

Desperate Afghan Women Wait for U.S. Protection, as Promised

Afghan women who worked with the U.S. or international groups are frantically erasing any trace of those links for fear that they will be targeted by the Taliban.



By Lara Jakes

Published Aug. 18, 2021 Updated Oct. 7, 2021

WASHINGTON — Even as they cling to hope of being rescued by the American government, Afghan women who worked with the United States over the past 20 years are destroying any hint of that association — shredding documents written in English, deleting social media apps and then burying their cellphones.

Current and former U.S. officials and activists described the desperate steps Afghan women have taken since the Taliban's takeover of their country this week as a grim reminder of the heightened threat they face because of their gender.

Any attempt to contact American or international refugee agencies is a risk that most Afghan women are not willing to take, the officials and activists said. Even going to the airport in Kabul, to try to secure a place on an American or international flight overflowing with anguished Afghans, has become a life-or-death decision.

"The most dangerous place in Afghanistan right now is the Kabul airport," Rina Amiri, a former official at the State Department and United Nations, said on Tuesday. She recounted stories of women and their families being caught between volleys of gunfire, or beaten by Taliban supporters, as they tried but failed to find a plane that would fly them out.

"It's just damning that the United States and the international community have put these women in the position of having to risk not only their lives, but that of their children and families, in order to leave and save themselves and their families," Ms. Amiri said.

Afghan men make up most of the interpreters and cultural officers who have worked for the United States over the 20-year war and, in turn, have been granted special access to immigrate. That is one reason relatively few women have been among the thousands of people who have been evacuated from Afghanistan over the past month — including more than 4,800 as of Wednesday morning since the Taliban's takeover of the government in Kabul. Tens of thousands of visa applicants remain stranded across the country.

The Biden administration in recent weeks has expanded immigration and refugee resettlement programs to allow more Afghans — including women — into the United States. Wendy R. Sherman, the deputy secretary of state, said on Wednesday that the administration would use every economic, political and diplomatic tool available to ensure the rights of women who will remain in Afghanistan under Taliban rule.

"This is personal for me," said Ms. Sherman, recounting meeting with Afghan women in a refugee camp in 1997. "That memory will never be wiped from my mind. Societies could not flourish and prosper without the full participation of women and girls back then, and they cannot flourish and prosper, without women and girls now."

On Wednesday, the United States joined 20 countries and the European Union in demanding that the rights of Afghan women be protected, and pledging to send humanitarian aid and other support "to ensure that their voices can be heard."



A Taliban fighter threatening a woman who was waiting to enter the Kabul airport with her family on Wednesday. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

“We are deeply worried about Afghan women and girls, their rights to education, work and freedom of movement,” the countries said in a joint statement released by the State Department.

But leading lawmakers in Congress said that was not enough to secure even a limited number of women — politicians, human rights activists, journalists, soldiers and defenders of democracy — who could be at the top of the list of Taliban targets.

This week, most Democrats and two Republicans in the Senate urged Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken and the homeland security secretary, Alejandro N. Mayorkas, to rush Afghan women who are at high risk to the United States under a temporary status, and deal with the paperwork after they were out of danger.

“We and our staff are receiving regular reports regarding the targeting, threatening, kidnapping, torturing and assassinations of women for their work,” the senators wrote in a letter on Monday.

Updates on Afghanistan Sign up for a daily email with the latest news on the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

They added, “We must also protect those women who might fall through the cracks of the U.S. government’s response.”

In remarks on Monday, Mr. Biden said the United States would “continue to speak out for the basic rights of the Afghan people — of women and girls — just as we speak out all over the world.”

Taliban leaders have portrayed their group as more socially evolved than it was 20 years ago, when extremists beat women without warning, required them to wear head-to-toe burqas, limited their public outings, refused to let them work and prevented girls from attending school.

“We assure that there will be no violence against women,” the Taliban’s chief spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, told journalists on Tuesday. He promised that “no prejudice against women will be allowed,” and said that they could participate in society — “within the bounds of Islamic law.”

The Biden administration has warned the Taliban that Afghanistan will not receive financial support if the group reverts to its extremist roots, including by oppressing women. On Monday, the U.N. Security Council made clear that for the Taliban to be considered a legitimate government — and receive aid — it must not only reject support and safe haven for terrorist organizations and allow humanitarian access into Afghanistan, but also protect human rights, specifically for women and girls.

“The U.S. needs to be careful in terms of the recognition that it gives to the Taliban,” said Lisa Curtis, who oversaw policy for Afghanistan and elsewhere in Central and South Asia on the National Security Council during the Trump administration. “We need to see concrete examples that they’re going to provide human rights, they’re going to maintain women’s rights.”

Already, Afghan central bank assets held in the United States have been frozen by the Treasury Department, and other direct American aid to the government in Kabul has halted to prevent the Taliban from misusing the funding, two officials said.



Afghan men make up most of the interpreters and cultural officers who have worked for the United States over the 20-year war and, in turn, have been granted special access to immigrate. Shekib Rahmani/Associated Press

Just two months ago, the U.S. Agency for International Development announced it would send \$266 million in aid to help Afghans struggling with food and clothing shortages caused by conflict. That brought the aid agency's total funding to Afghanistan to nearly \$3.9 billion since 2002, most of it funneled through relief agencies.

Much of that money has paid for educating Afghan women, training them for jobs and making sure they have better access to maternal, pediatric and other health care. One U.S.-funded program, known as Promote, prepared nearly 24,000 women who were once housebound to join the country's work force and sharpened the negotiation skills of 5,000 so that they could press for gender equity — including in the peace process with the Taliban that is now defunct.

A U.S. aid program that trained midwives proved so successful that it became a flagship project for the World Bank and secured funding from the European Union.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

But while some schools across Afghanistan remain open, others are closing. In some parts of the country, the Taliban have assured women who are doctors and health workers that their clinics will remain open. In other areas, women are unsure if they should even venture outside their homes without their husbands.

"I want to go out, I want to drive — I like driving," Fahima Saman said in an interview from Kabul on Tuesday, speaking only on the condition that she not be identified by her full name for fear of a Taliban reprisal. "But because of this situation, I cannot — I am afraid."

A high school teacher and mother of two, Fahima, 29, said she and her husband never applied to immigrate to the United States, given that they both had jobs and believed Afghanistan's future would be more stable than its past. More recently, as the threat of the Taliban rose, Fahima said she did not approach the U.S. Embassy or international diplomats for help for fear that other Afghans would think she was doing something improper or immoral.

Fahima said she did not believe the Taliban would respect her rights. “It’s a very bad situation; it’s very dangerous,” she said.

Ms. Amiri, a native of Kabul who is a naturalized U.S. citizen, demanded that the Biden administration back up its words of support for the rights of Afghan women by evacuating at least those who were at high risk.

“It should not just be rhetoric,” she said. “It is all possible. But there has to be the political will and the appetite to do so.”