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# Double Betrayal

Abuses against Afghan Policewomen, Past and Present



# **Double Betrayal**

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Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 979-8-88708-170-0

Cover design by Ivana Vasic

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## Abuses against Afghan Policewomen, Past and Present

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## Summary

Since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, Taliban authorities have threatened Afghan women who had served in the police under the previous government. As Taliban forces carried out hundreds of revenge killings of men who had served in the former government's security forces, many former policewomen went into hiding out of fear of being identified. Some women have described receiving intimidating phone calls from Taliban officials telling them to report for questioning and warning of unspecified consequences related to their former work. Some former policewomen and female corrections officials have been killed, apparently by relatives who believe their work shamed the family, and the Taliban have not conducted credible investigations into these murders. Many former policewomen have fled their homes, seeking refuge in neighboring Iran or Pakistan, or have tried to get to other countries to obtain asylum.

During the years they were employed by the former government, many policewomen experienced sexual assault and harassment by their male supervisors and counterparts in the police. Former policewomen have described systemic abuse, including frequent demands from superiors for sex in exchange for promotion, desirable posts, or avoiding dismissal from jobs. Complaints systems failed to provide any means of redress. While the widespread nature of these abuses was well-known since at least 2013, the former government did not discipline or prosecute police officers responsible for harassment or sexual assault, including rape. Former policewomen have recounted ongoing mental trauma and rejection by family members over perceived shame related to their abuse during this period.

This report is based primarily on 24 interviews with women who were police during the previous government, including in-person interviews conducted in Afghanistan and remote interviews with women now living abroad. The interviewees spoke to Human Rights Watch both about their experiences under the former government and since the Taliban takeover.

In 2009, when the United States and its allies deployed thousands of additional troops and increased civilian aid to Afghanistan in an effort to push back the Taliban, the European Union (EU) launched the European Union Police Mission (EUPOL), a substantial component of which was a training and retention program aimed at increasing the number

of women in the Afghan National Police. However, only a small number of former policewomen who have fled Afghanistan have been resettled in the US, Canada, or any of the European countries that promoted and funded the recruitment and training of Afghan women police after 2002. Despite the risks for them inside Afghanistan, former policewomen have said they have faced enormous obstacles filing applications for resettlement and applying for asylum. For those still in Afghanistan, difficulties in getting passports and fears about being identified as former police have left them feeling trapped.

All women employed under the former government as civil servants, including those in the police, lost their jobs when the Taliban took power. While the Taliban ordered some policewomen to return to work in selected areas including searching women at checkpoints and guarding female prisoners, the majority have struggled to find alternative income because in order to disguise their identity, they moved to areas where they have few networks or support. As a result, Afghanistan's economic collapse has hit the former policewomen particularly hard.

Fear of being identified as former policewomen has compelled many to flee to other parts of country, leaving behind family and social networks that could provide support. Many said that once they lost their income, family members physically abused them and rejected them for having done "shameful" work. Most former policewomen we spoke with reported long-term mental health impacts but were unable to find or afford tailored psychosocial support.

Human Rights Watch calls on the Taliban to cease all harassment, threats, and other abuses of former policewomen and others who worked for the former government. Taliban authorities should impartially investigate cases of abuse and appropriately punish those responsible. The US and other countries that supported programs to train and hire more women to be police should assist those women to obtain asylum now. The US should ensure that female police remaining in Afghanistan or temporarily in third countries seeking US protection should be deemed eligible at least on the same level as other vulnerable categories. The UK, EU and its member states should increase refugee resettlement of Afghan refugees, prioritizing women at risk.

## Recommendations

### To the Taliban

- Cease all acts of intimidation, harassment, and summary punishment of former government officials and others associated with the former government, including women employed by the police.
- End prohibitions and restrictions against the employment of women, including women serving in the police and other government offices.
- Investigate alleged human rights violations against former government officials, including policewomen, and prosecute those responsible, regardless of position or rank, in accordance with international fair trial standards. Report publicly on actions taken.
- Establish a confidential and safe complaints mechanism for women employed in the police or corrections facilities to report abuse; ensure that such complaints are fairly and thoroughly investigated and that those bringing complaints are not subject to any retaliation.
- Establish a mechanism for former policewomen to return weapons without fear of retaliation and return to their normal lives without fear.
- Investigate the fate or whereabouts of people forcibly disappeared, immediately notify their families, and release all those wrongfully held.

### To the United States

- The US should treat former Afghan policewomen like other groups it has helped evacuate and resettle, such as interpreters and members of the Afghan National Security Forces, and ensure that former policewomen remaining in Afghanistan or temporarily in third countries seeking US protection be deemed eligible at least on the same level as other vulnerable categories for the SIV Program, P1 and P2 refugee categories, or the humanitarian parole program, and are provided with safe passage to the US.
- Undertake the identification of all female police personnel and determine their need for US relocation or other assistance.



- Fund psychosocial support services as part of healthcare assistance in Afghanistan, and expand funding for other services targeted at women to provide economic and online educational support.

**To the United Kingdom, the European Union and its member states,  
and Japan**

- Ensure that former policewomen remaining in Afghanistan or temporarily in third countries—including in refugee camps in EU countries and elsewhere—are urgently identified and have access to resettlement, refugee status and other relocation pathways, including assisting them to make applications.

## Methodology

Human Rights Watch carried out research for this report between September 2023 and May 2024. The report is based primarily on 24 interviews with women who were police during the previous government, including 10 in-person and 9 remote interviews conducted in Kabul, Balkh, Nangarhar, Kandahar, and Kunduz provinces and 5 remote interviews in the United States, Sweden, Italy, Iran, and Pakistan. We also interviewed former United Nations officials and civil society activists familiar with the issues.

All interviewees were informed of the purpose of the interview, the ways in which the information would be used, and offered anonymity in our reporting. Most interviews with Afghans were conducted in Dari or Pashto. This report withholds identifying information for most interviewees to protect their privacy and security. In some cases, we have used pseudonyms, which appear in quotation marks, to anonymize individuals for their security. None of the interviewees received financial or other incentives for speaking with us.

On September 3, 2024, Human Rights Watch sent a summary of our findings to the Taliban authorities in Kabul which is available in the report's appendix. As of publication, we had not received a response.

