeds as a guarantee of compliance before activists are released.

Abuses against WHRDs

In line with the de facto authorities' repressive policies towards women, in 2023, WHRDs and their families were again a key target for the de facto authorities. WHRDs were systematically harassed, threatened, arbitrarily detained and tortured by the Taliban¹¹. Most of the detained WHRDs have been held in abusive conditions in unofficial detention centres run by intelligence agencies, often for several months at a time.

During 2023, SRMO documented 31 incidents targeting WHRDs and their families. Among the total incidents, 23 were instances of detentions of WHRDs and one case of harassment. Additionally, SRMO documented five detentions and two killings of WHRDs' family members. See below for a selection of case summaries.¹²

There are consistent allegations that some women are subjected to sexual abuse while in custody. Because of the sensitivity of this issue, few women are prepared to discuss this publicly after their release and few details are available. Witness testimonies from anonymous women are however periodically reported in the media and point to sexual abuse in custody being a serious concern. Released women are also at risk of so-called 'honour killings' if family members see their detention and suspected sexual abuse as having brought shame upon the family.

Case studies

- A woman protester died on 4 November in the city of Mazar-e Sharif in Balkh province shortly after being detained by the de facto authorities. WHRD Ms Huma had reportedly been detained at a checkpoint in police district 7 on 28 October, after which she was transferred to a detention centre. Local reports state that she was subject to violence and sexual assault and that this was filmed on video. She was found hanged to death in her home on 4 November shortly after being released. There are conflicting reports as to whether she committed suicide following the sexual assault she experienced while in detention or whether she was the victim of an honour killing.
- WHRD Julia Parsi, an educator who founded a women's library, was arrested during a raid on her home on 28 October. Her son was arrested on the same day and they were both kept in detention until 18 December. Relatives expressed alarm about her

¹¹ Human Rights Watch, November, 2023: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/30/womens-rights-activists-under-attack-afghanistan>

¹² This list represents a brief summary of cases. Please see SRMO's quarterly reports for additional details.

health while she was in detention, with reports suggesting she had to be hospitalized.

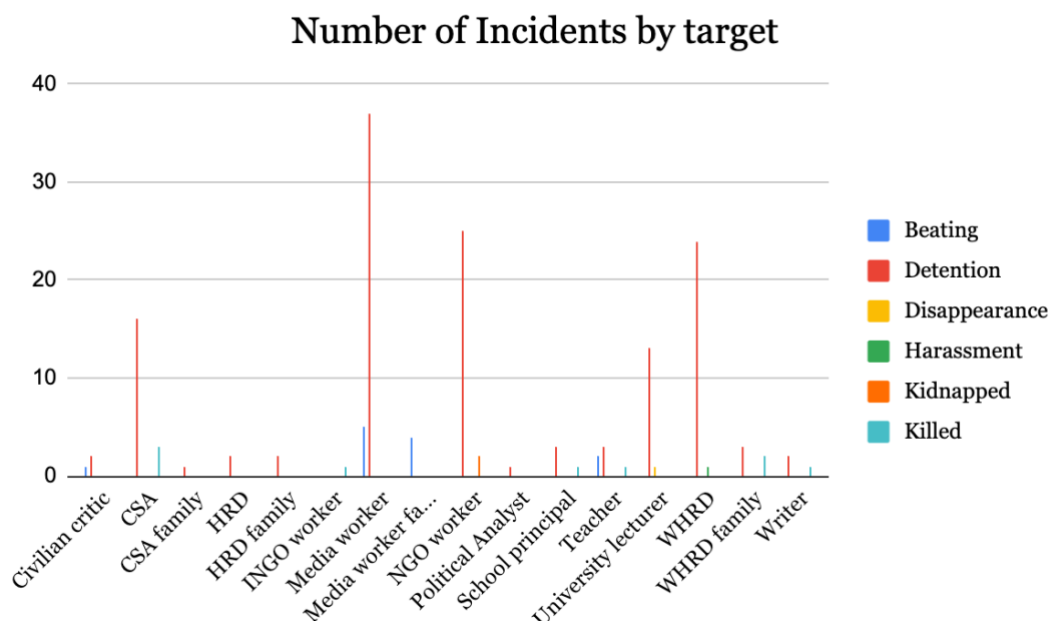
- WHRD Neda Parwani was arrested on 19 September with her husband and young child. All three were kept in detention for almost three months and were eventually released on 15 December. Relatives reportedly took Ms Parwani to hospital because she was in such poor health upon her release.¹³
- The Taliban arrested a woman protester on 12 August in Kabul and held her in an unknown detention centre for three days. According to local reports she was brutally tortured, sexually harassed while in detention and threatened by Taliban that naked photos of her would be published on social media if she continued to criticize the de facto authorities.
- A woman who was reportedly the victim of a forced marriage to a former Taliban official was released in April 2023 after being detained for around five months. She had been detained in November 2022 after she ran away from her husband and posted videos on social media criticizing him and detailing the abuse she had suffered. Following her release she gave testimony detailing her treatment while in detention, which included being beaten with pipes and given electric shocks.¹⁴
- Two relatives of a WHRD were killed on 2 April in Kabul. The WHRD had been detained by the Taliban for taking part in anti-Taliban protests and reportedly criticized the Taliban after her release. Her refusal to stay quiet – as she had been threatened to do – resulted in the Taliban trying to re-arrest her. They went to her uncle’s house believing that she was hiding there and shot dead her uncle and cousin.
- Parisa Mubarez, a woman protester and member of Takhar Women’s Movement, was detained alongside her brother Rahmatullah on 11 February 2023 in Takhar province. Intelligence agents from the de facto authorities raided Ms. Mubarez’s house and arrested both of them. The de facto authorities did not allow family to visit the detainees, and although they were released one day later, they had to guarantee that Parisa would stop her activities. Local reports state that Parisa was tortured while in custody.

Evolving trends with regard to human rights violations targeting WHRDs

Although the 31 cases documented by SRMO in 2023 is lower than the 59 incidents logged in SRMO’s 2022 report, this does not indicate that the clampdown on WHRDs has eased, but rather reflects the evolving repressive dynamics around WHRD’s activities. First, the intensifying clampdown on the media means many cases go unreported, while secondly relatives of WHRDs often do not try to share information about detentions with human rights groups because they fear this would put WHRDs in greater danger.

¹³ <https://amu.tv/76147/>

¹⁴ <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/south-asia/elaha-delawar-zai-taliban-afghanistan-prison-b2369554.html>



The numbers also reflect changes in the way WHRDs are organising their activities. In late 2021 and 2022 many WHRDs were detained during demonstrations in the streets of Kabul and other cities. The de facto authorities' use of violence against women protesters has had a deeply chilling effect on public protests, meaning that far fewer demonstrations have been held and as a result fewer mass detentions have taken place on the streets. WHRDs have moved many of their protests indoors, with women gathering in private homes and taking photos and videos of them holding placards to disseminate their calls for women's rights.

Even this clearly peaceful exercise of women's fundamental rights to peaceful assembly, association and expression has provoked harsh measures and violence against WHRDs from the de facto authorities. Members of the de facto authorities' intelligence forces have raided such gatherings, detaining WHRDs and damaging private property.¹⁵

Abuses against CSAs

Three people who were involved in civil society activities were killed during 2023. In the first killing, a member of a local youth association was shot dead in Nangahar province on 23 July; the perpetrator(s) of the shooting are unknown but local reports stated that Taliban security forces were responsible. In the second, a young man was beaten and then shot dead at a Taliban checkpoint by de facto security forces because he was carrying the flag of the former government; the incident reportedly happened on 20 August in the Sorobi district of Kabul province. In a third case, a female social media influencer was killed in Kabul on 23 August though the circumstances of her death and perpetrator are unclear.

Between January and December, the de facto authorities detained 17 civil society activists (CSAs). In one high profile case the highly regarded education activist Matiullah Wesa was arrested in March 2023 and kept in detention for seven months despite an international advocacy campaign calling for his release. Wesa had worked for years to bring education to

¹⁵ <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-detains-women-protest-kabul/32557527.html>

Afghans including girls in rural areas. At the time of his arrest his home was ransacked and several relatives were temporarily detained.

Although Wesa was finally released in October, two other girls' education activists were detained the same month. Ahmad Fahim Azimi, the director of the Afghan girls' robotics team and his colleague Sediqullah Afghan were kept for 72 days in department 40 of the de facto authorities' intelligence agency. They were reportedly transferred to Pul-e Charki prison on 27 December but it is unclear if they have been sentenced and if so, for how long.

On 12 October in Firoz Koh city in central Ghor province, Taliban intelligence forces reportedly arrested the manager of a private school for secretly teaching girls. It is unclear whether the school manager remains in detention.

