



Women Journalists in Afghanistan:

From Self-Censorship to Professional Downgrading

Examining the Challenges Facing Women Journalists, 2021–2026

Since the change of political regime in Afghanistan in 2021, media activity in the country has faced extensive restrictions. Beyond the general limitations on freedom of expression and access to information, women journalists face systematic restrictions rooted in gender and profession. This paper, produced by the Women Organization for Rights, Dignity and Speech (WORDS), examines the challenges facing women journalists who remain in Afghanistan, based on interviews with 40 women journalists across seven zones including the capital city of the country, alongside a review of reports and data published by media institutions. Among the 40 journalists studied, all reported practicing self-censorship; 25 raised the issue of the mahram (male guardian) requirement; 20 reported a sharp drop in income or being employed as trainees; 10 reported changing profession; and five reported leaving the workforce entirely. Five journalists reported experiencing interrogations lasting two to three hours, and five reported intending to leave the country.

The findings show that existing restrictions have not only reduced women journalists' access to sources and their professional freedom of action, but in some cases have led to reduced income, changed professional roles, career departure, and withdrawal from the workforce altogether.

Journalists also reported facing various restrictions on access to information, interviewing officials, choosing subjects, and how reports are prepared and published. Beyond general media restrictions, women journalists face barriers that affect their professional activity specifically because of their gender, including restricted attendance at press conferences, difficulty conducting interviews, a mahram (male guardian) requirement on certain work assignments, and restrictions on carrying out certain stages of news production. In the 2026 World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Afghanistan ranked 175th out of 180 countries. The country held the same rank, 175th, in 2025, having ranked 178th in 2024. Despite this shift in ranking, Afghanistan remains among the countries with a very poor press freedom environment.

The Afghanistan Journalists Center also recorded at least 205 cases of violence and press freedom violations in its 2025 annual report, including 34 cases of journalists and media workers being detained. This data is not broken down by gender, making it impossible to determine how many of those detained were women journalists.

This paper therefore seeks to move beyond general journalist statistics and focus instead on the direct experience of women journalists, examining the specific difficulties faced by women who continue to work in media inside Afghanistan.



Research Objective

The primary objective of this research is to examine the situation and challenges facing women journalists in Afghanistan since 2021.

The secondary objectives are:

- ❖ To examine the extent of self-censorship among women journalists;
- ❖ To examine restrictions on their access to officials and press conferences;
- ❖ To examine the role of the mahram (male guardian) requirement in women journalists' professional activity;
- ❖ To examine their income and job security situation;
- ❖ To examine the changes that have occurred in how women journalists in Afghanistan carry out their work;
- ❖ To examine the rate of career departure and workforce withdrawal among the journalists studied;
- ❖ To examine security pressures and interrogation experiences;
- ❖ To examine the state of women's presence in media management.



Research Methodology

This paper uses a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative methods, complemented by thematic analysis. The primary research data was obtained through interviews with 40 women journalists in Afghanistan.

Of these, 20 journalists in Kabul were interviewed in person; the remaining journalists, across other zones, were interviewed by telephone. Journalists' names were not recorded or published, in order to protect their security and preserve the confidentiality of their identities. References to the names of provinces that could lead to source identification have also been avoided. To complement and compare findings, reports and data published by media and freedom-of-expression institutions were used, including Reporters Without Borders (RSF), the

Afghanistan Media Support Organization (AMSO), the Afghanistan Journalists Center (AFJC), and domestic media outlets.