## Women in the Afghan National Police

One of the priorities for the United States and its allies after the invasion of Afghanistan and defeat of the Taliban in 2001 was to create a new Afghan army and police force. As there was no preexisting force to draw upon, the effort entailed a multi-year, multi-billion-dollar program to train and equip new security forces.<sup>1</sup>

Recruiting women for the police was not initially a priority of the post-2001 reconstruction program. The US government, which funded all of Afghanistan's police, military, and other security forces from 2002 through August 2021, focused first on a counterinsurgency force to prevent the return of Al Qaeda and other militant groups.<sup>2</sup> In 2002-2005, most of the new police recruits came from former militias of the Northern Alliance, the force composed of various militias with which the US had cooperated in defeating the Taliban. The commanders of the Northern Alliance saw the new enterprise as a way to retain influence at the powerful Ministry of Interior, and benefit from the millions in funding provided for training and equipping the force. Donor-funded training programs largely failed to root out the militias' influence and entrenched corruption.<sup>3</sup>

In 2006, the Afghan National Police (ANP) employed just 180 women out of over 50,000 personnel, mostly for cleaning, cooking, and searching female passengers at the airport.<sup>4</sup> A few were hired for a pilot project that began that year, establishing all-women Family Response Units intended to help women to bring complaints, including about domestic violence. Recruitment of women into the police was so low initially that even after Germany

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<sup>1</sup> Afghanistan's first police academy was established along with the creation of the Ministry of Interior in 1936 during the reign of King Zahir Shah. It trained no women police. Federico Vecci and Fabio Sappino, "An Historical Overview of Police Reforms and Gender Issues in Afghanistan," 2021, Center of Excellence for Stability Police Units, <https://www.coespu.org/articles/historical-overview-police-reforms-and-gender-issues-afghanistan>, (accessed September 13, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) noted that, "The Afghan National Police is an overwhelmingly male organization that currently operates as a security/counter insurgency agency and not as a public service entity." A Canadian police official who had managed training programs for Afghan policewomen described an "under-investment in...community-oriented policing which undermined the effectiveness of expenditure in relation to women's meaningful deployment and participation." Melissa Jardine, "The world must evacuate women police in Afghanistan," *Policing Insight*, September 8, 2021, <https://policinginsight.com/feature/opinion/the-world-must-evacuate-women-police-in-afghanistan/>, (accessed June 8, 2024).

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Wilder, "Cops or Robbers? The Struggle to Reform the Afghan National Police," *Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit*, July 2007, <https://areu.org.af/publication/717/>, (accessed June 14, 2024).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

built a 200-bed women’s dormitory for female trainees at the police academy, in its first year it had only four residents.<sup>5</sup>

Gradually, more all-women units were established in major cities, but progress was slow. By early 2006, concerns about the growing Taliban insurgency in the south and southeast prompted donors to promise support for more training and resources for the Afghan security forces—but not for women in the police.<sup>6</sup>

In 2009, in response to the growing Taliban threat, the US doubled the number of troops deployed in what was known as the “surge,” aimed at shoring up Afghan government forces and pushing back Taliban gains. As other countries sent additional international military forces and civilian diplomatic and aid staff, donor governments pushed for recruiting more women into the police.<sup>7</sup> The 2009 landmark law on Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW law), which made many forms of violence against women a criminal offense,<sup>8</sup> also gave new impetus to efforts to recruit women into the police.<sup>9</sup> From 2010, increasing the number of women in the security forces became a benchmark for US reform efforts at the Afghan National Police.<sup>10</sup> In that year, the United Nations, through the donor-funded Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan, which was used to pay the salaries of police, began working with the Afghan Ministry of Interior to recruit and train women police. Between 2009 and 2021, the US, Germany, Japan, and the EU spent millions on building facilities and training female recruits as well as paying their salaries. By July 2013, 1,531 policewomen

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<sup>5</sup> Wilder, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> “The Afghanistan Compact,” The London Conference on Afghanistan, January 31 – February 1, 2006, [https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/afghanistan\\_compact.pdf](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/afghanistan_compact.pdf), (accessed September 13, 2024).

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, “Support for Gender Equality: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan,” February 2021, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-18-LL.pdf#page=143>, (accessed September 13, 2024).

<sup>8</sup> This included a range of harmful practices including child marriage, forced marriage, giving away girls in dispute resolution and other forms of violence including rape. Oxfam, “Women and the Afghan Police,” September 10, 2013, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009\\_2014/documents/d-af/dv/wip\\_repo/wip\\_report.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/d-af/dv/wip_repo/wip_report.pdf), (accessed September 13, 2024).

<sup>9</sup> UNAMA, “A Long Way to Go: Implementation of the Elimination of Violence against Women Law in Afghanistan,” November 2011, [https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/november\\_23\\_unama-ohchr-joint-report-on-implementation-of-evaw-law\\_eng\\_1.pdf](https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/november_23_unama-ohchr-joint-report-on-implementation-of-evaw-law_eng_1.pdf), (accessed July 25, 2024).

<sup>10</sup> “U.S. support for women’s recruitment, retention, and progress within the ANDSF was shaped by the objectives set out in UN Security Council Resolution 1325. Between fiscal years 2014 and 2021, the Congress authorized up to \$240.6 million from the Afghanistan Security Forces Fund for the recruitment, retention, integration, training, and treatment of female security personnel. Ultimately, \$110 million was appropriated in those years for these activities.” Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, “Support for Gender Equality: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan,” February 2021, p. 124, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-18-LL.pdf#page=143>, p. 124, (accessed September 27, 2024).

were serving out of about 150,000 total police personnel.<sup>11</sup> The goal was to have 5,000 by 2015, but the numbers never exceeded about 3,600 in January 2021.<sup>12</sup>

The principal challenge in recruiting Afghan women for the police was the stigma attached to the institution and a perception in conservative communities that women working as police were sexually promiscuous. While many Afghan women who sought to work outside the home already faced resistance from their families, the reputation of the Afghan National Police for corruption and criminality and, as more women joined, for sexual harassment and abuse, compounded that stigma.<sup>13</sup> Most of the women recruited into the police had little education and few alternative job opportunities, making them particularly vulnerable to abuse. In a 2016 survey carried out by the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, Afghan policewomen surveyed said that their biggest concern about their job was the opposition of their immediate family members and relatives, with many saying they had received threats from their families when they began training.<sup>14</sup> Because some policewomen hid their employment from their families and also feared being identified by the Taliban, they changed into their uniforms only after arriving at their post. A lack of facilities for women, including a lack of separate changing rooms and toilets that could be locked, also affected recruitment and retention.<sup>15</sup>

Like other Afghan government security forces, women in the police were at risk of attack or assassination by the Taliban or criminals. The most high-profile attack on a female police

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<sup>11</sup> Oxfam, “Women and the Afghan Police,” September 10, 2013, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009\\_2014/documents/d-af/dv/wip\\_repo/wip\\_report.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/d-af/dv/wip_repo/wip_report.pdf), (accessed September 13, 2024).