Abuses against Media workers

Media Workers and their families were, according to SRMO's incident database, the most targeted group of civil society in 2023. SRMO documented a total of 42 incidents in which media workers were targeted by the Taliban de facto authorities, 37 of which were detentions and 5 were beatings. Additionally, the organization logged 4 cases of beating of media workers' families. The following cases give an indication of the dynamics during 2023:

- Sultan Ali Jawadi, head of Radio Nasim in central Daikundi province, was sentenced on 11 December to one year in prison.¹⁶ Mr Jawadi was originally detained in October alongside two colleagues after the de-facto authorities raided the headquarters of Radio Nasim and confiscated their equipment. According to media advocacy groups, Mr Jawadi was found guilty of 'propaganda against the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan' as well as 'espionage for foreign countries'. The radio station has been closed since the October raid.
- French-Afghan journalist Mortaza Behboudi was detained for more than 9 months after being arrested on 7 January by Taliban intelligence forces. After leaving Afghanistan following his release, Behboudi shared concerning details about the conditions he was held in.¹⁷ He was kept with 11 or 12 other prisoners in 'two or three-metre' rooms and was held in the same location as members of Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). He described being beaten regularly by intelligence personnel. Bahboudi was moved in July to Pul-e Charki prison, tried in a Taliban court and eventually released after spying charges were dropped.

Media workers also face threats from other violent extremist groups, notably ISIS's local chapter, ISKP. Four people, including three journalists, were killed in a bomb attack on a cultural centre on 11 March that appeared to target a gathering of journalists. A further 30 people including 15 journalists were reportedly injured in the incident.¹⁸

The de facto authorities seek to enforce extensive censorship on the media outlets that continue to function. The Taliban's de facto intelligence forces continues to threaten, intimidate and

¹⁶ <https://ifex.org/afghanistan-radio-nasim-manager-sentenced-to-one-year-in-prison/>

¹⁷ "Media coverage saved me," says journalist Mortaza Behboudi held for nine months in Afghanistan | RSF

¹⁸ These deaths are not included in the total number of civil society fatalities because they occurred in a terrorist attack and are therefore categorized differently in the SRMO database.

assault media workers, suspend media outlets and impose strict restrictions on freedom of expression¹⁹.

More than 40% of Afghanistan's media outlets have stopped working since the Taliban takeover in 2021.²⁰ On top of the violence and reprisals that media workers and journalists face, another significant reason for closures of media outlets is a huge drop in funding following the international exodus from Afghanistan. The restrictions on media workers have had an especially devastating impact on female journalists, who experience both Taliban regime gender repression and security risks²¹. On 17 June, for example, the Taliban prohibited women from taking part in radio and television programs hosted by male presenters.²² In some provinces, the Taliban's Information and Culture Ministry has issued directives instructing local radio stations to cease airing women's voices altogether, including in advertisements.²³

Journalists face an opaque system of increasing and ambiguous rules that are hard to navigate. Throughout 2023 media workers who remained active exercised extensive self censorship, but even then many were targeted for harassment and detention by Taliban officials who took offense to their coverage of events. Taliban officials appear to be particularly sensitive to coverage that suggests they are not able to provide security. The de facto authorities punished people for covering security incidents – even when their reports contained no criticism or comment of the de facto authorities but simply tried to report the facts. Taliban officials appear to perceive any coverage of resistance activities or political violence such as bomb attacks targeting civilians as breaking the rules. The following case is typical:

- A journalist in the northern city of Mazar-e Sharif was arrested on 22 October when the de facto intelligence agency raided his house. His house was searched and various items were confiscated. The journalist was reportedly released after several hours following the intervention of media advocacy groups and local elders. The journalist had reportedly covered an explosion on 20 October in which he reported several casualties. The de facto authorities warned him that he should not report such incidents without official permission.

Other targeted groups related to exercising the right to freedom of expression

A notable number of university staff were detained during 2023. Of the total of 13 university lecturers detained during the year, 6 were in Kabul, 3 in Baghlan and one each in Badakhshan, Faryab, Panjshir and Parwan. Additionally, a female university lecturer disappeared on 10 July in Samangan Province after leaving the university where she worked to return home.

One of these detainees, university professor and religious affairs expert Rasool Parsi, was sentenced by the de facto Supreme Court on 30 October to 16 months in prison for 'insulting Islamic sanctities and propagandizing against the regime'.²⁴ The sentence reportedly included four months for blasphemy and one year for propagandizing. He was initially arrested in March

¹⁹ Human Rights Watch, World Report 2023: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/afghanistan>

²⁰ Reporters Without Borders, 2023: <https://rsf.org/en/taliban-takeover-40-afghan-media-have-closed-80-women-journalists-have-lost-their-jobs>

²¹ Human Rights Watch, World Report 2023: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/afghanistan>

²² Rukshana: <https://rukshana.com/female-journalists-in-balkh-talibans-restrictions-have-threatened-our-job-security>

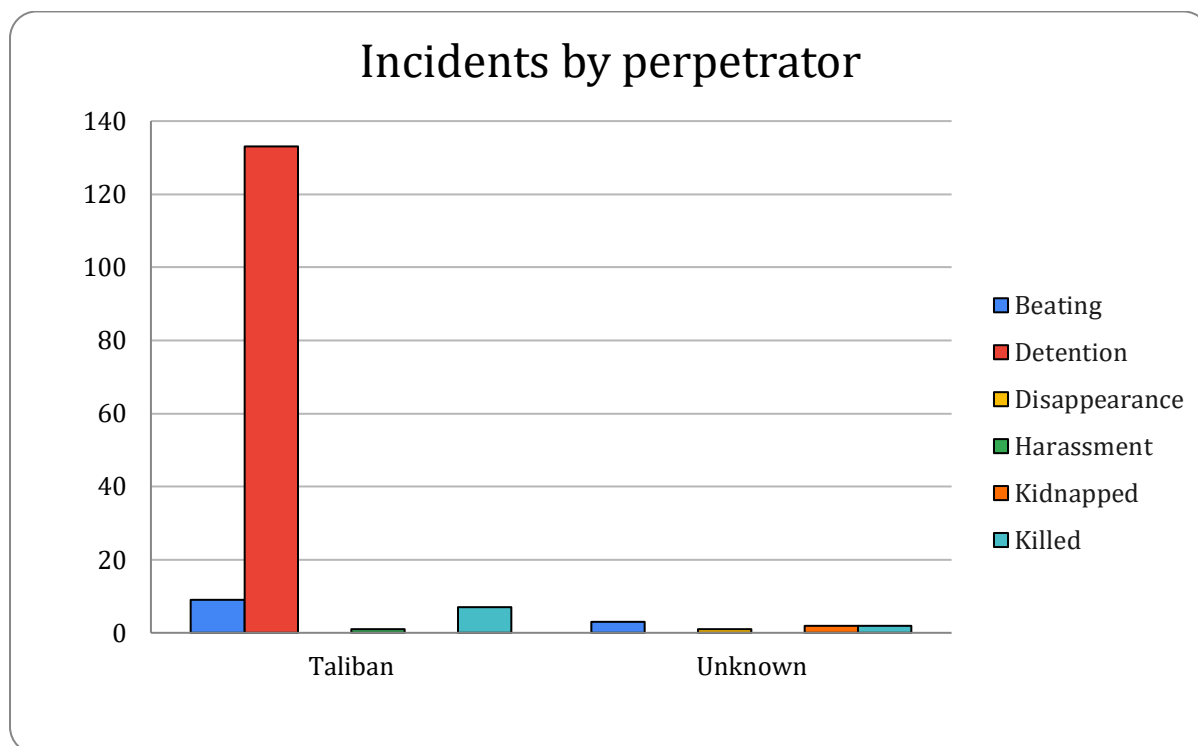
²³ <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-arrests-journalists-ban-women-radio/32547538.html>

²⁴ <https://www.afintl.com/en/202310303768>

2023 and it is not clear if this sentence includes the time he has already spent in detention. He had reportedly criticized extremism on social media prior to his arrest.

