



Afghanistan Democracy and Development Organization (ADDO)

Examining factors of threats against Human Rights Defenders and Women Human Rights Defenders in Afghanistan

Research Report by:

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List of Abbreviations

ANA	Afghan National Army
EU	European Union
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission for Afghanistan
EUHRDM	European Union's Human Rights Defenders Mechanism
HRDC	Human Rights Defenders Committee
HRD	Human Rights Defenders
WHRD	Women Human Rights Defenders
CS	Civilian Casualties
ANP	Afghan National Police
AI	Amnesty International
AWN	Afghan Women's Network
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women
CSO	Civil Society Organization
AWSDC	Afghan Women Skills Development Center
CSWJG	Civil Society Joint Working Group
GoIRA	Government of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
MoIA	Ministry of Interior Affairs
MoD	Ministry of National Defense
NDS	National Directorate of Security
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Women Empowerment

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Executive Summary

Threat factors for human rights defenders depend on a complex body of factors including absence of rule of law, social, cultural, political and economic issues, low public awareness levels, gender issues and distance from urban centers. Absence of rule of law in Afghanistan has paved the grounds for Taliban, AOGs, opportunists and abusers including religious, political individuals, narcotics and economic mafia and even some of the soldiers in defense and security forces to threaten human rights defenders. Threats against human rights defenders take place in a context of low public awareness but what intertwines all these is the current war or insecurity, with attempts to get privileges in the peace talks by Taliban acting as the factor increasing threats against human rights defenders.

Key Findings

- Taliban are the main factor of threats against human rights defenders and there is direct relationship between a surge in threats against human rights defenders and Afghanistan-Doha peace talks.
- Taliban are the greatest factor of threats against human rights defenders, followed by extremism, and absence of rule of law and low public awareness levels, which have the same impact on the threats against human rights defenders.
- Security threats are the greatest threats, followed by political threats, economic threats, socio-cultural threats and psychological threats.
- Men look at the threats in a more objective way than women. In contrast, the way women look at the threats against human rights defenders is less objective than men.
- For men, economic threats come after security threats while for women psychological threats come after gender threats.
- More men than women are subject to direct threats as a result of the activities they do, while women come under threats due to the perceptions which evolve about their activities.
- The previous finding reminds us that men are more affected by war while women are more affected by the outcome of war, because the factors threatening male human rights defenders include 'bare violence' which results in killing while for women, gender issues, low public awareness levels and extremism, which are considered the outcomes of war, result in a loss of opportunities and imposing limitations for their activity.
- Geographically, the extent of socio-cultural and gender threats against human rights defenders is highest at Kandahar province while in Herat human rights defenders complain about growing extremism and economic threats resulting from economic and narcotics mafia. In Balkh, the existing threats come mostly from the politicians. In Kabul, similar to Nangarhar, there are high levels of security threats.
- Appropriate measures have not been taken to address the threats against human rights defenders, causing a great deal of fear among human rights defenders, to the extent that they consider security and defense institutions and the supporting organizations as being unable to provide for their safety and are less optimistic about what they can do to support them. More than 60 percent of the respondents believe that human rights defender organizations are less able to support HRDs while 35 percent are happy with them. The same percent of respondents mentioned that security and defense organs were less willing to support HRDs and more than 40 percent mentioned that the government was less willing to do so. A considerable proportion of respondents mentioned that the government has no will to support HRDs.
- More young individuals than adults are interested to work for defending human rights and there is a significant difference between young boys and girls in this regard. There is, however, difference between individuals by their marital status and their involvement with human rights work, with married individuals being more interested to work in this area. On the other hand, there is a significant relationship between travelling or immigration to overseas and human rights-related activities.