<sup>12</sup> United Nations Development Programme, “Afghan police force recruits women to fight crime and stigma,” March 13, 2013, <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghan-police-force-recruits-women-fight-crime-and-stigma>; <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2021-01-30qr.pdf>, (accessed September 27, 2024).

<sup>13</sup> Wilder, p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> Japanese international Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, “Strengthening the Afghan National Police: Recruitment and Retention of Women Officers,” 2017, pp. 19-21, <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Strengthening-the-Afghan-National-Police-Recruitment-and-Retention-of-Women-Officers.pdf>, (accessed June 25, 2024).

<sup>15</sup> Rod Nordland and Taimoor Shah, “Female Afghan Police Commander Is Shot,” *New York Times*, September 15, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/16/world/asia/gunmen-shoot-female-afghan-police-commander.html>, (accessed July 6, 2024). The JICA/Georgetown report noted that since 2012, the Afghan government had been told to install facilities for women in police stations, but by 2016 these orders had not been implemented. Japanese international Cooperation Agency and the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, “Strengthening the Afghan National Police: Recruitment and Retention of Women Officers,” 2017, pp. 19-21, <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Strengthening-the-Afghan-National-Police-Recruitment-and-Retention-of-Women-Officers.pdf>, (accessed June 25, 2024).

officer occurred in Kandahar in 2008 when Malalai Kakar, the only female officer in the Kandahar police and Afghanistan's highest ranking female police officer, was fatally shot. The Taliban said they carried out the killing.<sup>16</sup> In Helmand in 2013, gunmen on motorcycles fatally shot three senior women in the provincial police.<sup>17</sup> They had received threats from the Taliban as well as from family members, including anonymous calls from people who accused them of doing work that was inappropriate for women.<sup>18</sup> Three other policewomen were killed elsewhere in the country that year, in some cases by family members.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> "Senior policewoman shot dead in Kandahar," *France 24*, September 28, 2008, <https://www.france24.com/en/20080929-senior-policewoman-shot-dead-kandahar-afghanistan>, (accessed July 4, 2024).

<sup>17</sup> Rod Nordland and Taimoor Shah, "Female Afghan Police Commander Is Shot," *New York Times*, September 15, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/16/world/asia/gunmen-shoot-female-afghan-police-commander.html>, (accessed July 6, 2024).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Alissa Rubin, "Afghan Policewomen Struggle Against Culture," *New York Times*, March 1, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/02/world/asia/afghan-policewomen-struggle-against-culture.html>, (accessed July 24, 2024).

## Sexual Abuse of Policewomen Under the Former Government

The US “surge” of 2009-2010, which brought additional troops and funds to the reconstruction effort in Afghanistan, boosted the numbers of recruits, including women, in the Afghan National Police, but did not lead to reforms. The force continued to function along militia-patronage networks linked to local strongmen and the burgeoning narcotics trade. Corruption was rife within the police and the judiciary, and both institutions had a reputation for their culture of bribe-taking and abuse.<sup>20</sup>

While efforts to increase the number of women police showed modest gains, in 2012 a US media report disclosed widespread abuse within the police including male officers withholding promotions or threatening to fire women police unless they agreed to sex; male officers sexually assaulting policewomen in their offices or homes; and women police experiencing frequent sexual harassment, such as being accused of being sex workers.<sup>21</sup>

In 2012 the UN launched an investigation into the allegations, which it said it had received from “Afghan women, local communities, civil society groups, and Afghan female police.”<sup>22</sup> In 2013 UNAMA provided senior Afghan government officials with the report but did not make it public out of concern that it would put those they interviewed and other Afghan policewomen at risk of retaliation.<sup>23</sup> The report, which was based on 136 interviews with serving policewomen, found that sexual violence and sexual harassment of women working in the Afghan police system by male police “was widespread and frequent” with

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<sup>20</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “Corruption in Afghanistan: Recent patterns and integrity challenges in the public sector,” October 2013, [https://dataunodc.un.org/sites/dataunodc.un.org/files/microdata/corruption\\_afghanistan\\_2013.pdf](https://dataunodc.un.org/sites/dataunodc.un.org/files/microdata/corruption_afghanistan_2013.pdf), (accessed August 12, 2024).

<sup>21</sup> Quil Lawrence, “For Afghan Policewomen, Sex Abuse is a Job Hazard,” *National Public Radio*, March 8, 2012, <https://www.npr.org/2012/03/08/148041305/for-afghan-policewomen-sex-abuse-is-a-job-hazard>, (accessed June 14, 2024).

<sup>22</sup> Unpublished report by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, “The Situation of Police Women in the Afghan National Police,” May 2013, on file with Human Rights Watch.

<sup>23</sup> The United Nations report was given to the ministry in 2013 but never publicly released, largely because of fears of possible reprisals against policewomen. Alissa Rubin, “Afghan Policewomen Struggle Against Culture,” *New York Times*, March 1, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/02/world/asia/afghan-policewomen-struggle-against-culture.html>, (accessed July 24, 2024); Alissa Rubin, “Afghan Women Battle Sex Abuse,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, September 17, 2013, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/afghan-policewomen-battle-sex-abuse-20130917-2twig.html>, (accessed July 24, 2024).

nearly 70 percent of the interviewees saying that they had “personally experienced sexual harassment or sexual violence at the hands of their male colleagues—particularly commanders—in their places of work.”<sup>24</sup>

The women whom UNAMA interviewed experienced violence in the form of rape, attempted rape, and coerced sexual acts. Thirty-three policewomen said that they had been dismissed from their job and 51 said that they were blocked from promotions for refusing sex with supervisors.<sup>25</sup> An unidentified official said that recruiting more women to join the police was not going to help address violence against women when “they are themselves abused by other officers within the force.”<sup>26</sup> In the report, UNAMA noted that the pervasive nature of the abuse raised broad concerns about the willingness and ability of the Afghan police system to address pervasive violence against women in wider Afghan society:

If police women in their role as protectors of citizen’s rights are not themselves protected from such grave violations of their rights within the police, how can they be enabled or empowered to adequately protect women in the communities they serve?<sup>27</sup>

Although officials in the Ministry of Interior vowed to implement reforms, little changed. In its 2019 report, the Special Investigator for Afghan Reconstruction noted that the problems persisted:

Women working in both the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police are subject to frequent bullying, discrimination, sexual impropriety, and assault. With no sexual harassment or assault policies in place within

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<sup>24</sup> “While 42 of the 136 (30 percent) policewomen interviewed denied direct experience of sexual violence and harassment, UNAMA observed that a majority of these women likely had experienced or were experiencing sexual harassment but chose not to report it for security reasons.” “The Situation of Police Women in the Afghan National Police,” May 2013, unpublished report by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, on file with Human Rights Watch.