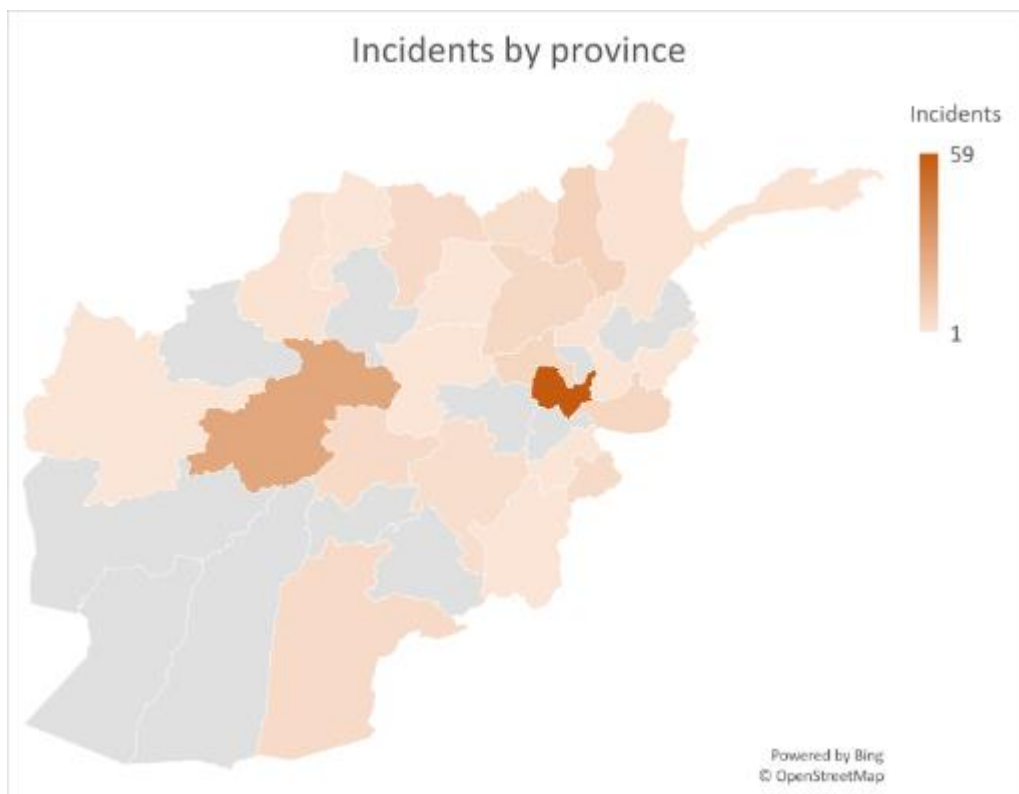
Alleged perpetrators of attacks and abuses against civil society

The Taliban de facto authorities were the alleged perpetrator in 151 out of the total 159 incidents recorded in 2023, which included the arbitrary detentions, beating and killing of civil society members. The perpetrators of the remaining 8 incidents were unknown.



Geographical distribution of violence against civil society

As was the case in previous years, in 2023, Kabul again saw the most reported incidents of abuses against civil society, with a total of 59 incidents (including 52 cases of arbitrary detention, 6 killings and 1 beating). The province with the second largest number of incidents was Ghor, with a total of 27 detentions (the majority of these were NGO workers from the same organisation). Other provinces that saw multiple incidents included Takhar (5 beatings, 3 detentions and 1 case of harassment), Nangarhar (4 detentions, 2 kidnappings and 1 killing), Parwan (1 beating, 6 detentions), Baghlan (5 detentions and 1 killing), Daikundi (2 beatings and 3 detentions), Kandahar (5 detentions) and Khost (4 detentions and 1 killing).



It is natural that Kabul would have the highest number of cases because it was previously the nerve centre of Afghan civil society. However, SRMO is also more likely to receive information about cases in Kabul because of the larger number of civil society actors who live in the city. It is very likely that many more cases take place in other provinces that are not reported.

Broader human rights situation

De facto authorities widespread and systematic abuses against women and girls during 2023

As has been well documented, the de facto authorities' targeted policies of gender repression have resulted in appalling restrictions on women's and girls' rights and lives. These policies have completely denied the fundamental rights and freedoms of women, and also have had devastating impact on women's access to healthcare, education, employment, and myriad other things including such simple pastimes as visiting a park with one's family. Hundreds of thousands of girls and young women are being denied an education. Millions of women and girls are effectively imprisoned within their homes as a direct result of the de facto authorities' policies of gender apartheid and gender persecution (see below).

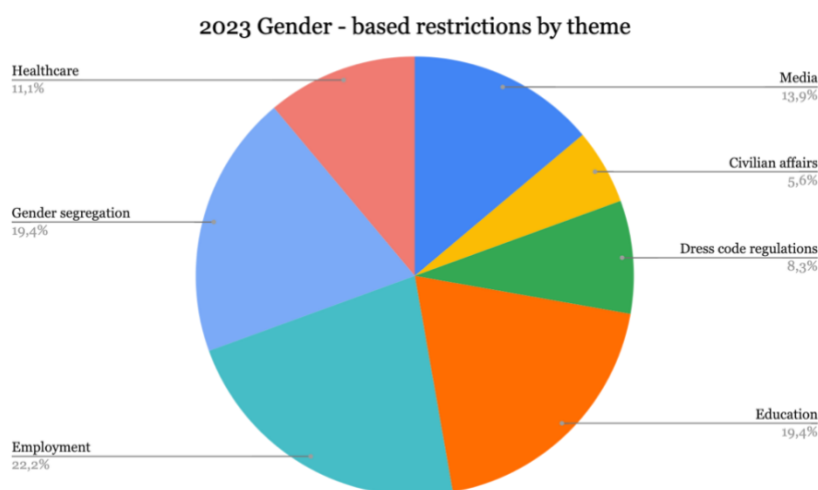
The multifaceted aspects of the de facto authorities' repressive gender politics were discussed at length in SRMO's 2022 State of Human Rights Defenders report.²⁵ During 2023, multiple additional restrictions were imposed. These included a ban on women working for UN agencies

²⁵ https://srmo.uk/?page_id=1069

that was announced in April 2023; the decree followed a previous ban on women working for NGOs and further exacerbated the challenges of addressing the humanitarian crisis, not to mention destroying around 400 women's livelihoods.²⁶ A ban on beauty parlours followed in July, leaving even more women without an income and blocking one of the last available locations where women were able to gather outside their homes.

Restrictions targeting women and girls during 2023

During 2023, SRMO monitored the multiple restrictions and decrees issued by the de facto authorities that obstruct women and girls' fundamental rights. Using both primary and secondary sources, the organization recorded 41 specific restrictive gender-based policies imposed on women and girls during 2023 on top of the multiple restrictions that had already been imposed between August 2021 and December 2022. Some of these restrictions reflected incidents where policies previously announced by the central de facto authorities started being actively implemented in new provinces. It is important to note that this is not a total record of every single restrictive policy, but rather a selection taken from available media reports and testimonies from affected women and girls; as described above, media coverage and the ability to report abuses to civil society organisations is now highly restricted, meaning that many other cases go unreported.



Of the roster of restrictions that were documented, 25% enforced gender segregation and discrimination, 22.2% involved additional limitations on the right to employment of Afghan women (which is already heavily restricted to a handful of permitted roles²⁷), 19.4% placed additional limitations on the right to education of girls and women, and the remaining included dress code regulations, additional limitations for women who work in the media, and others. The following chart shows the compilation of gender-based restrictions by theme; while this is just a small indication of the number of restrictions, it highlights the way the de facto authorities are deepening their policing of every aspect of women and girls' lives. Examples of the restrictions imposed during 2023 range from prohibiting women from visiting historic places²⁸

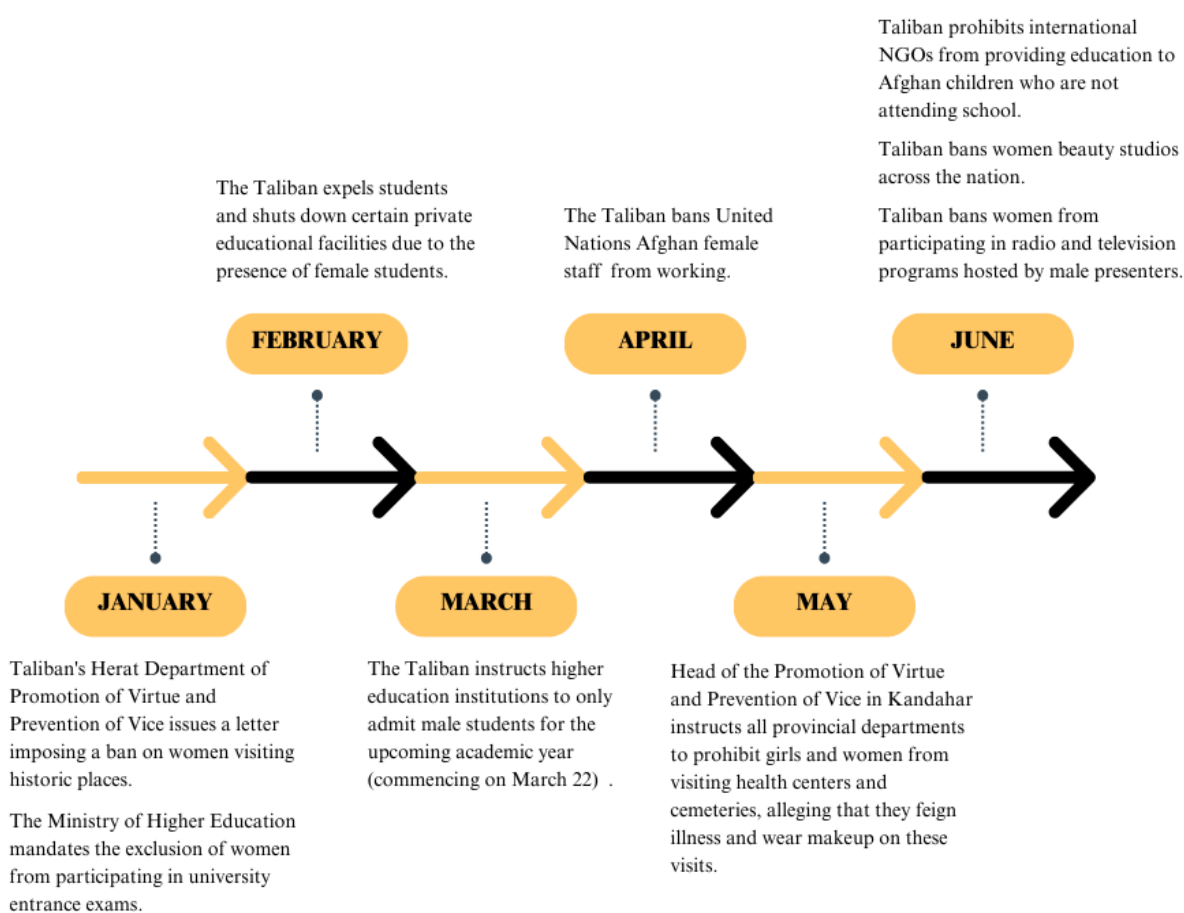
²⁶ <https://www.dw.com/en/taliban-ban-uns-afghan-women-staff-from-working/a-65231332>

