

THEIR LIVES ON THE LINE

Women Human Rights Defenders in Afghanistan
Spring 2016 — Activist Toolkit



Dear Human Rights Defender,

Amnesty International's April 2015 Report, *Their Lives on the Line: Women Human Rights Defenders Under Attack in Afghanistan*, found that women human rights defenders who face mounting violence - including threats, sexual assault and assassinations- are being abandoned by their government despite the significant gains they have fought to achieve.

Women human rights defenders are women and men who, individually or collectively, work peacefully to promote and protect nationally and internationally recognized human rights for women. They are defined by their actions rather than by their profession, job title or organization. They can be elected officials, state representatives such as police or government administrators, community leaders, civil society activists, journalists, lawyers, students, teachers, businesspeople, health care workers or housewives.

Insecurity is an inherent part of life for women human rights defenders in Afghanistan. They are frequently targets of intimidation and attack and face challenges both because of who they are and what they do: because they promote and protect women's rights, and because they defy cultural, religious and social norms about the role of women in society. **Rights defenders have suffered car bombings, grenade attacks on homes, killing of family members and targeted assassinations. Many continue their work despite suffering multiple attacks, in the full knowledge that no action will be taken against the perpetrators.**

Amnesty International found that while the Taliban and other armed opposition groups are responsible for the majority of abuses against women human rights defenders, they are not the only perpetrators. Government officials and powerful commanders and warlords who are supported by local authorities have also been implicated in committing human rights abuses against women human rights defenders. **The pattern of abuse against women human rights defenders is matched by the systematic failure of the authorities to bring perpetrators to justice, or to provide an environment that protects them.**

The institutionalized indifference on the part of the authorities to the threats, harassment and attacks that women human rights defenders face is a result of weak state structures, in particular the law enforcement, judiciary and security sectors. This is reinforced by an enduring culture of impunity, systemic gender discrimination and biases, a judicial system based on the ability to wield power rather than on a concept of justice, and a multiplicity of legal systems. Existing support and protection services for women human rights defenders are exceptionally lacking. They are under-resourced and overstretched with limited capacity, as well as lacking in sufficient security. **Help bring attention to Amnesty's report**, the incredible and brave Afghan WHRDS, and the discrimination and violence that many of them face!

Yours sincerely,

Elsie De Laere, Afghanistan Country Specialist
Kaitlyn Denzler, Women's Rights Campaigner



WHAT CAN YOU

Building a state based on rule of law by strengthening the effective functioning of government institutions, ending a culture of impunity, and translating national laws into realities on the ground are necessary preconditions for creating an environment that affords women human rights defenders better protection. Ultimately, however, transformational societal change in gender relations is needed if women human rights defenders are going to be truly secure.

Amnesty International made a number of calls in the report. Protection, especially for those in rural areas, is essential; there must be no discrimination in the level of protection; there must be prosecutions, using appropriate legislation. The culture of harassment in public institutions must be addressed, and the authorities must challenge attitudes which lead to abuses.

- 1) **Call your Senator/Representative** and express your concern—see the sample script
- 2) **Send a personal letter** & the executive summary to your Sen/Rep— See sample letter
- 3) **Learn more and share** the Afghan Women Rights Defenders photo display — Read the report/executive summary and **host a photo display** in your local community!

For a copy of the report and executive summary, go to: www.amnestyusa.org/afghanistan

For more information on Afghan Women Human Right Defenders contact:

Elsie De Laere, Afghanistan Country Specialist, e.delaere@sbcglobal.net

Kaitlyn Denzler, Women's Right Campaigner, kdenzler@aiusa.org

Call Your Representative — Tips and Sample

Making a quick phone call is a personal and effective way to make your voice and concerns heard with your Representatives!

Phone Tips:

- For your Senator/ Representative's phone number, go to this site:
http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/
- Telephone calls are usually taken by a staff member. When you call, you should ask to speak to the staffer who handles international human rights or women's issues.
- Tell the staffer you are a constituent (they care about the views of their constituents) and tell them you would like to leave a brief message for your Senator/Representative.
- Offer to send them more information or a draft statement if that would be helpful to them. Thank them for taking the call!
- After you have called, email Kaitlyn Denzler at kdenzler@aiusa.org and let us know how the call went so we can track the effectiveness of the action.

Sample Call Script:

"Hello, my name is _____ and I am calling to let Senator/Representative _____ know about the situation of Afghan women human rights defenders in Afghanistan. I am calling as a constituent of Representative _____ and a member of the human rights organization, Amnesty International."

"I would like to draw Senator/Representative _____'s attention to a recent report by Amnesty International entitled, *Their Lives on the Line: Women Human Rights Defenders Under Attack in Afghanistan*. The report highlights the serious threats to, harassment of, and violence perpetrated against women human rights defenders in a climate of impunity in Afghanistan. Those who defend women's rights—even those who simply teach women and girls—do so at grave risk to their own lives."

"I am deeply concerned about the treatment of Afghan women human rights defenders and would like to call on Senator/Representative _____ to help call attention to women's human rights defenders to better ensure that they can continue their important work free from intimidation or threats to their lives. Amnesty International includes a number of specific recommendations in its report, which I would like to send you if possible [you can ask for their email address here or another way to get them the executive summary and report]."

"Thank you so much for taking my call. I really appreciate your time and I hope that Senator/ Representative _____ will help defend Afghan women human rights defenders by calling more attention to this issue."