<sup>25</sup> “The Situation of Police Women in the Afghan National Police,” May 2013, unpublished report by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, on file with Human Rights Watch, p. 19.

<sup>26</sup> Quil Lawrence, “For Afghan Policewomen, Sex Abuse is a Job Hazard,” *National Public Radio*, March 8, 2012, <https://www.npr.org/2012/03/08/148041305/for-afghan-policewomen-sex-abuse-is-a-job-hazard>, (accessed June 14, 2024).

<sup>27</sup> “The Situation of Police Women in the Afghan National Police,” May 2013, unpublished report by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, on file with Human Rights Watch, p. 17.



the ministries of defense or interior as of 2018, women have few available mechanisms to report such abuse.<sup>28</sup>

A former policewoman who had been with the police for 16 years said she stayed because she needed the income, but said she was constantly harassed:

They never promoted me because I didn't accept their offers for having sexual affairs. They wanted me to have sex with them and stay overnight. He said that if I had a good family, what would I be doing here? I tried to complain but nothing happened.<sup>29</sup>

A policewoman from Khost said that most recruits either had to pay a bribe or agree to sex to be accepted into the force:

Everything seemed to be fine if you look from outside; for those who have worked inside, it was different. I have witnessed bodyguards harassing women, stopping them, and even touching them. [When] women would stay in the hostel, officers would come and spend the night with them. The head of intelligence for my station really harassed me. He told me that he can do whatever he wants to me.<sup>30</sup>

In response to the UN investigation, officials within the former Afghan government downplayed the issue, saying that no policewomen had complained to them and accusing the women of seeking “attention,” but promised to institute reforms.<sup>31</sup> However, there were no prosecutions of male officers for sexual harassment or assault, and the lack of accountability allowed the abuse to continue unchecked. The gender department within the Ministry of Interior was responsible for investigating cases of abuse, but many former policewomen said that these departments either lacked the authority to look into the

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<sup>28</sup> Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, “Support for Gender Equality: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan,” February 2021, p. 125, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-18-LL.pdf>, (accessed July 24, 2024).

<sup>29</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with F. M., November 20, 2023.

<sup>30</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with H.L., April 23, 2024.

<sup>31</sup> Alissa Rubin, “Afghan Policewomen Say Sexual Harassment Is Rife,” *New York Times*, September 16, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/17/world/asia/afghan-policewomen-report-high-levels-of-sexual-harassment.html>, (accessed July 25, 2024).

complaints or would not take the cases seriously. “There was a gender department and [name withheld] was the head of it... but her position was just symbolic. There was no one to protect our rights.”<sup>32</sup>

In interviews that UNAMA investigators carried out in 2012, policewomen said they rarely officially complained about sexual harassment and sexual violence because they were aware of the impunity senior male officers enjoyed. They feared the stigmatization they would suffer and the risk of losing their jobs.<sup>33</sup> Those who felt coerced to agree to sex often did so because they feared being punished by male officers who could mark them absent or dismiss them, costing them their income. Said one former policewoman:

Most of the women who worked for the police needed the money. These women were being beaten by their families and harassed in the work environment. Their job was the only thing that they had.<sup>34</sup>

A senior police officer who attempted to pursue complaints registered by her staff told Human Rights Watch that women were almost always deemed to be at fault in such cases, even if they were raped. Just the accusation that they had any relationship with a man outside the family can cause severe damage to their reputation, and men in positions of power often use that to cover up their own crimes.<sup>35</sup> The officer described a case she had investigated in 2019 of a staff member who said she had been raped by a senior male police officer:

In this case, the woman was raped, but if the community found out, they might claim she willingly engaged in the act, even if it was not consensual. She said the district police chief came to her house at night and raped her. Her husband was away that day. She cried in front of me. She said she couldn't file an official complaint because she feared her husband would

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<sup>32</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with F.G., November 12, 2023.

<sup>33</sup> “The Situation of Police Women in the Afghan National Police,” May 2013, unpublished report by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, on file with Human Rights Watch, p. 19.

<sup>34</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with T.M., March 13, 2024.

<sup>35</sup> Human Rights Watch, “I Had to Run Away: The Imprisonment of Women and Girls for ‘Moral Crimes’ in Afghanistan,” March 28, 2012, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/03/28/i-had-run-away/imprisonment-women-and-girls-moral-crimes-afghanistan>, (accessed July 20, 2024).

divorce her, and she would lose custody of her children. Six months after the rape, we learned that she had been murdered by her husband's family.<sup>36</sup>

A policewoman from Kabul said that when she and others tried to file complaints about sexual harassment, they were told not to raise their voices because it was considered shameful for women to bring up such issues publicly. “They suggested that these problems should be resolved discreetly,” she said.<sup>37</sup>

A woman who had been the head of female recruitment in one province, a position she held for six years. She said that because she came from a wealthy and well-connected family in the area, she faced fewer problems than other women, but she was aware of the problems her subordinates faced. Of the 35 women working under her, all had faced demands for sex with the men in power in exchange for better positions. She said:

I told them to record the men when such requests happened. One was divorced and had a child. The commander in charge asked her to shave her bikini area because he wanted to suck it. After this, she came to me and cried. She had recorded all this, and I transferred her to a different station. I took the recordings to him, and he said that he would never do it again. I don’t want to justify the current Taliban regime, but it makes me very angry to speak of the previous government.<sup>38</sup>

Another time, she wore a burqa and pretended to be a visitor so she could sit and observe how the male officers at her station interacted with female members of her staff:

There were around eight or nine men working with her at that station. Each of them would come and say, “You look very beautiful today. You have put on nice make-up. Are you going somewhere? Do you have enough money? Would you want some?” Every five minutes, one of them would come and harass her. She wouldn't respond and a few days later, her station commander came to me, saying that she’s not good enough and they want

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<sup>36</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with K.L., November 14, 2023.