- HRDs are mostly active in the area of defending women rights which is intertwined with remarkable gender-based threats identified during the analysis of interviews (66 individuals referred to gender-based threats). However, a less number of respondents are concerned with defending rights of the victims of war, which is in contrast with security threats which has been referred to the most during the interviews (89 times).
- There is no ethnical and religious balance in human right activities and there is significant difference between HRDs from different ethnicities and religions by the extent of threats they have been exposed to.
- HRDs are mostly in Kabul which is in line with what was said by most of the interviewees who consider the activities of HRDs to be concentrated in the cities especially Kabul.
- Even HRDs consider themselves to have less access to their basic rights but they are much happy with their activities.
- About half of the respondents have, to a large extent, observed the violation of human rights in Afghanistan, but they believe that there are ‘less’ and ‘very less’ opportunities and facilities to support human rights defenders.
- At least half of HRDs had faced threats repeatedly and also observed their counterparts be threatened. However, one quarter of them received no support and more than 60 percent believed that options and opportunities by which the threats could be reduced were limited (see chart 19).
- Nearly half of the HRDs mentioned that cases of threats against HRDs had been addressed ‘‘very little’ and were not happy with the support provided by the international partners.
- Nearly half of the HRDs believed that there was little coordination among HRDs which is consistent with what was said by the interviewees.
- International assistance for supporting the HRDs were ‘very effective’, with most of the HRDS considering the stoppage of or reduction in such assistance as a threat against HRDs and human rights-related activities. Also, HRDS are less optimistic about future.
- The fear caused by the threats has resulted in more self-censorship among HRDs, to the extent that many of them are not willing to at least write one post on Facebook about some sensitive issues.
- There is significant difference between the conditions of male and female HRDs both in terms of the activity area and enjoyment of support, with women being potentially subject to life threats by joining the human rights defending activities on one hand, and being subject to psychological threats after taking refuge to safe houses once they face any security threats on the other hand.

Practical Recommendations

- ✓ Amid all these complexities around the issue of threats against HRDs in Afghanistan, the most general recommendation is that the solutions to support HRDs should encompass a series of integrated support. Measures that are scattered, individual, single-dimensional and focus only on one geographical location would not bring about a remarkable outcome.
- ✓ In the design of any type of strategy, policy and operational plans for supporting HRDs attention should be given to social, cultural, political, economic and gender aspects of the threats and the resulting actions should be implemented with the consideration of time and space requirements.
- ✓ The committee on supporting HRDs should be established based on Supporting Human Rights Defenders Policy under the leadership of Human Rights Defenders Committee (HRDC).
- ✓ Provide protective facilities and safe houses for female HRDs including for their children and families.
- ✓ Create a database of all HRDs in all provinces of Afghanistan.
- ✓ A special unit for supporting HRDs should be established within MoI and other defense and security institutions and be included in the budget of FY 1400.

- ✓ Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) should establish a special committee on addressing cases of violence against HRDs in its regional offices.
- ✓ UN should create a special unit on supporting HRDS under the structure of UNAMA.
- ✓ International organizations should exert more pressure on the Afghan government to prioritize supporting and protection of HRDs.
- ✓ For male HRDs who are at ‘high risk’, safety and protection measures should be taken, but for women, in addition to protection measures, other measures should be taken to provide for their psychological security, including but not limited to helping them re-join their children and families, or preventing from or restricting their access to news and social media.

Methodology

Research data were collected using interviews and questionnaires.

Table 1. Interviews and Data Analysis

Interviews and data analysis	
Number of responded questionnaires	31
Percentage of women who responded to questionnaire	41.9 %
Number of men who responded to questionnaire	58.1 %
Number of interviews conducted with women	13
Number of interviews conducted with men	11
Number of interviews in Kabul	5
Number of interviews in Balkh	5
Number of Interviews in Herat	6
Number of interviews in Kandahar	3
Number of Interviews in Nangarhar	3
Number of interviews conducted with individuals who were subject to high threat	3
Data analysis	The collected data were analyzed using SPSS24 and MAXQDA10

Research Goal

Objective of the research is to examine the threat factors for male and female HRDs in Afghanistan.

