

## **Written evidence submitted by Internews Europe (AFG0036)**

### **Introduction**

Internews is an international non-profit organisation set up in 1982, with headquarters in London (Internews Europe) and Washington DC (Internews Network). A media development organisation, Internews works in more than 80 countries worldwide to support media and other information providers to deliver trustworthy and accurate information.

As part of its work fostering independent media and access to information, Internews has developed special global programs in health journalism, environmental journalism, humanitarian media, information and communications technology, and governance and transparency.

Internews has worked in Afghanistan since 2002, when the country's independent media was virtually non-existent. Under Taliban rule, from the late 1990s to 2001, there were no independent media outlets. There were no female journalists. There was no public debate. The voices of ordinary people were silenced and sidelined. Taliban edicts served as "news."

Over the next two decades, that completely changed with the development of vibrant networks of radio, television and online media that reached all 34 provinces. Prior to the fall of Kabul it was estimated that female journalists numbered over 1,100. Local media, according to a 2019 survey, was the second-most-trusted public institution in Afghanistan, behind only religious leaders.

The situation for journalists is now extremely perilous.

Given its mandate, Internews Europe has focused its response to the inquiry on the situation for journalists and media workers and how the UK can support those at risk both in the immediate and longer term.

**What are the humanitarian and human rights implications of the Taliban takeover? How can the UK support those at risk – particularly women and girls – both in the immediate and longer term? What steps is the Government taking to do this?**

#### **i. The humanitarian and human rights implications of the Taliban takeover**

The security situation for those in the media sector was already perilous prior to the Taliban takeover in August 2021. From the beginning of 2018 to end of March 2021, 37 journalists/media workers were reported to have been killed <sup>1</sup>.

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[https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama\\_special\\_report\\_killing\\_of\\_human\\_rights\\_defenders\\_and\\_journalists\\_in\\_afghanistan\\_2018-2021\\_february\\_2021.pdf](https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_special_report_killing_of_human_rights_defenders_and_journalists_in_afghanistan_2018-2021_february_2021.pdf).

Data for 2021 from <https://en.unesco.org/themes/safety-journalists/observatory/country/223649><https://en.unesco.org/themes/safety-journalists/observatory/country/223649><https://en.unesco.org/themes/safety-journalists/observatory/country/223649>

The Taliban insurgency made a series of threats against the media for their allegedly pro-Western coverage. In 2019 the Taliban issued a broad threat against media outlets stating that “journalists and media will no longer be safe”.<sup>2</sup> The attacks on media represented a serious “shift from ... journalists being indirectly impacted in the context of mass casualty attacks affecting civilians in 2018, to the intentional, premeditated and deliberate targeting of individuals after the start of the Afghanistan peace negotiation”.<sup>3</sup> Threats against journalists increasingly come through social media.

Since the Taliban takeover the space for the media to operate has become increasingly restrictive. In late September the Ministry of Information and Culture distributed regulations to the media that prohibited media content contrary to Islam and required detailed reports to the Taliban prior to publication.<sup>4</sup> Journalists who bravely covered street protests were detained and very badly beaten.

In November 2021, media guidelines released by the Ministry of Vice and Virtue further restricted women’s role in the media requiring women journalists on television to wear the hijab and prohibiting them from acting in television dramas<sup>5</sup>.

Most media outlets have been visited by the Taliban and many have received direct threats. Since August 2021, according to a report by the Afghanistan National Journalists Union (ANJU), more than 70% of journalists who responded to a survey had received threats in the month after the Taliban came to power. The ANJU surveyed more than 1,300 journalists and media workers from 28 provinces<sup>6</sup>.

The report found that the fallout of the international withdrawal has also dealt heavy economic implications on the industry as well as safety concerns. At least 67% of journalists and media workers surveyed had been rendered jobless since the Taliban assumed control. Media organisations have also been shuttered due to the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, with only 31% of media outlets remaining open. A lack of personal security and immunity was ranked as the highest concern by 41% of respondents, followed by financial stress and a lack of job security by 30% and 29% respectively.