<sup>37</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with F.M., November 20, 2023.

<sup>38</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with T.M., March 3, 2024.

another female officer instead of her. I told him what I had done and said, “You don’t want her because she’s not saying yes to what you want.”<sup>39</sup>

The former head of female recruitment said that even though in that case the commander apologized, she could not send the evidence through the official system because there was no support at the management level for any accountability, while the women risked being fired or marked absent, which would cost them income. She said, “The head of police in [my province] used to hide harassment cases. He never let any of these cases go to the justice system.”<sup>40</sup>

Another female police officer who had tried to pursue investigations into such cases said:

We summoned the superior officers of female police officers engaged in illicit conduct and spoke to them about not committing such acts again. I dealt with such cases, but the women didn't want their cases to become official because they were afraid of facing shame in society, being divorced by their husbands, or being disallowed from working anymore.<sup>41</sup>

A female officer who had investigated allegations from women who had been assaulted and harassed gave an example:

I received a complaint from a woman who said that while she was in the prayer room, her senior colleague had come and grabbed her from behind, attempting to rape her. When I informed [the male officer] about the complaint, he indirectly showed me 100,000 Afghanis [US \$2,000] it appeared to be a veiled attempt at bribery. We recommended that [the male officer] be immediately dismissed from duty and referred [for prosecution]. I don't know how he learned the details of the investigation [but] the following day, the victim came to me and informed me that she was withdrawing her complaint because the commander had apologized. I asked if she had been

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<sup>39</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with T.M., March 12, 2024.

<sup>40</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with T.M., March 12, 2024.

<sup>41</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with S.H., November 14, 2023.

threatened [but] she said that she didn't want her case to become public and bring shame upon her, so she withdrew the complaint.<sup>42</sup>

Another senior police officer faced threats for trying to investigate cases:

I received calls from two colleagues urging me to drop the investigation.... I informed them that I couldn't [because] if I did so, the intelligence department might ask why I halted the investigation, suspecting bribery. ... The next day, I received a threatening phone call, with the caller insisting that I abandon the investigation and saying they knew where my son attended school, which frightened me. After hearing about the threats, my superior officers asked me to drop the investigation to protect me. They explained that they couldn't guarantee my safety if I pursued the case.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with A.Z., November 20, 2023.

<sup>43</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with A.Z., November 20, 2023.

## Threats and Abusive Searches by the Taliban after August 2021

In the months after the Taliban took power in Afghanistan in August 2021, their security forces carried out revenge killings targeting those who had been part of the security forces of the former government. Human Rights Watch documented 47 such killings.<sup>44</sup> The UN documented 218 extrajudicial killings of former army, police, and intelligence service officers, and 14 instances of enforced disappearances, most in the first months after the takeover.<sup>45</sup> Other estimates of enforced disappearances range as high as 400.<sup>46</sup> News and images of these incidents circulated widely on social media, magnifying fears among all who had worked for the security forces that they were at risk.

Although the number of women in the security forces were fewer, they were additionally vulnerable because they faced increased threats from family members who may have seen the moment of the Taliban's return as an opportunity to punish their relatives working in the police. Family members may have always opposed having female relatives working in the police, or now opposed it because, with the power change, the perceived stigma was compounded with the risk of being associated with the former government. In addition, the women's loss of income made them more vulnerable to family violence at a time when many Afghans were hit hard by job losses after Afghanistan's economy collapsed following the Taliban takeover. Reports and images of some women in the army and police who had been killed also spread widely on social media.

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<sup>44</sup> Human Rights Watch, "No Forgiveness for People Like You: Executions and Enforced Disappearances in Afghanistan under the Taliban," November 30, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/11/30/no-forgiveness-people-you/executions-and-enforced-disappearances-afghanistan>, (accessed August 8, 2024).

<sup>45</sup> United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, "A barrier to securing peace: Human rights violations against former government officials and former armed force members in Afghanistan: 15 August 2021 – 30 June 2023," August 2023, [https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/a\\_barrier\\_to\\_securing\\_peace\\_aug\\_2023\\_english\\_\\_o.pdf](https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/a_barrier_to_securing_peace_aug_2023_english__o.pdf), (accessed July 8, 2024).

<sup>46</sup> Richard Pérez-Peña, "U.N. Says Taliban Committed Rights Abuses Despite Blanket Amnesty," *New York Times*, August 22, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/22/world/asia/taliban-revenge-united-nations.html>, (accessed September 13, 2024).

As one former policewoman said, “The stress was real because some of our colleagues were found dead, although it remains uncertain whether the Taliban were responsible or if they had family-related problems.”<sup>47</sup>

Some said they had experienced increased violence from family members: “When I lost my job with the coming of the Taliban, I also faced domestic violence from my husband. ... I studied a total of 15 years including school and police academy, but now I feel hopeless.”<sup>48</sup>

Women who had formerly worked as police described receiving threatening phone calls in the months after the Taliban takeover.<sup>49</sup> Those who had male relatives who had also worked in the security forces were particularly worried that they might also be targeted.<sup>50</sup> One former policewoman said that “in the media the Taliban say that there is general amnesty, but in reality, it’s something else.”<sup>51</sup> Another woman whose husband was also in the police said:

[The Taliban] took my husband for one day. They asked him questions about his job, but he didn't tell them that his wife is a policewoman. The Taliban told him that they would come again. Imagine if they had found out about me—they would have taken me, too. That's why we left and went to Iran.<sup>52</sup>

The former policewomen described their fear of persecution, and the hardship of displacement following the Taliban's return to power. Many were forced to flee their homes, leaving behind possessions and concealing their identities to evade the Taliban. A former policewoman from Daikundi province in central Afghanistan said she burned any identifying documents and hid her uniform to avoid discovery.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Human Rights Watch telephone interview with A.Z., November 20, 2023.

<sup>48</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with S.L., November 14, 2023.