Research Objectives

- ✓ To examine factors of threats against HRDs
- ✓ To examine vulnerabilities of female HRDs
- ✓ To compare and contrast threats against HRDs in five provinces of Afghanistan
- ✓ To identify different types of threats against male and female HRDs in Afghanistan

Review of the Related Literature

- ✓ With regards to threats against HRDs, the Amnesty International (AI) has in its 2019 report entitled “The Defenceless Defenders” examined the threats against HRDs in Afghanistan. There is no mention of factors of threats in the report.
- ✓ In its 2016 report entitled “Kunduz after Taliban”, Afghanistan Civil Society Forum (ACSFO) has examined the threats against HRDs but again this report does not touch the factors of threats.

- ✓ “Illicit Weapons and Gun Violence: The Impact of Illicit Weapons and Gun Violence on the Life of Women in Afghanistan” published by AWN in December 2020 examines the issue of violation of women rights as a result of using illicit weapons.
- ✓ Women Perspectives on the Peace Process is another report published by AWN in 2019 which addressed the concerns of women about the peace process.

Limitations of the Research

The wide range of threats was the main challenge of this research, manifested in the broad volume of the data collected. Establishing proper relationships between various perspectives is a difficult task. In addition to this, the research needed to examine many characteristics and normative values in a specific time period which added to the difficulties of the research. Further, newness of the topic and broad-based discussions of cultural and normative characteristics of Afghan society and its impact on the threats against HRDs added to the complexity in establishing casual relationships to draw conclusions. Other limitations include:

- ✓ Public inattention to research and research works
- ✓ Access limitations
- ✓ Security limitations
- ✓ Time limitation
- ✓ High level of the threats
- ✓ Self-censorship
- ✓ Lack of adequate budget

Factors of Threats against Human Rights Defenders

1. Taliban

Taliban is the main and first factor of threats against HRDs, both men and women, in Afghanistan. The main factor of such threats could be Taliban who wants to suppress, target and kill them brutally.¹ Interviewees called Taliban enemy and one of them mentioned “The enemy tries to destroy the motivations held by human rights defenders.”²

In different ways, Taliban threaten HRDs and their most prominent method is target killing. But they have other ways to threaten HRDS. As mentioned by the interviewees, “It is a psychological war which has mentally been very harmful to people. It was not like this in the past. Taliban and our security forces fought each other. It is another psychological war being imposed on people, the type of war has changed. Hence, they target people in a way that friend and enemy cannot be distinguished, with anyone assuming the other as his/her enemy.”³

Channels used by Taliban to target and threaten the HRDs are very extensive, ranging from areas under their control to working through informal and even formal *madrassas* which are being controlled by the government. As a result of government failure, in most of *madrassas* there are places where individuals try to form an anonymous group to promote Taliban’s mentality and bring people to their circle.⁴

Geographically, Taliban have the ability to target and threaten HRDs in much of Afghanistan’s territory, from cities to districts and villages. What is happening in provincial centers differs from what is happening in districts. Also, situation in provincial centers is different from Kabul.⁵ Approach and intensity of threats from Taliban has changed. In the past, Talib was a person who was against

1 Anusha Asadi, civil society activist, Balkh, January 14, 2021.

2 Nasib Ahmad Atal, civil society activists, Nangarhar, January 14, 2021.

3 Nasib Ahmad Atal, Ibid.

4 Feraiidoon Fakoori, HRd, Herat, January 10, 2021.

5 Feraiidoon Fakoori, lbd.

the government and the government was engaged in war against a specific group in a specific area. When peace talks initiated, Taliban were forced to increase their pressure.⁶

2. The Factor of War and Insecurity

War and insecurity is a serious factor threatening HRDs and in many cases the source of threat never becomes clear. Insecurity is both the cause and effect of threats against HRDs, because in a context of insecurity different types of threats emerge against HRDs, including life threat,⁷ physical threat, or external threat and hostile threat. In an atmosphere of war and insecurity, HRDs would face different types of threats_ economic, political, cultural, social and psychological_, with female HRDs becoming increasingly vulnerable against those threats especially gender-based threats. Two female employee of 209 Shaheen Corps who were terrorized in Mazar Sharif,⁸ use of adhesive mines and the implantation of mines beside the roads, and targeted killings are examples of many threats⁹ which have severely affected our activities.¹⁰ Their ultimate objective is to create a long-term, big gap between government and HRDs. ¹¹ The most common and pathetic threat is life threat which has recently been increasing and affecting a big number of civil activists and human rights defenders.¹² Unfortunately, the national security measures to address this situation are not effective and ministry of Interior and detective organs are failing to establish security for the people.¹³ However, one interviewee mentioned “I think people are more aware than before, there are more activists now and their number would increase, no matter how many of them are threatened or killed by Taiban.¹⁴