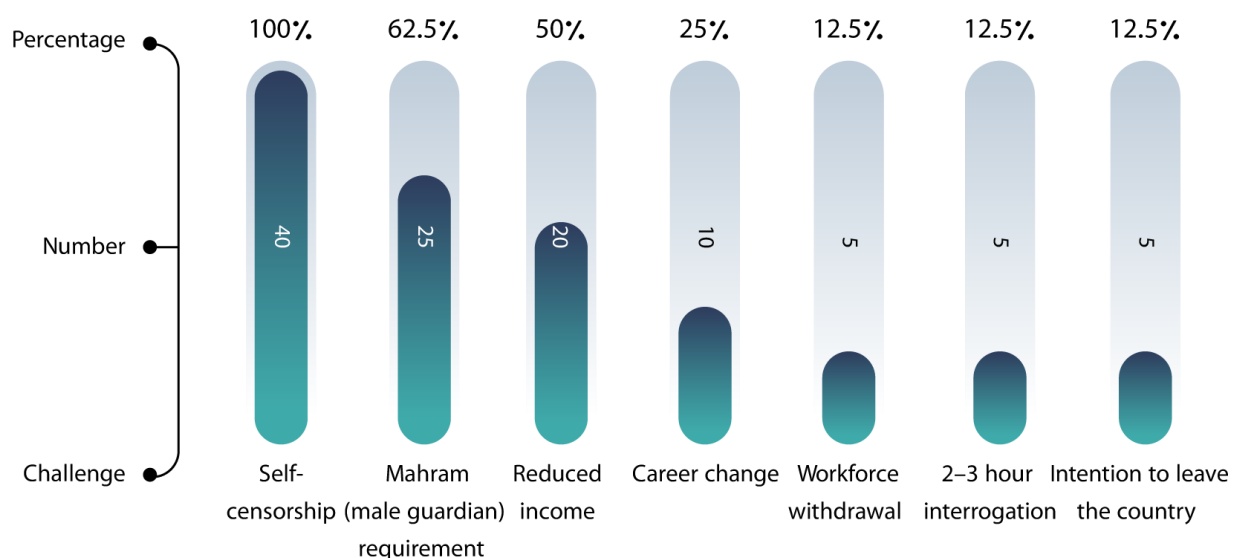
In the quantitative section, journalists' responses were calculated by number and percentage. Given the sample size, these percentages relate only to the 40 journalists studied and should not be generalized to all women journalists in Afghanistan.



Research Findings

Data obtained from interviews with 40 women journalists shows that the journalists studied face a combination of professional, economic, gender-based, and security restrictions. The chart below presents the most important quantitative findings of this research, based on the number and percentage of journalists.

Distribution of Number and Percentage of Journalists Among the 40 Women Journalists Studied



Self-Censorship: A Shared Experience Among Journalists

Restrictions on Press Conferences and Access to Officials

Among the 20 women journalists interviewed in Kabul, all 20 said that under current conditions they do not have the right to ask officials questions freely at press conferences. Some participants in this study said that in very limited cases they are permitted to attend press conferences, but are sometimes only able to hear an official's remarks from behind a curtain or behind physical barriers, without the right to ask a question. This situation restricts women journalists' direct access to official sources and makes them more dependent on unofficial sources or male colleagues in preparing their reports. Restrictions on women journalists' presence and participation at official events have also been raised in human rights reports.





Mahram: A More Pronounced Barrier in the Provinces

25 of the 40 journalists studied, equivalent to 62.5 percent raised the mahram (male guardian) issue as one of the difficulties in their professional work.

This problem was far more pronounced among provincial journalists: 19 of 20 provincial journalists, equivalent to 95 percent, raised it. In Kabul, six of 20 journalists, equivalent to 30 percent, spoke of this problem.

Journalists said the mahram (male guardian) issue arises mainly during work assignments, travel from one province to another, and coverage of certain events.

One provincial journalist said she had been asked by Amr bil Ma'ruf (Vice and Virtue) officials whether she was accompanied by a mahram (male guardian). A journalist from the eastern zone of the country also recalled being told at one point that she needed to be accompanied by a mahram (male guardian) even inside the media office itself. According to her, continuing to work under such conditions was not possible, and she ultimately left journalism.

This finding shows that in some regions, the mahram (male guardian) issue does not merely restrict women journalists' movement, it can directly affect whether they are able to continue their professional work at all.



Changing Roles for Women in News Production

One of the important findings of this research is the change in how women journalists work, and the reduced role some now play in stages of news production. Journalists from three northern provinces said that the relevant authorities have asked them not to travel personally to conduct interviews, and that a male family member or male colleague be sent to conduct the interview instead. To preserve confidentiality and prevent source identification, the names of these provinces are not disclosed in this paper.