<sup>49</sup> Men and women who worked for the justice system as prosecutors, judges, and corrections officials have also been threatened and in some cases killed. For example, in 2020 UNAMA documented 29 incidents in which the Taliban targeted people working for the judiciary as judges and prosecutors, resulting in 27 killed and 17 injured. United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, “Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict Annual Report 2020,” February 2021, [https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/afghanistan\\_protection\\_of\\_civilians\\_report\\_2020\\_revs3.pdf](https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/afghanistan_protection_of_civilians_report_2020_revs3.pdf), (accessed July 14, 2024).

<sup>50</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with N.H., November 22, 2023.

<sup>51</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with F.G., November 12, 2023.

<sup>52</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with I.M., September 1, 2023.

<sup>53</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with F.S., November 12, 2023.

Despite efforts to remain hidden, some faced threats and harassment, while others experienced violent searches of their homes, resulting in the loss of personal belongings. A former policewoman who had burned identifying documents said the Taliban beat her husband after finding her police shoes during a search.<sup>54</sup> Those who went back to their police headquarters after the Taliban took power to collect their belongings faced questioning by Taliban officials who asked why they had fought against them in the previous government.<sup>55</sup>

In some cases, the women had information the Taliban were looking for them because of the kind of work they had done as police. One said that a lawyer told her that there were specific complaints against her from people whose cases she had handled in units that investigated violence against women.<sup>56</sup> Another former policewoman said: “During the republic [former government] period, I would handle criminal cases. When the republic government collapsed and the regime changed, all the perpetrators were released from prison, therefore, in addition to the Taliban, this was also a huge threat for me.”<sup>57</sup>

Alia Azizi had worked as a police officer with the former Afghan government for more than a decade, and as the head of the women’s prison in Herat since 2019. She stopped working when the Taliban took control of Herat on August 12, 2021, and only returned to work on August 24 when the new Taliban head of Herat’s central prison called her and told her to resume working, reportedly saying, “As there are women prisoners, we need you to come back to work.” However, on October 2, Azizi reportedly received a phone call while leaving work and never returned home. Her family has said she had sometimes received threats from the families of prisoners. Taliban authorities have said they have investigated the case, but her fate and whereabouts remain unknown.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with S.R., November 14, 2023.

<sup>55</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with F. S., November 12, 2023.

<sup>56</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with K.L., November 14, 2023.

<sup>57</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Z.M., November 25, 2023.

<sup>58</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Afghanistan: Herat Women’s Prison Head Missing 6 Months,” April 20, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/20/afghanistan-herat-womens-prison-head-missing-6-months>, (accessed July 20, 2024); UNAMA, “A barrier to securing peace: Human rights violations against former government officials and former armed force members in Afghanistan: 15 August 2021 – 30 June 2023,” August 2023, [https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/a\\_barrier\\_to\\_securing\\_peace\\_aug\\_2023\\_english\\_\\_o.pdf](https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/a_barrier_to_securing_peace_aug_2023_english__o.pdf), (accessed July 8, 2024).



In neighborhoods, villages, and small towns where residents tend to know each other, Taliban officials, even from outside the area, have been able to obtain information as well as identify individuals who had worked for the previous government, often by questioning shopkeepers and other residents.<sup>59</sup> Most of the former Afghan policewomen interviewed said that fear of being identified drove them to leave their home communities either to live with relatives or on their own elsewhere in the country. Said one former policewoman:

Everyone knew that I was a policewoman. I left my house and all my belongings behind, only taking a bag of clothes and my children to my brother-in-law's house. My husband told everyone that his wife had gone to Iran...and he had told [our neighbors] to deny any knowledge of someone by my name.<sup>60</sup>

Many of the former policewomen we spoke with said Taliban security forces searched their homes looking for weapons. One said that during the search, they beat her husband and asked him why he had allowed her to join the police.<sup>61</sup>

Some said they or their colleagues received calls from Taliban officials who ordered them to return to work. Said one:

Around three months after the takeover I received a call from the Taliban telling me to come back to my job. I gave them a fake name, but they accused me of lying and said that I must show up for my job at any cost. I got scared and cut off the phone call. Again, I received a phone call and this time I was asked, "Will you come by yourself, or should we come and drag you by the hair and bring you?"<sup>62</sup>

Another woman received a threatening phone call in which a Taliban official told her that if she did not come to the police headquarters herself, they would find her, and it would

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<sup>59</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with I.M., October 4, 2023.

<sup>60</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with A.D., February 12, 2024.

<sup>61</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with S.H., November 14, 2023.

<sup>62</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with R.G., November 25, 2023.

have “negative consequences” for her.<sup>63</sup> She and others who were called in for questioning changed their numbers and left the area:

[When] I learned that the Taliban had been searching for me at my home, I frequently changed my location to protect myself and my children. Once, [an apparent Taliban] man contacted me on [a social media application] and said that I should have met with them to answer some questions. Fear overwhelmed me, so I deleted the app, changed my phone number, and created a new account with a new name.<sup>64</sup>

Another said she received calls from men who claimed to know she had worked in the gender department of the Ministry of Interior, and suggested they might reinstate her job:

The tone on the phone was far from friendly, and since my telephone number was registered with the government, I became very fearful.... I suspected it might be a trick, so I took the precaution of destroying the SIM card.<sup>65</sup>

Many women expressed fears that their neighbors might inform on them to the Taliban, and broke off contact with former colleagues out of fear. One said she had asked her colleagues not to meet with her and changed her residence so she could not be found. She said: “If I stay in contact with them, one might inform the Taliban, and then they might find me.”<sup>66</sup> One woman who continued to live in a major city said that she lives in fear:

Over the phone I have been threatened, and every second is a threat. ... Whenever I go to bazaar, I wear a mask and glasses so no one can recognize me. ... If people find out, they might rat me out to the Taliban that I used to work for the police.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with S.H., November 14, 2023.

<sup>64</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with F.M., November 20, 2023.

<sup>65</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Z.M., November 25, 2023.

<sup>66</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with F. M., November 20, 2023.

<sup>67</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Z.M., November 25, 2023.