3. Extremism

Our people are simple-minded and thus are misused by our enemies and other countries. They are told God is one but those in the government are pagans, and thousands of such propagandas. This way their mind-sets are controlled and they would say Taliban are right, we are fighting for God; we would become martyr if we die.¹⁵ It is an interpretation of extremism, indicating a feature of threat against HRDs which is not limited to the enemy. Threats against HRDs occurring as a result of extremism have even penetrated the homes. We see that the rate of violence has increased at family level.¹⁶ To handle this situation, Nuria Safi believes, “the Islamic beliefs shall be applied, people should be told that what religion has taught us, is something given to us by Islam not by West or East.¹⁷ Mr. Fakuri believes “When we speak of human rights, they would say human rights is about blasphemous ideas and on the other hand, people see this assistance negatively, because much of aids coming under the name of human rights have reached those who are relatives the person in charge of the contributing organization.¹⁸ On the other hand, Maryam Dorani believes that “the idea of extremism which exists in the minds of people in our society is a wrong interpretation of religion. There is this weakness that in our society religious issues are misused.¹⁹ Further, in such a society where traditions have deep, historical roots, there could be individuals who may present threats to HRDs. For example, a clergy can also be source of threat. Female HRDs could be especially vulnerable from this angle.²⁰ There are religious scholars with wrong interpretations from religion or customs and traditions of the society who encourage individuals to stop human rights defenders from

6 Maryam Dorani, HRD, Kandahar, January 14, 2021.

7 Nuria Safi, HRD, Kabul, January 16, 2021.

8 Anoosha Asadi, Ibid.

9 Nasib Ahmad Atal, Ibid.

10 Nasib Ahmad Atal, Ibid.

11 Feraidoon Fakoori, Ibid.

12 Latifa Jafari, HRD, Herat, January 11, 2021.

13 Golsum Sediqqi, HRD, Herat, January 14, 2021.

14 Atefa Ibrahim, HRD, Kabul, January 11, 2021.

15 Nuria Safi, Ibid.

16 Nuria Safi, Ibid.

17 Nuria Safi, Ibid.

18 Feraidoon Fakoori, Ibid.

19 Maryam Dorani, Ibid.

20 Kobra Balooch, HRD, Balkh, January 17, 2021.

working, no matter they are men or women, and unfortunately in our society there is high probability that such things happen.²¹ I want to say that Afghanistan is a traditional society and it will be very good if human rights defenders act with the consideration of people's customs and religion, all these teachings should be introduced to people within the framework of Islam because in that case, I think, there would be less potentials for emergence of threats.²² Much of what was said by the interviewees on the threats against human rights defenders, was linked, in one way or another, with the threats the extremism were presenting to the human rights defending work, and such threats are enduring and deep-rooted.

4. The factor of Absence of Rule of Law

One of the most serious factors of threat against HRDs is the absence of rule of law. In a country where rule of law is absent, conditions will be ready for terror.²³ For example, in terms of the laws, no laws are being correctly implemented in Afghanistan. We have human rights laws, we have laws on the prohibition of violence against women and children, but why they are not being implemented. The challenge is that there is lack of adequate support from the government for HRDs and human rights programs, and if such support exists, it has been on the paper, but in practical terms, such support does not exist and it just stays as letters and words. Everywhere the government says that they support us and that they are happy that we are with them, but this is just something they say to people or the media, while behind the scene, completely different things are said and there are possibilities that even the government impedes the implementations of certain programs and activities of human rights defenders.²⁴ In such an atmosphere, criminals and criminal groups cause the voices get silenced so that they can sustain their activities in absence of rule of law and of civil activists' and HRDs' voices, whether inside or outside the government.²⁵