## Women

Prior to the Taliban takeover women journalists already faced significant socio-cultural challenges to joining and remaining in the media sector. These included restrictions on their ability to travel and interview people freely, issues regarding workplace practices and irregular hours, and the threat of harassment. Women disproportionately faced online and

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<sup>2</sup><https://rsf.org/en/news/taliban-threat-treat-afghan-media-military-targets>

<sup>3</sup> UNAMA. (2021). *Special Report: Killing of Human Rights Defenders, Journalists and Media Workers in Afghanistan 2018-2021* [https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama\\_special\\_report\\_killing\\_of\\_human\\_rights\\_defenders\\_and\\_journalists\\_in\\_afghanistan\\_2018-2021\\_february\\_2021.pdf](https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_special_report_killing_of_human_rights_defenders_and_journalists_in_afghanistan_2018-2021_february_2021.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/10/01/afghanistan-taliban-severely-restrict-media#>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/11/22/afghanistan-taliban-crackdown-media-worsens-0>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/afghanistan-report-reveals-dire-economic-and-safety-situation-for-afghan-media-workers.html>

workplace harassment. Women were consequently underrepresented in the media both as producers of content and in the content itself, with far less content featuring the views and voices of women. Many female journalists work under pseudonyms to avoid recognition, harassment, and retaliation.

The Centre for the Protection of Afghan Women Journalist (CPAWJ) registered more than 100 cases of aggression against women journalists – including insults, physical attacks, death threats and murders – in the space of twelve months between March 2020 and February 2021<sup>7</sup>.

However, despite these challenges there were an estimated 1,377 women media professionals in the country in March 2021<sup>8</sup>. Since the Taliban seized power the situation for women journalists has become dire.

Internews has received hundreds of requests to support asylum from former staff and partners. Other organisations also report a flood of requests from journalists and media workers for immediate evacuation. However, only a small handful of those at risk have been successfully evacuated and many continue to languish in third countries waiting for asylum applications to be processed.

#### **What the current situation portends for the future:**

- Taliban restrictions and journalists fear for their safety will have a huge impact on local news, and importantly on people's ability to access life-saving information on issues such as healthcare. It also silences any criticism of the Taliban rule and ensures abuses will go unreported.
- Women journalists will increasingly stay at home or work in behind the scenes roles, meaning that their voices will not be heard on important issues.
- Media outlets that continue to operate will struggle to access both domestic sources of funding given the country's economic collapse and international sources of funding as international aid is redirected from development spending to humanitarian aid. This will mean that many media outlets will not survive.
- There has been a massive drain of media and journalistic talent from Afghanistan that will take years to rebuild. This capacity represents two decades of investment in building high quality reporting capacity. Journalists in exile will require support to transition to lives outside Afghanistan
- Media outlets will need to adapt and change to the emerging situation – this may mean increased shifts to digital media in their business model and reliance on on-the ground citizen journalists providing and verifying information.

#### **ii. How can the UK support those at risk – particularly women and girls – both in the immediate and longer term?**

Internews sees an **urgent need to protect independent media partners in a comprehensive and coordinated approach** in the current and rapidly deteriorating operating environment.

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<sup>7</sup> [Situation getting more critical for Afghan women journalists, report says | RSF](#)

<sup>8</sup> [https://twitter.com/ajsc\\_afg/status/1368834674450178052?s=20](https://twitter.com/ajsc_afg/status/1368834674450178052?s=20)

We see a continued escalation of violence and threats against independent media and those that support this ecosystem, **especially against women journalists and managers.**

The Afghan media have grown to be critical players in the country over the past 20 years, both holding local and national government to account and providing a voice and platform to women and other marginalized groups. Now, with the withdrawal of international troops, the Afghan media must contend with the additional uncertainties of the impact of this action, on journalists' safety, media freedom and public access to information.

The UK should **enable media development organisations and others to work quickly with trusted independent national and local media institutions to establish individual mitigation plans, provide core support to keep independent information flowing, and to ensure this does not become an extinction event for independent Afghan media.**

### **Strategic Approach**

Protecting media freedom in Afghanistan in the face of huge economic, political and security challenges is critical to ensuring citizens have accurate information and analysis to hold those in power to account. While media outlets may face restrictions on the type and range of content they produce, it will be important they get the support they need to continue providing information to the public, particularly in communities that already lack access to information and where traditional media such as radio plays an important role.

Grant support to cover core operating costs will fill the gap that reduced funding creates and ensure public interest content reaches people. Media outlets facing significant security risk also require assistance to explore alternative operational models such as relocation or upgraded digital platforms for better public access.