Some former policewomen who did return to work said the Taliban treated them suspiciously, as if they were under investigation, and demanded the phone numbers of their former colleagues.<sup>68</sup> Some did not return to work after that.<sup>69</sup>

Women who had been employed as police under the former government who have returned to work under the Taliban said they are far fewer in number and now work in gender-segregated areas and are limited to tasks such as searching and guarding women who have been detained.<sup>70</sup> Several expressed concern about the lack of job security and lack of opportunity for promotion. They said that because the Taliban authorities have not put in place any mechanism through which policewomen can safely register complaints to hold senior officers accountable, there is a risk that some of the same abuses that took place under the republic government could recur.<sup>71</sup> In addition, even as reports of violence against women have increased, the Taliban have dismantled laws and institutions that had provided women experiencing violence in the home some protection and access to justice.<sup>72</sup>

## Obstacles to Resettlement Abroad

Since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, foreign governments have taken in several thousand Afghans who worked for the former government or for civil society organizations and media funded by donors. But these represent only a fraction of those at risk in Afghanistan in need of resettlement. Even before the Taliban takeover, the US implemented the Special Immigrant Visa program for members of the former government's security forces who worked with US forces. The program was largely stalled between 2016 and 2021, and as of March 2024, 130,000 applications remained unprocessed.<sup>73</sup> Given the

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<sup>68</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with S.H., November 14, 2023.

<sup>69</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with S.G., November 14, 2023.

<sup>70</sup> Jelena Bjelica and Roxanna Shapoor, "A Pay Cut for Afghan Women Working in the Public Sector: 'What can you do with 5,000 afghanis?'" Afghanistan Analysts Network, July 29, 2024, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/rights-freedom/a-pay-cut-for-afghan-women-working-in-the-public-sector-what-can-you-do-with-5000-afghanis/>, (accessed September 18, 2024).

<sup>71</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with L., November 19, 2023, and with H., November 25, 2024.

<sup>72</sup> UNAMA, "Divergence of Practice: The Handling of Complaints of Gender-Based Violence against Women and Girls by Afghanistan's de facto Authorities," December 2023, [https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/the\\_handling\\_of\\_complaints\\_of\\_gbvawg\\_english\\_141223.pdf](https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/the_handling_of_complaints_of_gbvawg_english_141223.pdf), (accessed September 3, 2024).

<sup>73</sup> Jonathan Landay, "Special visa program for US-affiliated Afghans faces demise," *Reuters*, March 6, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/special-visa-program-us-affiliated-afghans-faces-demise-2024-03-06/>, (accessed July 24, 2024).

programs strict classification of eligible applicants, only a small percentage have been women.<sup>74</sup>

The European Union (EU) and its member states have a poor record of resettling Afghans.<sup>75</sup> According to the International Rescue Committee, more than 250,000 Afghan refugees were in need of resettlement in 2023, but in the EU, only 329 had been resettled in just four countries as of August 2023.<sup>76</sup> While EU member states took in about 13,000 Afghans through emergency evacuations immediately following the Taliban takeover,<sup>77</sup> they have not provided pathways toward sustainable resettlement. Many of those evacuated remain in limbo in refugee camps in Greece or other countries.

In the United Kingdom (UK), lengthy delays, inconsistent and unclear processes, and other serious problems have meant that the government's Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP), launched in April 2021, and Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS), announced in August 2021 but formally opened in January 2022, have similarly failed to provide a safe route for at-risk Afghans.<sup>78</sup> Despite Pathway 3 of the ACRS being intended to prioritize women and girls at risk (as well as other at-risk groups), years on, they and members of oppressed minority groups still have no access to the program, as has been raised with the UK repeatedly.<sup>79</sup> Former Afghan policewomen are also unlikely to be eligible for the ARAP scheme.

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<sup>74</sup> As of September 2022, the figure was just 6 to 14 percent. Jeanne Shaheen, "Standing Up for Our Afghan Allies: The History, Challenges and Future of the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program," September 2022, <https://www.shaheen.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Afghan%20SIV%20Report%20-%20FINAL.pdf>, (accessed July 1, 2024).

<sup>75</sup> Lisa O'Carroll, "EU accused of 'staggering neglect' after just 271 Afghans resettled across bloc," *The Guardian*, May 31, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/31/eu-accused-of-staggering-neglect-after-just-271-afghans-resettled-across-bloc> (accessed September 27, 2024).

<sup>76</sup> Of those, 296 went to Sweden, 21 to Finland, 9 to Spain, and 3 to France. International Rescue Committee, "IRC: The EU has resettled just 329 Afghans since 2021, despite deepening humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan," August 14, 2023, <https://www.rescue.org/eu/press-release/irc-eu-has-resettled-just-329-afghans-2021-despite-deepening-humanitarian-crisis>, (accessed July 23, 2024).

<sup>77</sup> European Parliamentary Research Service, "Evacuation of Afghan nationals to EU Member States," November 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/698776/EPRS\\_BRI\(2021\)698776\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/698776/EPRS_BRI(2021)698776_EN.pdf), (accessed September 3, 2024).

<sup>78</sup> Afghan Pro Bono Initiative, "Two Years of Empty Promises: The UK Leaves Afghans Stranded and at Risk," October 17, 2023, [https://mcusercontent.com/61d24b5cob7ef24ebe5d503fa/files/e1c6c618-8648-6c63-051e-b6e59aa26c59/CS2307\\_CDD\\_73720\\_ADD\\_108573\\_Email\\_ENG\\_.pdf](https://mcusercontent.com/61d24b5cob7ef24ebe5d503fa/files/e1c6c618-8648-6c63-051e-b6e59aa26c59/CS2307_CDD_73720_ADD_108573_Email_ENG_.pdf), (accessed July 23, 2024).

<sup>79</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Joint UK Parliamentary Briefing on Afghanistan," August 17, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/08/17/joint-uk-parliamentary-briefing-afghanistan> (accessed October 1, 2024).

Several former policewomen said that because they feared that the Taliban authorities would identify them, they were unable to apply for passports, they could not leave the country. One former policewoman said:

One day, I went to obtain an electronic *tazkira* [national ID card] and passport and I was so scared of getting identified there or that some old colleagues might recognize me, because nowadays the Taliban's intelligence is very strong.<sup>80</sup>

Another said:

I am scared to get a new passport, because renewing or getting a new passport requires biometrics, and all my documents are registered. I am worried that if I get a new passport, then the Taliban will find out about me, because the passport department is a part of the Ministry of Interior.<sup>81</sup>

One woman, who was receiving threatening phone calls from the Taliban, fled Afghanistan shortly after the takeover. She and her family first tried to get to Iran by road, without visas, but they were stopped and deported back to Afghanistan. They went back to their home, sold all their possessions in order to pay fees for Iranian visas through a broker. She also applied for a visa for Brazil. While the family remained in Iran, she continued on to Brazil on her own, where she stayed for nine months. She eventually reached the US through the Darien Gap. She said: "I paid US\$3500 for the tickets, crossed 11 countries, and reached the US. I applied for asylum, and they granted me refugee status. Now, I am trying to bring my family."<sup>82</sup>

## Mental Health Concerns

The combination of previous abuse, financial hardship, and fear of the Taliban's persecution has had a devastating impact on the mental health of former policewomen in Afghanistan. Many said they were struggling to get by financially, while also coping with the strain of maintaining a false identity and living in hiding. "Everything is taken away from me," one

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<sup>80</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with S.M., November 25, 2023.