According to Nuria Safi "there is no rule of law, no accountability, rate of violence has gone up, there is not peace throughout the country, everyone is preoccupied with their personal hostilities."²⁶ Human rights violators are not punished. For example, we as social workers went to districts for conducting our programs and repeatedly got threatened by some individuals but nobody prosecuted them.²⁷ Mr. Mohammad Bagheri believes "In Afghanistan laws are not enforced, when civil society activists or human rights defenders get informed of something and want to work for it or initiate advocacy or anything else that benefits the society, they get threatened."²⁸

5. Low Public Awareness Levels

Low public awareness levels constitute the biggest social factor of threats against HRDs.²⁹ In my community, threats against HRDs may have different reasons; it is perhaps due to this reason that people do not have adequate knowledge of the program, of the community and of their needs. People with low education levels are not able to analyze issues, causing problems to human rights defenders.³⁰ Low public awareness levels have various aspects and its outcomes present overt and covert threats for human rights defenders. According to Maryam Dorani, a human rights defender in Kandahar province, "Since the several days ago there have existed wrong beliefs about the presence of women in different spheres of the society, people believe that women cannot become a police

21 Kobra Balooch, Ibid.

22 Khaled Ramozi, HRD, Kabul, January 14, 2021.

23 Wodood Pedram, HRD, Kabul, January 17, 2021.

24 Atefa Ibrahimy, HRD, January 11, 2021.

25 Wodood Pedram, Ibid.

26 Nouria Safi, Ibid.

27 Feraidoon Fakoory, Ibid.

28 Mohammad Baqeri, HRD, January 14, 2021.

29 Women under high threat (2), Kabul, January 25, 2021.

30 Atefa Ibrahimy, Ibid.

officer or a judge. These are the values which exist in our society, be it true or not. They impede women's progress in different spheres of society.³¹

Our people still do not have a thorough understanding of democracy and freedom of speech; human rights is still a question mark in their minds. They do not have thorough information and often they turn to extremist thoughts. As a result, we have witnessed many cases of female journalists and women's rights activists being killed by anonymous individuals for which no specific terrorist groups have claimed responsibility, or where any group has claimed responsibility, later it has retracted it. For example when MalalaiMaiwand was martyred, first it was Daesh who issued a statement but they retreated their claims later.³²

Unfortunately, the enlightenment values have not been institutionalized in the society the way they were supposed to be institutionalized.³³ There are different reasons for this and reasons are not essentially the same everywhere. For example, in any of the provinces of Afghanistan there are different cultures; what is accepted by Badakhshan's culture is not accepted in Khost. This is why one cannot say that one single factor has been the cause of threats. In Badakhshan, for example, nobody prevents women from education and women have a choice in marriage, but in Jalalabad or Khost, girls should marry somebody who is chosen by the family and if she does not accept it, it is considered a big shame.³⁴ Public awareness levels are low and women do not have any strong supporters. If there is support to be provided by the government, there is noncooperation. In Kunduz, when a woman comes as a member of civil society and wants to defend women rights, they find a way to damage her reputation or suppress her ideas. They want women to stay at home or if they are out, they should not intervene with issues that are related to rights.³⁵

6. Political Factors

Top politicians misuse women in many ways.³⁶ This politics may be very much threatening.³⁷ Perceptions of human rights defenders about political factors of threats against them are different and mostly tied with suspicions. For example, Mrs. Ziaee mentioned "In the society where we live, someone who has a little power thinks the whole Afghanistan and the whole world are in his hands. Politics is threatening for female HRDs up to 60-70 %."³⁸ But if we regard the issue from a political perspective, political threat is the greatest threat. It is clear that we also get threatened from the politicians and it is not that we are only scared of Taliban.³⁹ Even when one of the artists in Herat got beat up, the government did not pay attention to public advocacy.⁴⁰ In Afghanistan, politics is of an unhealthy type. When you want to tell a story or judge a certain political group or a politician and analyze how their power hurts people, you would subject yourself to violence, and this has become a prevalent practice.⁴¹ I think the current threats which take place are mostly from a political source.⁴² We do not have mature politicians, because we never had a transparent election and so a democratic and representative government has never come true. Absence of a democratic, national and inclusive government has had the outcome of various features of violence being used to undermine security and safety of the public.⁴³

31 Marayam Dorani, *Ibid*.

32 Zainab Farahmand, *Journalists' rights activist*, Kabul, January 17, 2021.

33 Rahim Jami, *Ibid*.

34 *Woman under threat* (1), Kabul, January 25, 2021.