### **Recommendations**

**There are three immediate priority areas of focus for media in Afghanistan – both media content producers and the civil society organisations that train, support and advocate for the sector:**

- Support the journalists inside who can keep working to work as safely as possible.
- Support those journalists who want to leave their city or province or country and work remotely to do so; and
- Help those at risk who need to get out of the country with their families to do so. Visa restrictions for all Afghan journalists seeking asylum must be eased. The Afghan citizens resettlement scheme (ACRS) should have dedicated arrangements in place for journalists at risk.

The following strategic support will also be critical to the survival of the Afghan media sector:

### **Relocate Journalists and Media Support Organisation staff at-risk where needed**

Afghan journalists and media workers remain extremely concerned for their safety as the Taliban have made it clear in the past that they view media outlets and journalists as a

legitimate target. This is particularly true for Afghan women journalists who have been outspoken in their support of women's rights. Media support organisations have been inundated with requests for support from journalists. Only few of these have received support to date.

- There is an urgent need to provide safe housing and support costs for journalists-at-risk (and their immediate family).
- There is an urgent need to ease visa restrictions for all Afghan journalists seeking asylum, not just those who have worked for international outlets. Right now, a journalist seeking asylum must leave Afghanistan and wait in a third country while their application is processed. Leaving Afghanistan is simply not an option for many under greatest threat.

### **Financial Support**

Afghan media outlets in large part rely on the international community for their sustainability, as revenue generation continues to be a challenge in a very poor country ravaged by conflict.

- Media need **immediate and ongoing core support for their news gathering and operations**. Grant funding for public interest content is critical – to ensure public interest content reaches people and that the most trusted media outlets have some income for content production. This is also an important strategy against misinformation.
- Many outlets may also need equipment upgrades and remote training to help them migrate online as multiplatform entities.
- Media outlets will need support to train and onboard new staff and talent given the anticipated brain-drain of talent in the sector overall.

### **Business Support**

This may include core operational support as the business model for media changes. There is a considerable skills gap in scenario planning and formulating business strategies. While most partners operate in both the digital and analogue space, that balance may likely shift, which requires new skills, trained staff and different advertising/business models.

### **Offshoring Media Operations**

Media outlets facing significant security risks, especially those that are web-based, require assistance to explore alternative operational models such as relocation or upgraded digital platforms for better public access. In some cases, this will require reimagining their operations and news gathering approach.

- Offshore migration and technical assistance feasibility studies
- Digital security assessments and threat analysis for new platforms and models
- Offshoring and data storage

### **Networking for Solidarity and Advocacy for Media Freedom**

A strong united media sector is critical to maintain solidarity and support, and to continue to advocate for journalist protection and media freedom.

- Support for the media's watchdog role is important to track violence against journalists' cases and intimidation, any proposed legal changes.
- Regional networking with other media outlets with related experience will be an aspect of this work, as well as engaging at an international level with platforms like Google and Facebook to help protect at-risk journalists and human rights defenders, and identify and tackle disinformation and hate speech, particularly speech that is dangerous for Afghan women.

## **Safety Training**

Continued access to safety training would be essential areas of support (together with funds for physical security mitigation measures)

- Holistic Safety Training (with a focus on physical security)
- Safety audits for partner offices and potential equipment upgrades
- DART training – psychological support for journalists
- First aid training

### **iii. What steps is the government taking?**

To date, the response from the British government has been sluggish and lacking in detail. Though the government has announced it was increasing its UK aid to Afghanistan this year to £286 million, there is still at the time of writing little indication how this will be disbursed. Since humanitarian assistance does not usually encompass media development funding, it is unlikely that any of this funding will go to supporting the provision of trustworthy and accurate information.

Given that the UK government has made supporting media freedom one of its flagship campaigns, the UK could play a key role – as founder of the Media Freedom Coalition – in spearheading global governmental efforts to support Afghan media. An explicit commitment on overseas development aid for Afghan media is a crucial first step along with explicit and increased commitments to support journalists both within Afghanistan and those who are already in exile but without clear avenues for swift and permanent resettlement.

**Oral evidence:** Our CEO, Jodie Ginsberg, would be happy to give oral evidence to the committee. Ms. Ginsberg is a former journalist and member of the Media Freedom Coalition Advisory Network providing advice to the coalition, established by the UK and Canada to support media freedom globally.

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