²⁷ Women are only permitted to work in very few professions including healthcare, girls' primary school education, airport security staff, and limited policing and prison roles.

²⁸ <https://amu.tv/44244/>

and national parks²⁹, to segregating banking services based on gender making it even harder for female headed households to access financial services.³⁰ Concerning employment, the Taliban implemented even more severe limitations on women’s access to work; in addition to preventing women working for the UN as mentioned above, the de facto authorities in Uruzgan province in September specifically banned women from working remotely for NGOs³¹, something that some women had been doing as a stop gap measure since the NGO ban of 2022. Other employment restrictions included a ban on women holding the position of Director in NGOs, and preventing women being allowed to work as photographers at wedding ceremonies in Faryab province.

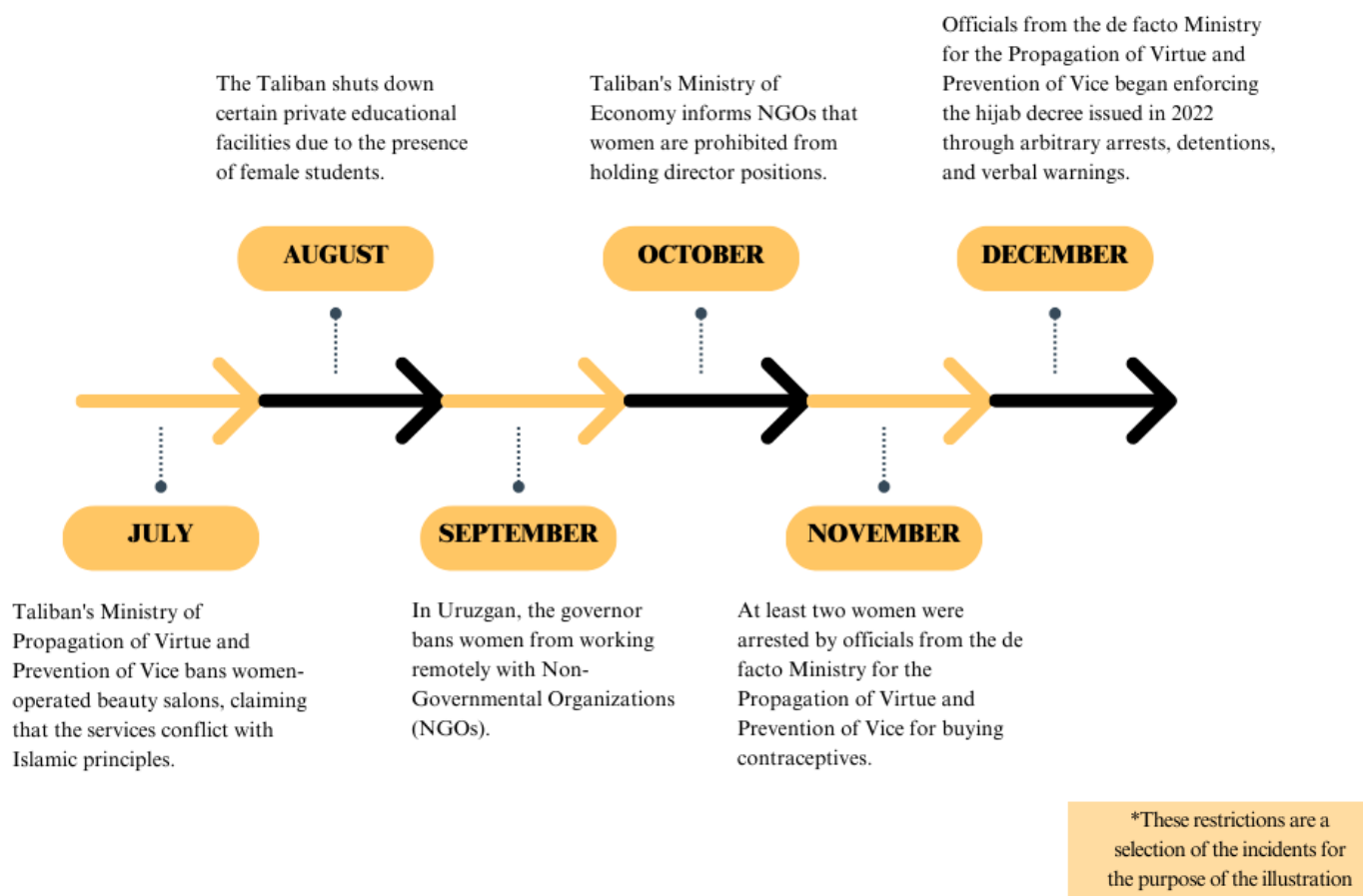
RESTRICTIONS TARGETING WOMEN AND GIRLS DURING 2023



²⁹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-66633178>

³⁰ <https://rukshana.com/taliban-regulated-the-banks-of-balkh-province-based-on-gender-segregation>

³¹ This was announced on local radio in Uruzgan province.



Not content with the already extensive restrictions on girls' education, the de facto authorities sought to further obstruct any remaining avenues of education and training. 2023 saw efforts to obstruct INGO community education projects³², the closure of multiple private education centres that provided training in subjects such as IT and languages³³, and even the closing down of schools for blind girls in Nangarhar and Kunar provinces. The timeline above illustrates a selection of additional restrictions imposed throughout 2023, demonstrating the breadth of the de facto authorities' expanding system of gender apartheid.

Concerted Advocacy efforts towards holding Taliban accountable for the crime of 'gender apartheid'

2023 saw an increase in advocacy efforts by human rights NGOs, UN officials and other activists calling for the de facto authorities policies' to be recognized as 'gender apartheid' and 'gender persecution' against Afghan women and girls.

It is critical to frame the Taliban's extreme restrictions on Afghan women's rights under these norms because they both provide important protections and entail different legal consequences. For example, recognizing the situation in Afghanistan as *gender persecution* can serve as a

³² See for example <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/unicf-concern-over-report-aid-group-ban-afghan-education-2023-06-08/>; this reported intention of the de facto authorities to block INGO involvement in education work was followed by reports that several INGO community education projects had indeed been suspended in some parts of the country.

³³ <https://8am.media/eng/taliban-close-educational-center-and-private-school-in-ghazni-due-to-girls-attendance/>; <https://kabulnow.com/2023/05/taliban-close-down-private-institutions-in-kabul-that-remained-open-despite-ban/>

basis for women seeking and receiving refugee status from host States in accordance with the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, its Protocol, and relevant regional and national legislations. Meanwhile the *gender apartheid* framing would emphasize the duty that States and actors of the international community bear to take effective action to end the practice, akin to the actions taken to end the system of racial apartheid in South Africa.³⁴ Moreover, the conceptualization of gender apartheid, as advocated by human rights NGOs, UN officials and other activists, would prompt the development of further normative standards, tools and action to end the Taliban imposed system of systematic suppression and gender discrimination and exclusion, and to hold the perpetrators accountable.

In a report presented to the UN Human Rights Council in 2023, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan and the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls set out the applicability of these concepts of gender persecution and gender apartheid to the current situation in Afghanistan.³⁵ In the report the UN experts expressed concern that “gender persecution is occurring in Afghanistan under the rule of the de facto authorities”³⁶ and stated that the Taliban ideology and regime could amount to gender apartheid. The authors supported their arguments by presenting the systematic discrimination against women and girls, by illustrating the gender-based edicts restricting Afghan women’s rights, and by describing women’s current economic, political, and social life under the Taliban regime.