If you are unable to speak to a staff member, leave a message with a quick blurb on the issue and provide them with your contact information so they can get back to you.

Write Your Representative – Sample Letter

[Your Name, Address and Contact Info]

[Representative's Name and Address]

[Date]

Dear Senator/Representative _____,

I am writing to you as your constituent and a member of Amnesty International. I would like to call your attention to the report by Amnesty International from April 2015, *Their lives on the Line: Women Human Rights Defenders Under Attack in Afghanistan*. In this report, of which I have included a copy with this letter, you will read how there are serious threats to, harassment of, and violence perpetrated against women human rights defenders in a climate of impunity in Afghanistan.

The nine key case studies featured in the report illustrate the range of violence women human rights defenders are confronted with on a daily basis: from threats, harassment and intimidation to physical attacks on property and family members, and attempts on their life. Amnesty International found that while the Taliban and other armed opposition groups are responsible for the majority of abuses against women human rights defenders, they are not the only perpetrators.

Government officials and powerful commanders and warlords who are supported by local authorities have also been implicated in committing human rights abuses against women human rights defenders. The pattern of abuse against women human rights defenders is matched by the systematic failure of the authorities to bring perpetrators to justice, or to provide an environment that protects them.

I am deeply concerned about the treatment of Afghan women human rights defenders, and I therefore call upon you to prioritize support and resources to women's rights and women human rights defenders in Afghanistan. Since the United States is a key international partner with Afghanistan, I also urge you to raise the recommendations that are included in the report to protect Afghan women human rights defenders in order to ensure that they can continue their important work free from intimidation or threats to their lives.

I welcome further discussion of these issues. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any comments or questions.

Sincerely,

Afghan Women Human Rights Display

What's the photo display?

The photo display is a series of twelve beautiful photos that capture Women Human Rights Defenders in Afghanistan. Each photo will be accompanied by a caption card that explains the photograph, as well as an information page on the campaign, a contact your representatives page, and petitions.

Where should the photo display be presented?

Anywhere within your community! Host an event at a local coffee shop, at your university, or in your community center. Have the call script and sample at your event so people can take action after they see the display.

How do I promote my event?

Coordinate with your Field Organizer and reach out within your community and online. Create an event on social media, contact local groups that would be interested in attending and promoting the photo display, and utilize the Amnesty International report to highlight the importance of Women Human Rights Defenders, here: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa11/1279/2015/en/>

How do I acquire the photo display?

Contact Aashka Merchant at (212) 633-4160 or amerchant@aiusa.org to have the photos and information sent to you. Following the event, send the materials back to your regional office so more photo displays can take place!



Here is an overview of the photos and captions you will receive for your display



Aziza Khairandish responds to a call about a case where a woman's nose and ears were cut off by her husband, who is now on the run —Aziza is trying to get the authorities to act.

Aziza used to educate girls in secret when her home town of Herat was under Taliban control. Since 2006, she has headed the western regional office of the Afghanistan Civil Society & Human Rights Network. Still based in Herat, she promotes the rights of women and girls not just through awareness raising and youth forums, but also by directly challenging hard-line mullahs – something that leaves her and her family exposed to threats.



Fawzia Nawabi, investigator at the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, Mazar-e-Sharif, gathers information in a local women's prison.



Fawzia Nawabi, investigator at the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, Mazar-e-Sharif, shares stories at a shelter for women at risk.



Defending women's rights is not restricted to women only. Habib-Uk-Rahman works as a lawyer for an organization that provides legal aid and protection for women and girls fleeing violence in Kabul. "There should be men supporting every institution for women like this one," he said.

Jawad Sadat is a university law professor and human rights specialist, who is also constantly in demand for interviews by local media about women's rights. He uses his multiple public platforms to raise awareness with local communities about the rights of women and girls.



Civil engineer Manizha Paktin (left), director and co-founder of Stand Up for Afghan Women, instructs builders at a construction site in Kabul.



Maria Bashir is Afghanistan's only female prosecutor general, based in Herat. She has braved serious threats to combat corruption, crime, and domestic abuse, handling hundreds of cases of violence against women in 2014 alone. But Bashir's championing of the cause of abused women has made her a target — her house was bombed in 2007, and her children live with death threats.



Najiba Ayubi has been at the forefront of Afghan journalism for almost three decades, and today heads one of the country's largest media groups, Killid. Her outspokenness has come with a cost — she has faced harassment and threatening phone calls throughout her career, and a few years ago had to pretend to be someone else when gunmen showed up at her door following a report criticizing two MPs.





Sherifa Shahab is the police ombudsman for the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission in the western Herat province. She deals with cases of police abuse against civilians, as well as fighting abuse within the police force, particularly endemic sexual harassment of women police officers. Here, she consoles the father of a detainee who complained of ill treatment at the hands of the police.



Demonstration in Kabul by civil society organizations against the sexual harassment of girls and women in Afghanistan.



Demonstration in Kabul by civil society organizations against the sexual harassment of girls and women in Afghanistan.

Shows unidentified speaker addressing crowd and press.



Mozhgan Entazar runs a small organization fighting to improve pay and standards for women working in factories in Herat. Here she is speaking to a local Imam who shares an office with her.



Amnesty International is a global movement of more than 7 million people who campaign for a world where human rights are enjoyed by all.

Our vision is for every person to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion and are funded mainly by our membership and public donations.

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