35 *Woman under threat* (2), *civil society activist*, Balkh, January 14, 2021.

36 Nouria Ziayee, *civil society activist*, Balkh, January 14, 2021.

37 Anoosha Asadi, *civil society activist*, Balkh, January 14, 2021.

38 Nouria Ziayee, *Ibid*.

39 Nouria Safi, *HRD*, Kabul, January 16, 2021.

40 Feraiidoon Fakoori, *Ibid*.

41 Maryam Dorani, *HRD*, Kandahar, January 14, 2021.

42 Latifa Jafari, *HRD*, Herat, January 11, 2021.

43 Golsum Sediqqi, *HRD*, Herat, January 14, 2021.

7. Economic Factors

Economic threats affect all of us. For example, you work somewhere and always get threatened in many ways by your supervisor. One day they would say ‘you cannot work with us’ and the other day they would say ‘you are fired’.⁴⁴ Those who have monopolized the economy and markets, would not let civil society and especially women to make progress, and it is a clear threat against which we stand but we have not succeeded because there are mafias at higher levels.⁴⁵ If we do not work, if civil and human rights activists do not work and all stay at home, we would be subject to an economic shock which would affect all of us.⁴⁶ We see that most of the economic units and individuals who provide employment opportunities for the people get threatened, face the danger of abduction of their children or being blackmailed, putting negative impacts on the businessmen and cause them flee the country. The government should pay attention to this issue. We even saw that those who are invisibly at the top of the politics instilled a feeling of disappointment into people.⁴⁷ Economic issues have a vital role in the lives of women.⁴⁸ From a human rights and social perspective, economic threat is the greatest threat and there is no threat greater than that, because economic activities provide human beings with necessary means to reach peace and tranquility. In a state of lack of such tranquility, human beings cannot make progress, educate or get access their basic rights. Therefore, people should be supported to have decent standard of living by provision of budget, facilities and active supporters who can help them get access to their basic rights. If such facilities are absent, rights are violated, progress in any areas is impeded and the vulnerable individuals will be marginalized.⁴⁹

8. Socio-cultural Factors

We most of the times hear statements like “our main issue is our culture”⁵⁰ or “there is something wrong with our society” or “our society is not democratic”⁵¹. Such statements are right, as they explain many of the threats being faced by human rights defenders, especially women. Threats are like a pyramid, they begin from the top and move downward to the bottom, affecting socio-political conditions of HRDs.⁵² In the discussion of social and cultural factors of threats, one would say when families and communities see that the government is weak, there is lack of rule of law and accountability, violence rates have gone up, and there is not an inclusive peace, they would cling to their personal hostilities and misuse the situation.⁵³

In the first place, families themselves create problems. Second, when women come for work to the public sphere, they would face individuals who do not let them work by abusing them. Factors of violence against women are not only cultural and economic but also domestic and social. There are many reasons why women continue to experience violence and bad events. When they get out of their homes, they face a thousand problems, they get humiliated and insulted, they are not allowed to move from one place to another or to pursue their plans. Female civil activists and human rights defenders face many problems.⁵⁴

The inappropriate customs and dominance of a patriarchal culture have led people to follow such ideas as “women cannot become a police officer or judge” which impede women’s progress in different arenas. Feminine literature, feminine ideas or feminine writings are scarce in Afghanistan and there is such a threat that everything has been defined in masculine terms and all writings are masculine in nature, which altogether constitute a challenge for women who want to be present and