Gender persecution constitutes a crime against humanity as outlined in article 7.1 (h) of the Rome Statute and is defined as “the intentional and severe deprivation of fundamental rights contrary to international law by reason of the identity of the group or collectivity”³⁷, in this case, by reason of sex characteristics and gender roles.³⁸ Gender apartheid, on the other hand, has not yet been defined as a crime under the Rome Statute, but UN officials, academics, and activists are advocating to have gender included within the definition of the crime of apartheid in the statute.³⁹ In the ‘Report on Situation of women and girls in Afghanistan’, gender apartheid is defined as “inhumane acts committed in the context of an institutionalized regime of systematic oppression and domination by one gender group over any other gender group or groups and committed with the intention of maintaining that regime.”⁴⁰

Other organizations and actors, such as the United States Institute of Peace⁴¹, Human Rights Watch⁴², and CIVICUS⁴³, have also argued that the Taliban is pursuing a policy of gender apartheid and gender persecution. In September, the UN Security Council was urged by delegates to “End ‘Gender Apartheid’ in Afghanistan through all available means”. Sima Sami Bahous, Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), called on the Council to provide

³⁴ 2023 Report on Situation of women and girls in Afghanistan, A/HRC/53/21, para 96:

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc5321-situation-women-and-girls-afghanistan-report-special-rapporteur>

³⁵ 2023 Report on Situation of women and girls in Afghanistan: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc5321-situation-women-and-girls-afghanistan-report-special-rapporteur>

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, p. 4: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/RS-Eng.pdf>

³⁸ 2023 Report on Situation of women and girls in Afghanistan: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc5321-situation-women-and-girls-afghanistan-report-special-rapporteur>

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/09/two-years-talibans-gender-apartheid-afghanistan>

⁴² <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/08/15/joint-statement-call-justice-accountability-and-effective-response-ongoing>

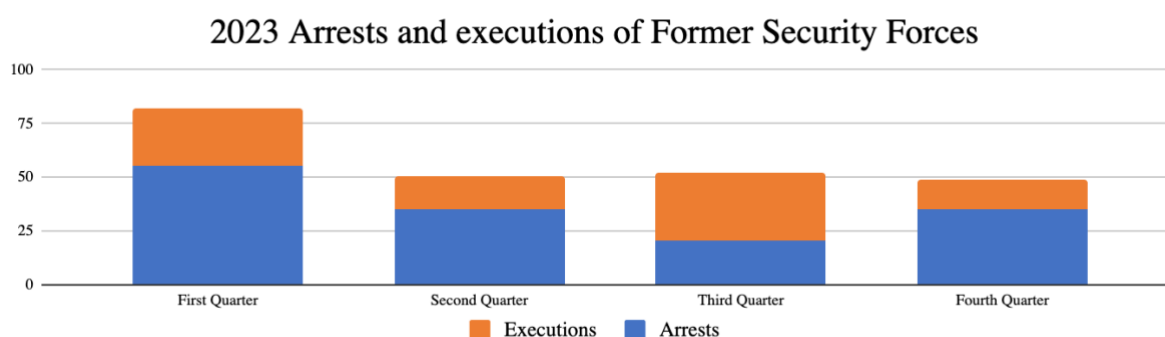
⁴³ <https://lens.civicus.org/afghanistan-gender-apartheid-must-be-stopped/>

“full support for an intergovernmental process to explicitly codify gender apartheid in international law, stressing that the systematic and planned assault on women’s rights foundational to the Taliban’s vision of State and society must be named, defined and proscribed in global norms so that the international community can respond to it appropriately.”⁴⁴

Reprisals against former government officials and security forces including those forcibly returned from Pakistan and Iran

A key theme in the human rights environment since August 2021 has been the killing, detention, torture and disappearance of hundreds of former members of the security forces. Despite a general amnesty⁴⁵ declaration stating that former government officials and former members of the armed forces should not be subject to reprisals, killings and arrests of such individuals have continued for more than two years.

In 2023, SRMO documented 233 total incidents against former security forces – 145 cases of arrests (some of which amount to enforced disappearances) and 88 cases of extrajudicial executions. Victims of these reprisals include former army soldiers, intelligence officials, police, and guards and interpreters for international military forces. Family members of the above were also targeted.



The victim’s family members were usually unaware of the reasons behind the arrest and the whereabouts of the detainees. Many former security forces who were arrested were subjected to torture while in Taliban custody.

Several former members of the security forces were killed or detained soon after being deported from Pakistan or Iran, highlighting the danger of these countries’ policies of forced return of Afghan refugees, especially those falling under the profile of individuals at serious risk of human rights violations by the Taliban de facto authorities (see below). Some cases that highlight this trend include:

- On 13 November, 2023, the Taliban intelligence arrested former military officer Abdul Baswit Nabeel while he was returning from Pakistan to Nuristan province.

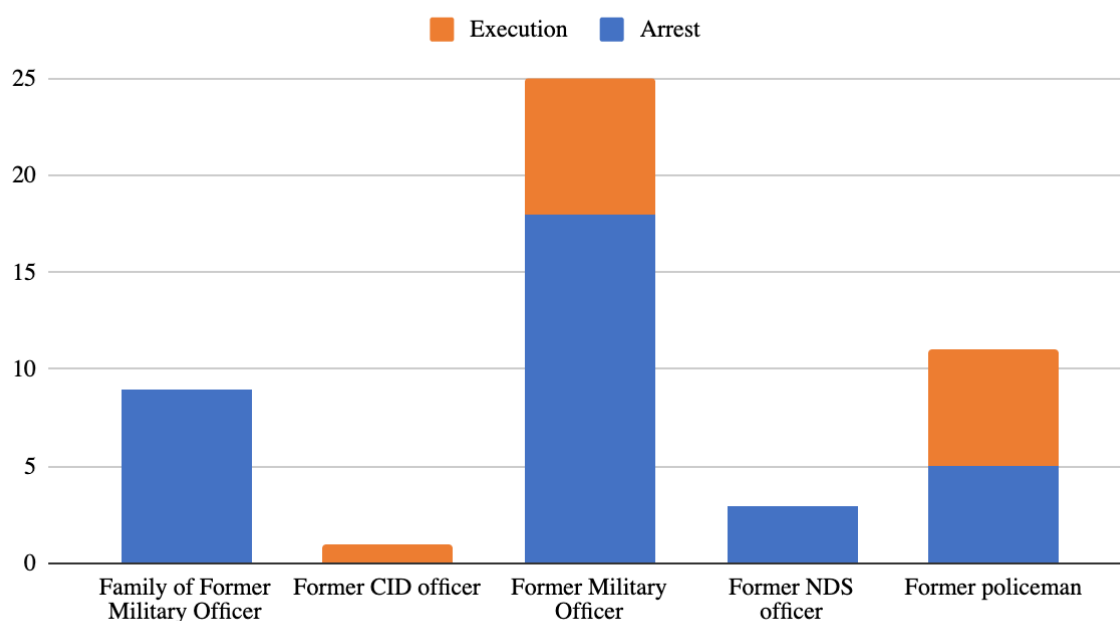
⁴⁴ <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15421.doc.htm>

⁴⁵ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/17/taliban-announces-amnesty-urges-women-to-join-government#:~:text=The%20Taliban%20has%20announced%20a,get%20out%20of%20the%20country.>

- On 17 November, 2023, two former military officers native to Takhar province, Ghulam Muhammad Nazari and Asifallah Azimi, were arrested by Taliban intelligence. They had been deported from Iran to Nimroz.
- On December 10, 2023, the Taliban shot and killed Abdul Bashir, the son of Wali Mohammad and a former local police commander, along with his wife in Takhar Province. The report indicates that the victims had recently returned to their home from Pakistan.
- On 24 December, the Taliban in Ghor province shot and killed an unidentified former military officer in the previous government. He had returned recently from Iran; a picture of the deceased was posted on social media.

Other groups who were part of the state apparatus or legal system during the ‘republic’ era (2002-2021) have also been subject to reprisals in various forms. One group that has been targeted by both the de facto authorities and by individuals seeking revenge are legal professionals including prosecutors, judges and lawyers. At least 29 prosecutors have been killed since the Taliban takeover⁴⁶; prisoners were released during the chaos of the takeover and some have since taken direct revenge on those who had put them in jail. During a protest held in Pakistan on 21 November, the Association of Prosecutors of Afghanistan in Exile put the number killed at 37, and stated that at least 45 others have been detained.

Incidents by target



⁴⁶ <https://theintercept.com/2023/08/08/afghan-prosecutors-taliban/>

Human rights abuses targeting civilians accused of sympathizing with armed resistance groups

Arbitrary arrests of civilians and incidents of forced displacement are frequently reported in areas affected by clashes between Taliban troops and a variety of resistance groups. During 2023, the SRMO database documented a total of 667 mass arrests and enforced disappearances in this context. The de facto authorities often conduct mass arrests after security incidents such as attacks on checkpoints or roadside bombs. Some people are released relatively quickly after being picked up in such sweeps, but others are detained for long periods or completely disappear with their families often unsure if detainees are alive or dead. Extensive restrictions on both local and international media in affected areas such as Panjshir mean that many of these developments are taking place in an information blackout.