<sup>81</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Z.M., November 25, 2023.

<sup>82</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with T.M., March 12, 2024.

woman said. “I am not the same person anymore.” She said that she had tried to find mental health support but could not afford the cost of a psychiatrist or therapist.<sup>83</sup> Most women interviewed said that they were taking medication for anxiety and depression. “I’ve been taking depression medication for two years because my situation wasn’t good,” said a former policewoman. “I frequently had dreams of the Taliban capturing me and harming me. I even had hallucinations about encountering the Taliban.”<sup>84</sup>

Multiple reasons—fear of persecution, the experience of sexual abuse, and limited possibilities for resettlement to a safe country—continue to cause trauma for former policewomen. They need tailored psychosocial expertise, as well as gender-sensitive psychosocial support.

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<sup>83</sup> Even prior to the Taliban takeover, Afghans faced critical gaps in the availability and affordability of psychosocial support and mental health services in Kabul and other cities, while in rural areas they were virtually nonexistent. Since 2021, those services are even fewer, and unaffordable for most Afghans. See Human Rights Watch, “‘Disability is not Weakness’: Discrimination and Barriers Facing Women and Girls with Disabilities in Afghanistan,” April 28, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/04/28/disability-not-weakness/discrimination-and-barriers-facing-women-and-girls>, (accessed September 2, 2024).

<sup>84</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Z.M., November 19, 2023.

## Acknowledgments

Research for this report was carried out by a consultant to Human Rights Watch and Fereshta Abbasi, Afghanistan researcher at Human Rights Watch. Patricia Gossman, associate Asia director at Human Rights Watch, edited the report. Tom Porteous, deputy program director, and James Ross, legal and policy director, provided programmatic and legal review, respectively. Jonas Bull, assistant researcher with the Disability Rights Division; Bill Frelick, director of the Refugee and Migrant Rights Division; Claudio Francavilla, associate director, EU Advocacy; Nicole Widdersheim, deputy Washington director; Emilie McDonnell, UK communications and advocacy officer; Iskra Kirova, advocacy director, Europe and Central Asia Division; Kanae Doi, Japan Director; and members of the Women's Rights Division provided specialist reviews.

Editorial and production assistance was provided by Robbie Newton, senior coordinator for the Asia Division, and Travis Carr, publications officer. The report was prepared for publication by Jose Martinez, senior coordinator, and Fitzroy Hepkins, administrative manager.

Human Rights Watch wishes to thank all those in Afghanistan who agreed to be interviewed. We have honored their requests for anonymity.

# Appendix I: Human Rights Watch Letter to the Taliban

September 4, 2024

To: Mufti Abdul Matin Qane:

Human Rights Watch is preparing a report on recent threats to women who had worked as members of the police force under the former Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. It is largely based on interviews with women who had worked in the police before August 2021.

We would be grateful if you could provide answers to the following questions by September 25 so that your responses can be reflected in our reporting (in Pashto or Dari is also fine):

We have received reports of former policewomen receiving threatening phone calls from people claiming to be with the Ministry of the Interior. In some cases, the women have been warned that there would be serious unspecified consequences if they did not report for questioning or return weapons (which the women said they did not have). Women have also described abusive searches of their homes, during which personal property was damaged or taken, and family members assaulted.

1. Have such allegations of threats been brought to your attention? What is the procedure for investigating such allegations?
2. Can you provide us with information on steps taken in specific cases of threats and whether any Taliban personnel have been disciplined or prosecuted for such abuses?
3. What procedure is available for current policewomen to register complaints of abusive behavior by senior officers or other personnel? Have any cases been investigated and actions taken?
4. We understand that the authorities initiated an investigation into the disappearance on October 2, 2021, of Alia Azizi, former head of the Women's Prison in Herat province. As of now her whereabouts remain unknown. Could you provide us with any information from your investigation?



We would appreciate your response to these questions by September 25 so that they can be reflected in our report, and any other information you wish to provide.

Thank you for your attention to these important matters.

Sincerely yours,

Patricia Gossman  
Associate Director and Senior Editor  
Asia Division  
Human Rights Watch



## Double Betrayal

### Abuses against Afghan Policewomen, Past and Present

Since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, Taliban authorities have threatened Afghan women who had served in the police under the previous government. As Taliban forces carried out hundreds of revenge killings of those who had served in the former government's security forces, many former policewomen went into hiding out of fear of being identified. Several have been killed, either by relatives who opposed their work as "shameful" or under unclear circumstances. The Taliban have not conducted credible investigations into these murders.

While employed by the former government, many policewomen experienced sexual harassment and assault by their male supervisors. They described abuses including rape as well as demands from superiors for sex in exchange for promotion or avoiding dismissal. The widespread nature of these abuses was well-known since at least 2013, including among countries supporting the then-government, but police officers responsible for abuse were not held accountable. Women reported mental health effects from this abuse and their fear of the Taliban, but have been unable to find or afford psychosocial support.

Human Rights Watch calls on the Taliban to cease all threats and abuse of policewomen and others who worked for the former government. The US and other countries that supported programs to train and hire women in the police should ensure that those seeking protection are deemed eligible on the same level as other vulnerable categories. The US, UK, Canada, and the European Union and its member states should increase Afghan refugee resettlement places, prioritizing women at risk.

*(above) Women training to be police officers sit in a classroom at a police barracks draped in the Taliban's flag, Kabul, Afghanistan, November 17, 2022. © 2022 Oliver Weiken/picture-alliance/dpa/AP Images*

*(front cover) Afghan policewomen and policemen during their graduation ceremony in Herat, Afghanistan, December 20, 2012. © 2012 AP Photo/Hoshang Hashimi*