North and Southwest Zones

Journalists from the northern and southwestern provinces of the country said that interviews for their reports are now conducted by their male colleagues. After obtaining the information, they prepare the report themselves, but the narration of their reports is also now done by their male colleagues. This is in contrast to before, when they carried out every stage of preparing their reports themselves.

Eastern Zone

A woman journalist in the eastern zone of the country said that she previously carried out every stage of report production herself at a radio outlet, from conducting interviews and asking follow-up questions to preparing the report and narrating it. Now, however, she mostly writes text-based reports for a website, while her male colleagues conduct the interviews. She added that if a follow-up question or additional interview/data is needed to complete a report, officials do not provide the necessary cooperation. These experiences show that existing restrictions are not only about "permission to work", in some cases, they have severely affected the role women journalists play in the news production process itself.





Reduced Income and Professional Downgrading

20 of the 40 journalists interviewed, equivalent to 50 percent said they now work for low pay, as trainees, or for very limited compensation. The salaries reported by journalists ranged between 4,000 and 10,000 Afghanis per month. These 20 journalists said that during the Republic era they worked as professional journalists in the media and had better salaries; now, however, some media outlets employ them as trainees or for a small sum. Some of these journalists also said that at times only their transportation costs are covered, yet they continue working because of their commitment to the profession and their wish not to be cut off from the media community and their professional work.

This situation is comparable to the findings of the Salam Watandar report on women's unpaid labour. Salam Watandar Radio, based on interviews with 40 women volunteers across 11 provinces, reported that 15 of them work in media on a voluntary basis. This figure, however, relates specifically to Salam Watandar Radio's own research and should not be generalized to all women journalists in Afghanistan.



Career Change and Withdrawal from the Workforce

10 of the 40 journalists, equivalent to 25 percent said they had changed profession due to the difficulty of continuing their professional work.

Among them: two changed to sales work; three to tailoring; two to teaching; and three others did not provide precise information about their current occupation.

In addition, five, equivalent to 12.5 percent said they are now out of the workforce entirely. These individuals cited media managers' preference for male journalists, and concern about facing difficulties in professional work, as reasons for stepping away from their jobs.

By contrast, five other journalists said they continue to work as primary staff members with reasonable pay — but that their workload has increased, because a large number of professional journalists have left the country, leaving them to take on additional responsibilities.



Interrogation and Security Pressures

Five of the 40 journalists, equivalent to 12.5 percent said they had experienced interrogations lasting two to three hours. They said these interrogations followed certain news-related questions they had raised. At the same time, none of the 40 journalists interviewed raised a direct threat of arrest as a personal experience.

This research therefore cannot claim that the threat of arrest is a universal experience among women journalists; however, the findings show that concern over security consequences plays a role in some journalists' professional decision-making.

General statistics on the detention of journalists are also largely not broken down by gender. For example, the United Nations had, by late 2024, recorded more than 256 cases of journalists and media workers being detained since the Taliban's return to power but this figure includes both women and men. It is therefore not possible to determine from it how many detained journalists were women.





Concern Over Leaving the Country

Five of the 40 journalists, equivalent to 12.5 percent said they intend to leave Afghanistan. These journalists said they would prefer to leave the country but do not have a practical means of doing so. Comprehensive, disaggregated data on the number of women journalists who have left Afghanistan since 2021 does not exist in public sources. Figures relating to the migration of women journalists should therefore be used with caution, and any such figure should be accompanied by its source, date, and method of collection.



Fear of Consequences for Family

One woman journalist in this study said she left journalism out of fear that if her professional work caused problems, the male members of her family would also face difficulty. While this single case cannot represent the experience of all women journalists, it is an important qualitative example showing that the potential consequences of journalistic work can influence women's decisions about whether to continue in or leave the profession.



The State of Women-Led Media Outlets

A review by the Women Organization for Rights, Dignity and Speech (WORDS) of the list of registered media outlets held by the Ministry of Information and Culture shows that, during the Republic era in Afghanistan, a number of media outlets were run by women.