2023 also saw a wave of arrests of civilians who are originally from Panjshir province around the country. Panjshir was the only province that resisted Taliban rule during their first period in power in the late 1990s, and although the de facto authorities are formally in control of the area, resistance activities continue to be reported in the region. Panjshiris appear to be being targeted for arbitrary arrest throughout the country based solely on the fact they are from Panjshir province and regardless of any actual involvement in alleged armed resistance activity. Detainees from Panjshir are routinely tortured for information on armed resistance activities, in some cases resulting in deaths in custody. For example in the space of one week in January 2023:

- A man reportedly died in a hospital in the Omarz district of Panjshir province on 16 January. He had been detained two weeks before on charges of having connections with the National Resistance Front (NRF) and had reportedly been tortured.
- A young man from Panjshir province was murdered on 21 January by ‘unknown gunmen’ in Kabul city. The victim’s relatives believe he had been detained by the Taliban and died under torture.

The Taliban are also accused of summarily executing prisoners. For example, 8 members of the Afghanistan Liberty Front (ALF) were reportedly summarily executed on 11 April after being captured during fighting in Salang district, Parwan province. There were also cases in 2023 when the Taliban appears to have summarily or extrajudicially executed young men purely on the basis of their ethnicity. For example, four young men from Panjshir province were shot dead at a checkpoint in Kabul on 25 October after an argument over their clothing. The men were wearing Panjshiri scarves and hats (known as *pakol*). Soldiers from the de facto authorities stopped them, insulted them and beat them. When the men argued with the soldiers they were shot dead. Three other Panjshiri men travelling in the same vehicle were detained and taken to an unknown location.

In addition to killings and detentions, the Taliban are alleged to have carried out forced evictions and purposely set fire to civilian houses. In one example Taliban troops reportedly set fire to civilian houses on 7 May in the Khost district of Baghlan province. The incident occurred after a clash between Taliban troops and local armed resistance forces in which several people died. In another case, Taliban armed forces on 28 May allegedly evicted civilians from their homes in the Annaba district of Panjshir province in order to set up a military base.

Use of violence by de facto security forces

General policing human rights violations

In addition to the serious human rights abuses described above that are fueled by the Taliban's crack down on critics or alleged armed resistance sympathizers, there is also a widespread human rights crisis in the general policing situation. Former Taliban fighters have been posted to policing jobs with no clear legal framework or operating procedures, no training and certainly no understanding of civilian law enforcement that respects the rights and freedoms of civilians. There are frequent reports of local Taliban acting as police using arbitrary and excessive force resulting in arbitrary arrests, torture and extrajudicial and summary executions. The examples below represent just a handful of the total number of incidents recorded in the SRMO database:

- A local commander from the de facto authorities on 24 December shot dead a young man from the Hazara minority. The commander reportedly opened fire on two members of the Hazara community in a public place. One of the two was killed on the spot and the other seriously wounded. The Taliban handed over the body of the deceased saying that he was killed while stealing.
- 27 July: a taxi driver from the Shulgara district of Balkh province had a traffic accident in which a child related to a Taliban official was injured. The driver took the child to Shulgara hospital and contacted the child's family. The driver was then arrested by members of the Taliban de facto authorities and was subsequently hanged to death inside the building of the local security command.
- 11 July: Taliban soldiers reportedly shot and killed a civilian after accusing him of theft near a mosque in the Qala-e-Wazir area of Kabul. The body of the dead man was circulated on social media.
- A local farmer was shot dead on 13 June by a Taliban commander in Samangan province after he tried to complain to officials from the central government about the behaviour of local Taliban fighters.
- One civilian was killed on 10 April at a checkpoint in Faryab province when a Taliban soldier opened fire on a vehicle carrying young men returning from a party.

Religious police

The Taliban de facto Ministry for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (MPVPV) conducts patrols in some areas during which its officials enforce the de facto authorities' religious codes on the general public through arbitrary arrests, torture, ill treatment and other cruel punishments of alleged "offenders". Much of this focuses on clothing for women and hair and beard styles for men. Religious officials also police women's movements (such as enforcing bans on women travelling alone in taxis) and search restaurants and shops to prevent the mingling of men and women. Examples from 2023 include:

- Taliban religious police detained 6 civil servants on 18 December in western Herat province. The men were reportedly detained for cutting their beards too short. They

were locked in a shipping container without food or water for more than 24 hours.

- Officials from the MPVPV on 16 May reportedly beat several men, women and girls because they considered their clothing or appearance in violation of the de facto authorities' rules. The incident, in which some of those accosted were also detained, took place at a check point in Daikundi province.

Corporal punishment

The Taliban Supreme Leader's order in November 2022 that judges start imposing sharia punishments resulted in a surge in reports of corporal punishment, particularly floggings. The practice continued throughout 2023, with SRMO's database recording a total of 160 floggings during the year. Whereas the gender breakdown of public floggings was often mentioned in media reports in 2022, during 2023 this was rarely stated, making it difficult to access data on how many women and men were affected. Many floggings took place in public and were attended by large crowds, but local media and civilians are prevented from taking photos or videos of these events.

Floggings were carried out as punishment for a range of alleged crimes, including theft and kidnapping, but a large proportion were handed down for so-called 'moral' crimes, such as wearing the wrong clothing, talking on the phone with someone of the opposite sex, extra marital relationships and drinking alcohol. For example:

- On 23 October the Supreme Court of the Taliban announced that a man and a woman in Bamyan province were flogged in public on the charge of adultery. These people were reportedly punished based on the verdict of the primary court of Shibar district in Bamyan province and subsequently approved by the head of the General Crime Division of the Supreme Court.
- A woman from Feroz Koh city was reportedly flogged on 6 November by the de facto authorities for communicating with a stranger on a mobile phone. The incident occurred in Ghor province.

Taliban courts have also issued death sentences and summary executions were carried out of the accused, including of children. For example:

- Security forces from the de facto authorities reportedly shot and killed a 28-year-old woman in the Almar district of Faryab province in front of her two children. The Taliban had reportedly sentenced the woman to death in a field court for running away from home. The execution took place on 25 December.

There were also numerous reports of local Taliban security forces hanging up corpses in public spaces of people they had killed in security operations against alleged criminals.⁴⁷ In one example, the bodies of two men were hung from their feet at a traffic intersection in Herat province on 22 February; Taliban officials said the men had been killed "after being accused of robbery". In another case three teenagers, reportedly aged 13, 14 and 16 were shot dead after

⁴⁷ <https://rukshana.com/en/the-talibans-public-displays-of-brutality-and-dead-people-is-deliberate-and-psychologically-destructive>

being arrested for an unknown crime and their bodies were left in a public place. That incident took place on 13 June in the western province of Herat.

Forced deportations of Afghan refugees from Pakistan and Iran

Pakistan on 3 October 2023 announced that undocumented Afghan refugees had one month to leave the country or they would face arrest and deportation.⁴⁸ Prior to the deportation program UNHCR estimated that there were more than 1.3 million registered Afghan refugees in Pakistan, as well as 427,000 more people in ‘refugee-like situations’.⁴⁹ In October 2023, OHCHR estimated that there were more than 2 million undocumented Afghans living in Pakistan, 600,000 of which had arrived since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021.⁵⁰

The deportation announcement prompted alarm from human rights groups and international stakeholders because of fears that hundreds of thousands of vulnerable Afghans would be forcibly returned to Afghanistan in the middle of winter, where they faced serious risk of harm from the de facto authorities as well as a dire humanitarian situation. Pakistani officials however pushed ahead with the policy regardless of these concerns and the UN estimates that more than 450,000 Afghans left Pakistan for Afghanistan during the last three months of 2023.⁵¹

While the Pakistani authorities insist they are only deporting ‘undocumented’ refugees, multiple reports from affected Afghans contradict this claim. Afghans report that various official documents such as Proof of Registration (PoR) cards or letters from third countries confirming people were on visa application tracks – which should in theory have exempted people from being deported – were either ignored by Pakistani authorities⁵² or even destroyed⁵³ by police during house raids. Pakistan’s acting Interior Minister Sarfraz Bugti argued that western countries who raised concerns about Afghans on visa programs being deported should have arranged visas more quickly rather than leaving at risk people in neighbouring countries for extended periods.⁵⁴

Thousands of Afghans were detained, taken to the border and deported. Thousands of others travelled to the border ‘voluntarily’, fearing that staying would result in detention. Conditions on these journeys and at the border were atrocious⁵⁵, with insufficient food, no toilets, and reports of theft and intimidation from Pakistani security forces. Many of those crossing the border had had to sell their only possessions to fund the journey, while the Pakistani authorities also prevented people from taking more than 50,000 rupees (around \$175) across

⁴⁸ <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/10/04/asia/pakistan-deportation-immigrants-afghans-intl-hnk/index.html>

⁴⁹ <https://www.unhcr.org/pk/17767-unhcr-provides-cash-assistance-to-over-1-million-afghan-refugees-in-pakistan.html>

⁵⁰ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/10/1142887>

⁵¹ <https://unric.org/en/far-from-the-headlines-the-continuing-tragedy-of-afghanistan/#:~:text=Since%20Pakistan%20announced%20the%20repatriation,longer%2Dterm%20support%20for%20reintegration>

⁵² <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistan-deported-afghans-waiting-us-resettlement-sources-2023-12-26/#:~:text=At%20least%20130%20Afghans%20being,of%20groups%20helping%20such%20efforts>

⁵³ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/nov/01/pakistan-starts-mass-deportation-of-undocumented-afghans>

⁵⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/nov/01/pakistan-starts-mass-deportation-of-undocumented-afghans>

⁵⁵ <https://www.nrc.no/news/2023/november/loaded-trucks-at-the-torkham-border-as-thousands-of-afghan-returnees-make-their-way-back-to-afghanistan-from-pakistan/>

the border. Many Afghans reported having cash below that amount confiscated by security forces as well as jewellery.⁵⁶

Iran, which is also home to millions of Afghan refugees, also increased deportations in late 2023. Details of exact numbers of forcible returns from Iran are not available but Taliban de facto officials have quoted numbers in the hundreds of thousands between September and December 2023.⁵⁷

Many people returning from Iran and Pakistan have not lived in Afghanistan for years if ever, and Afghanistan was already struggling with food insecurity and an economic crisis leading to a huge shortage of jobs. The de facto authorities claim to have set up services to support returnees, but the support available is insufficient. However, this huge number of deportations does not only present a humanitarian challenge. Several of those who have been deported have already been killed in revenge attacks – the fear of which led them to travel to Iran or Pakistan in the first place.

Taliban officials have falsely claimed that Afghanistan is safe for people to return to regardless of their involvement with the past government. Killings of those recently returned – including the cases above in the section on former security forces confirms this is untrue and highlights the importance of states upholding their obligation to respect the principle of ‘non-refoulement’. Under international human rights and refugee law, no one should be returned to a country where they would face torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and other irreparable harm, or persecution. This principle forms an essential component also of customary international law, and applies to all migrants at all times, irrespective of migration status.⁵⁸

Protecting civic space under Taliban rule: Recommendations to the International Community

Deeply concerned with the critical erosion of the civic space in Afghanistan, and in pursuit of the rule of law and the respect of international human rights law and humanitarian principles, SRMO urges the International Community to urgently implement the below practical recommendations in order to protect and support Afghanistan civil society and W/HRDs and guarantee the continuation of their crucial work.

To the International Community:

- Continue to pressure the Taliban through all available means to respect their international human rights obligations as the de facto authorities of Afghanistan.
- Publicly condemn ongoing violations targeting W/HRDs, CSAs and media workers. Call for the de facto authorities to immediately cease the intimidation, harassment, detention, ill-treatment, sexual violence and other reprisals against W/HRDs and civil

⁵⁶ <https://reliefweb.int/report/pakistan/pakistan-mass-deportation-afghans-poses-risks-regional-stability>

⁵⁷ <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-iran-deports-almost-350-000-afghans-within-3-months/7392705.html>

⁵⁸ <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Migration/GlobalCompactMigration/ThePrincipleNon-RefoulementUnderInternationalHumanRightsLaw.pdf>

society, and to immediately release all those members of civil society that are currently imprisoned for peacefully exercising their fundamental freedoms.

- Call for de facto officials found to be responsible for human rights abuses against members of civil society to be held accountable. Call on the de facto authorities to bring Taliban officials responsible for torture, sexual violence and summary executions to account.
- Call on the Taliban de-facto authorities to cease the unlawful acts of reprisal against former government officials and to bring those responsible for their detention, torture and summary executions to account.
- Continue to pressure the Taliban de-facto authorities through all available means to lift all civic space restrictions, with the view of ensuring full respect for the right to freedom of expression, association and assembly. Urge the Taliban to enable the meaningful and equal participation of all groups, including women, in political and public life, emphasizing the important role this will play in Afghanistan's development and in overcoming the humanitarian crisis.
- Frame the Taliban's extreme restrictions on Afghan women's rights under the norms of gender persecution and gender apartheid. Support the specific codification of gender apartheid in international law to enable the international community to respond appropriately to the systemic oppression of women and girls.
- Continue exercising international pressure by withholding diplomatic recognition for the Taliban de facto authorities and imposing targeted sanctions, including travel bans, against the de-facto authorities for their systematic violations of civic freedoms and women's rights.
- Document human rights violations perpetrated by the Taliban regime, including through supporting and funding Afghan CSOs and activists working on human rights monitoring, documentation and reporting.
- Call on the Taliban authorities to ensure UNAMA, human rights monitors and humanitarian INGOs and NGOs have unhindered access to all detention facilities in Afghanistan, including access to all detained members of civil society and women's rights activists.
- Push for the reinstatement of human rights protection mechanisms such as the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission.
- Support accountability measures, including the resumption of investigation into the situation of Afghanistan by the International Criminal Court.

Protection for high risk groups

- Issue emergency visas for the most at risk W/HRDs, members of civil society and media workers (and their dependents) in order to save their lives and protect them from serious human rights violations, both for those residing in Afghanistan and those in third

countries.

- Provide immediate support (including financial and psychosocial support) for those W/HRDs and their families who have fled Afghanistan and are struggling to establish themselves in host countries.
- Provide protection for other high risk groups including judges, lawyers and prosecutors who are at risk of reprisal by the Taliban, especially women, and ensure they are not subjected to refoulement from host States.

Support for civil society

- Continue to effectively support civil society in Afghanistan and in exile, so they can continue their activities, ensuring that the past human rights gains in Afghanistan are protected and can be built upon.
- Allocate adequate financial resources for Afghan NGOs who are working for the protection of human rights defenders, including those in exile as well as in Afghanistan, so that they can continue to document violations and provide vital protection and life-saving services for HRDs and civil society at risk.
- Ensure that the terms of financial support for civil society take into account ground realities of working under restrictions imposed by the de facto authorities. For example Taliban restrictions banning women from holding director positions in NGOs has precluded some NGOs from accessing donor funds that can only be allocated to ‘women-led’ organisations.
- Actively advocate for the reinstatement of women in international and local NGOs, so that resources and humanitarian aid distribution can be guaranteed and can reach women and women-led households.
- Continue to create space to effectively engage with Afghan HRDs and civil society; support ongoing coordination initiatives by Afghan civil society groups inside and outside Afghanistan; recognize and promote Afghan civil society as partners, including them in decision-making processes related to Afghanistan.
- Ensure State delegations meeting Taliban de facto authorities always include women, as a way to continue promoting women’s rights and equality in public spaces.

Organizational background: SRMO

The Safety and Risk Mitigation Organization (SRMO), established in May 2013, is an Afghan led non-governmental organization dedicated to providing protection to human right defenders (HRDs) and grassroots activists at risk in Afghanistan. SRMO was established in response to growing insecurity and threats to Afghan civil society, as well as the lack of institutional mechanisms to provide protection to this community. Its main objective is to empower and protect Afghan civil society, NGOs and HRDs, so that they may continue their fundamental work. SRMO also focuses on advocating for greater state protection and accountability for any

abuses civil society may suffer as a result of their activities. The organization works in close collaboration with HRDs, grassroots activists and local NGOs to ensure that their needs are met, specially focusing on insecure and rural areas where there is a limited presence of NGOs and international organizations, and where HRDs have very narrow contact with international organizations or diplomatic and UN missions for protection.

Throughout its years of activities, SRMO has successfully implemented several protection mechanisms, such as: a 24-hour Protection Hotline for urgent assistance to grassroots HRDs at risk; an early-warning system that monitors daily security, political and other developments affecting the work of HRDs and NGOs; security surveillance, needs assessments, security training and risk mitigation and security plans for vulnerable HRDs and Afghan-led NGOs; regular reports on the situation of HRDs in Afghanistan; lobbying with the Afghanistan courts and law enforcement agencies to improve HRDs protection and accountability in cases of attack, intimidation and threats; and advocacy at the national and international level to influence the Afghanistan government and its key international donors and partners towards adopting and implementing policies, laws and programmes that ensure the protection, justice and safety of HRDs in Afghanistan.

Recent activities

SRMO was forced to move its base to London after the Taliban takeover in 2021. However, the organization has adapted to its changed circumstances and has continued its human rights work through various channels. Key activities during 2023 included:

- Monitoring, documenting and reporting on human rights abuses targeting civil society and Afghan civilians more broadly.
- Engaging in advocacy in international fora with a focus on keeping the protection needs of Afghan Human Rights Defenders on the international agenda, in particular calling for increased numbers of humanitarian visas and safe evacuation routes for those activists who are most at risk.
- SRMO is an active member of the Afghanistan Human Rights Coordination Mechanism (AHRCM), a platform designed to increase coordination and joint activism among Afghans both inside and outside Afghanistan.