According to this data: five radio stations, two television stations and one radio-television station, three news agencies, one magazine, five newspapers, and approximately 30 weekly, monthly, annual, occasional/periodical, and quarterly publications were run by women.

Based on information gathered for this research, none of the above-mentioned television stations, radio-television stations, news agencies, magazines, or newspapers are currently operating in Afghanistan. Some of them have continued to operate from exile. Of the five radio stations that were under women's management during the Republic era, only Begum Radio remains active but according to this research, its license holder and manager is a man, with women playing an informal role in its management. This data relates specifically to women-managed media outlets and should not be equated with the total number of outlets where women worked as journalists or staff.



Discussion and Analysis of Findings

The findings of this research show that the challenges facing women journalists cannot be reduced to a single factor. Restrictions have affected their work across several levels.

At the first level, self-censorship has narrowed journalists' professional space. When all 40 journalists studied speak of self-censorship, it can be said that fear of potential consequences has become part of their daily working process.



At the second level, restricted access to officials and official sources has reduced women journalists' capacity to produce independent reporting. Limited attendance at press conferences and the absence of the right to ask questions directly affect the quality and independence of their reporting.

At the third level, gender-based restrictions such as the mahram (male guardian) requirement in some provinces have increasingly narrowed the scope of women's work. The finding that 19 of 20 provincial journalists raised this issue shows that, within the sample studied, this matter was far more pronounced in the provinces than in the central zone of the country, particularly the capital.

At the fourth level lies reduced income and professional downgrading. Half of the journalists studied now work for low pay or in trainee positions, even though many of them were previously professional journalists with work experience and better salaries.



Limitations of the Research

This research faced several serious limitations. The data for this report was gathered inside the country, and given the climate of fear prevailing there, journalists expressed concern about speaking freely on certain matters. Comprehensive, disaggregated data on the number of women journalists in Afghanistan, imprisoned women journalists, their migration, workforce withdrawal, and career change does not exist in public sources in a consistent, systematic form. Figures published by different institutions on the number of women journalists vary from one another, and the method of data collection is not always clear.



Conclusion

The findings of this research, based on the sampling conducted, show that the women journalists who remain in Afghanistan face a combination of professional, economic, security, and gender-based restrictions. The findings show that the pressure on women journalists is not limited to restrictions on publishing content or accessing information, it also affects how they carry out their work, their income, their professional standing, and their decisions about whether to remain in the profession. In the provinces, these restrictions are in some cases more severe: a woman journalist may be unable to personally conduct an interview, with tasks such as interviewing and narration handed to male colleagues instead. Under such conditions, women may formally remain “journalists” while losing part of the core function of journalism itself.

At the same time, half of the journalists studied face a significant reduction in income or a change in job title, while others have changed profession or withdrawn from the workforce entirely due to the difficulty of continuing their work. Overall, the findings of this research show that the future of women's presence in Afghan media does not depend solely on the number of active media outlets — it also depends on their access to sources, their ability to carry out professional duties independently, job security, income, and the space necessary for free professional activity. Given the absence of comprehensive, disaggregated data on the situation of women journalists, establishing a systematic mechanism for recording information on women's presence, migration, career departure, detention, workforce withdrawal, and working conditions in media could offer a more accurate picture of this group's situation.



Sources

1. Data collected by the Women Organization for Rights, Dignity and Speech (WORDS) from interviews with 40 women journalists residing inside Afghanistan.
2. Reporters Without Borders (RSF), World Press Freedom Index and report.
3. Afghanistan Media Support Organization (AMSO), The Resilience of Women Journalists in Afghanistan Following the Regime Change.
4. Afghanistan Journalists Center (AFJC), report on the state of media freedom and journalists in 2025.
5. Salam Watandar, report on women volunteers and unpaid labour.
6. United Nations reports on the situation of journalists and media freedom in Afghanistan.
7. List of registered media outlets, Ministry of Information and Culture of Afghanistan, used by the Women Organization for Rights, Dignity and Speech (WORDS) to examine women-managed media outlets.

Women Organization for Rights, Dignity and Speech (WORDS)