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SRMO is a member of the following local, regional and international human rights networks:

Afghanistan Human Rights Coordination Mechanism (AHRCM)

Afghanistan Civil Society Forum (ACSF)

Afghan Women Network (AWN)

CIVICUS

Civil Society and Human Rights Network (CSHRN)

Forum Asia

HRDs Protection Committee

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With thanks to those who reviewed the document including Sonya Merkova and Horia Mosadiq.

Annex 1: Key cases of attacks and abuses against HRDs and CSAs Jan-Dec 2023

| Date | Gender | Target | Perpetrator | Province | Incident Type | Number of victims |
|----------|--------|---------------------|-------------|----------|---------------|-------------------|
| 03/01/23 | M | Civilian critic | Taliban | Ghor | Detention | 1 |
| 27/02/23 | M | Civilian critic | Taliban | Ghazni | Detention | 1 |
| 07/01/23 | M | CSA | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 1 |
| 16/01/23 | M | CSA | Taliban | Ghazni | Detention | 1 |
| 08/02/23 | M | CSA | Taliban | Kabul | Killed | 1 |
| Jan-23 | M | CSA | Taliban | Laghman | Detention | 1 |
| 13/02/23 | M | CSA | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 1 |
| 12/02/23 | M | CSA | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 1 |
| 27/03/23 | M | CSA | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 1 |
| 21/01/23 | M | CSA family | Taliban | Paktika | Detention | 1 |
| 11/02/23 | F | WHRD | Taliban | Takhar | Detention | 1 |
| 11/02/23 | F | WHRD | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 1 |
| 16/02/23 | F | WHRD | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 1 |
| 23/03/23 | M | University lecturer | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 1 |
| 08/03/23 | F | WHRD | Taliban | Ghor | Detention | 1 |
| 20/03/23 | F | WHRD | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 1 |
| 26/03/23 | F | WHRD | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 3 |

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| 11/02/23 | M | HRD family | Taliban | Takhar | Detention | 1 |
| 08/03/23 | M | HRD family | Taliban | Ghor | Detention | 1 |
| 06/01/23 | M | Media worker | Taliban | Ghor | Detention | 2 |
| 06/01/23 | F | Media worker | Taliban | Ghor | Detention | 1 |
| Jan-23 | M | Media worker | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 1 |
| 16/02/23 | M | Media worker | Taliban | Kandahar | Detention | 1 |
| 18/02/23 | M | Media worker | Taliban | Takhar | Beating | 4 |
| Jan-23 | M | Media worker | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 1 |
| 02/01/23 | F | Media worker family | Unknown | Kunduz | Beating | 1 |
| 02/01/23 | Unknown (children) | Media worker family | Unknown | Kunduz | Beating | 2 |
| 11/03/23 | M | Media worker family | Taliban | Parwan | Beating | 1 |
| 05/02/23 | M | NGO worker | Unknown | Nangarhar | Kidnapped | 2 |
| 01/02/23 | M | University lecturer | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 1 |
| 02/02/23 | M | University lecturer | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 1 |
| 18/02/23 | M | University lecturer | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 1 |
| 30/01/23 | M | Writer | Unknown | Khost | Killed | 1 |
| 15/02/23 | M | Writer | Taliban | Nangarhar | Detention | 1 |
| 02/04/23 | M | WHRD family | Taliban | Kabul | Killed | 2 |
| 04/04/23 | M | University lecturer | Taliban | Badakhshan | Detention | 1 |
| 05/04/23 | M | University lecturer | Taliban | Baghlan | Detention | 3 |
| 06/04/23 | M | School principal | Taliban | Parwan | Detention | 1 |
| 09/04/23 | M | University lecturer | Taliban | Faryab | Detention | 1 |
| 12/04/23 | M | School principal | Taliban | Panjshir | Detention | 1 |
| 19/04/23 | M | University lecturer | Taliban | Panjshir | Detention | 1 |
| 26/04/23 | M | School principal | Taliban | Baghlan | Killed | 1 |
| 28/04/23 | M | Media worker | Taliban | Badakhshan | Detention | 1 |
| 09/05/23 | M | Media worker | Taliban | Khost | Detention | 4 |
| 16/05/23 | M | CSA | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 1 |
| 19/05/23 | M | Media worker | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 1 |
| 19/05/23 | M | School principal | Taliban | Parwan | Detention | 1 |
| 20/05/23 | M | CSA | Taliban | Unknown | Detention | 1 |
| 27/05/23 | M | Teacher | Taliban | Parwan | Detention | 1 |
| 01/06/23 | M | Teacher | Taliban | Baghlan | Detention | 1 |
| 03/06/23 | M | HRD | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 2 |
| 03/06/23 | M | CSA | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 1 |
| 12/06/23 | M | Teacher | Unknown | Kabul | Killed | 1 |

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| 18/06/23 | M | Media worker | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 1 |
| 18/06/23 | M | INGO worker | Taliban | Kabul | Killed | 1 |
| 29/06/23 | M | Writer | Taliban | Ghazni | Detention | 1 |
| 04/07/23 | F | University lecturer | Unknown | Samangan | Disappearance | 1 |
| 14/07/23 | M | CSA | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 1 |
| 23/07/23 | M | CSA | Taliban | Nangarhar | Killed | 1 |
| 04/08/23 | M | Civilian critic | Taliban | Takhar | Beating | 1 |
| 12/08/23 | F | WHRD | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 1 |
| 20/08/23 | F | WHRD | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 8 |
| 23/08/23 | M | University lecturer | Taliban | Parwan | Detention | 1 |
| 22/08/23 | M | CSA | Taliban | Kabul | Killed | 1 |
| 14/09/23 | F | NGO worker | Taliban | Ghor | Detention | 1 |
| 14/09/23 | Unknown | NGO worker | Taliban | Ghor | Detention | 19 |
| 19/09/23 | F | WHRD | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 1 |
| 19/09/23 | M | WHRD family | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 2 |
| 27/09/23 | F | WHRD | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 1 |
| 27/09/23 | M | WHRD family | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 1 |
| 08/07/23 | M | Media worker | Taliban | Jawzjan | Detention | 1 |
| 13/07/23 | M | Media worker | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 2 |
| 18/07/23 | M | Media worker | Taliban | Nangarhar | Detention | 1 |
| 26/07/23 | M | Media worker | Taliban | Faryab | Detention | 1 |
| 31/07/23 | M | Media worker | Taliban | Balkh | Detention | 3 |
| 08/08/23 | M | Media worker | Taliban | Ghazni | Detention | 1 |
| 10/08/23 | M | Media worker | Taliban | Kunduz | Detention | 1 |
| 11/08/23 | M | Media worker | Taliban | Nangarhar | Detention | 2 |
| 11/08/23 | M | Media worker | Taliban | Paktia | Detention | 1 |
| 13/08/23 | M | Media worker | Taliban | Kandahar | Detention | 3 |
| 11/08/23 | M | Media worker | Taliban | Kunar | Detention | 1 |
| 26/09/23 | M | Media worker | Taliban | Kabul | Beating | 1 |
| 27/09/23 | M | Media worker | Taliban | Daikundi | Detention | 3 |
| 16/09/23 | M | Teacher | Taliban | Daikundi | Beating | 2 |
| 05/10/23 | F | WHRD | Taliban | Takhar | Harassment | 1 |
| 09/10/23 | F | WHRD | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 1 |
| 12/10/23 | M | Teacher | Taliban | Ghor | Detention | 1 |
| 14/10/23 | M | CSA | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 1 |
| 28/10/23 | F | WHRD | Taliban | Balkh | Detention | 1 |

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| 02/11/23 | M | CSA | Taliban | Herat | Detention | 1 |
| 09/11/23 | M | Political Analyst | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 1 |
| 13/11/23 | M | CSA | Taliban | Baghlan | Detention | 1 |
| 14/11/23 | F | WHRD | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 1 |
| 21/11/23 | F | WHRD | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 1 |
| 23/11/23 | M | CSA | Taliban | Bamyan | Detention | 1 |
| 23/11/23 | M | NGO worker | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 4 |
| 25/11/23 | F | WHRD | Taliban | Takhar | Detention | 1 |
| 26/11/23 | M | NGO worker | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 1 |
| 11/12/23 | M | University lecturer | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 2 |
| 20/11/23 | M | CSA | Taliban | Kabul | Detention | 2 |
| 22/10/23 | M | Media worker | Taliban | Balkh | Detention | 1 |
| 05/12/23 | M | Media worker | Taliban | Parwan | Detention | 1 |
| 12/12/23 | M | Media worker | Taliban | Kandahar | Detention | 1 |
| 19/12/23 | M | Media worker | Taliban | Parwan | Detention | 1 |