44 Nouria Ziayee, civil society activist, Balkh, January 14, 2021.

45 Nouria Safi, *Ibid.*

46 Nasib Ahmad Atal, civil society activist, Nangarhar, January 14, 2021.

47 Feraidoon Fakoori, *Ibid.*

48 Anoosha Asadi, *Ibid.*

49 Latifa Jafari, HRD, Herat, January 11, 2021.

50 Nouria Ziayee, *Ibid.*

51 Nouria Ziayee, *Ibid.*

52 Nourida Safi, *Ibid.*

53 Nourida Safi, *Ibid.*

54 Anoosha Asadi, civil society activist, Balkh, January 14, 2021.

participate in the society.⁵⁵ Different cultures which exist in Afghanistan, from north to south and from east to west, have undermined public-state unity and collaboration, thus undermining the process of supporting human rights defenders.⁵⁶

9. Gender factors

Quotations such as “they misuse women in many ways, women do not have the right to say what they want”,⁵⁷ or “they glare at you as if they want to eat you”⁵⁸ or “With regards to gender issues, men and women both have faced problems”⁵⁹ are thought-provoking.

I think they do not want women to work and achieve high status in society. They do not want us to get out of home. Also, Taliban have problem with women rights and human rights, insofar as they took with themselves a few women who were working for human rights. Taliban believe that girls should not educate beyond 6th grade and so they closed down the girls’ schools and only a few schools (in Logar province) stayed open. Not only women but also men were threatened and several individuals got terrorized by doorstep or when they were on the way to work or house. They believe that they do not work for women rights but they work to deviate women from ethical principles. It was some of the problems that we faced and still face in Logar province.⁶⁰

I think the threats which exist against women and human rights defenders are basically due to closed nature of our society. It is very difficult for them to immediately embrace that women as the half of society can work like men in the public sphere. It is also the case for female human rights defenders.⁶¹

10. Psychological factors

For human rights defenders, having a family member get threatened is more psychologically damaging than when they themselves get threatened. For example, you saw that son of director of AIHRC’s north zone office was killed. Such events indicate that not only the human rights defenders but also their family members are subject to threats, which is adding to the pressure they experience.⁶² I think targeting this layer of society (HRDs, media and civil society activists) is a tactic they use to terrorize other parts of the society. It is a warning for them to stop what they do and not to appear on the scene as human rights defenders. We cannot only blame Taliban on this, there are other individuals and groups who impede such individuals’ activities to achieve their goals.⁶³ Hence, I ought to stay silent not for the sake of myself but for the sake of my family, no matter where the threat comes from, be it from Daesh or Taliban.⁶⁴

It is a psychological war that has begun and damages people psychologically. It was not like this in the past. In the past, Taliban and our security forces fought each other, but now the type of war has changed, they initiate a psychological war through targeting people in a way that friend and enemy cannot be distinguished.⁶⁵ Someone calls us and tells us something which damages us psychologically. Threat takes different forms. That somebody tells us harsh words and intimidates us is a psychological threat.⁶⁶ I cannot sacrifice my children for the sake of my work, I ought to kill myself to comfort them, otherwise my children and my family will be in danger.⁶⁷ Everyone feels

55 Maryam Dorani, HRD, Kandahar, January 14, 2021.

56 Golsum Sediqqi, Ibid.

57 Nouria ziyee, Ibid.

58 Nouria Safi, Ibid.

59 Mohammad Asef Haidarzada, HRD, Herat, January 13, 2021.

60 Woman under high threat (3), Kabul, January 25, 2021.

61 Shazia Haqju, HRD, Balkh, January 17, 2021.

62 Wodood Pedram, HRD, Kabul, January 17, 2021.

63 Woman under high threat (2), Kabul, January 25, 2021.

64 Tamana Habibi, HRD, January 16, 2021.

65 Nasib Ahmad Atal, Ibid.

66 Anoosha Asadi, Ibid.

67 Woman under high threat (1), Kabul, January 25, 2021.

unsafe and the government cannot do anything.⁶⁸ In our working area, we tried to support our female staff through providing psychological advice on how to protect themselves under bad security conditions.⁶⁹ Everyone is concerned about this.⁷⁰

Factors of threats against HRDs by province

There is threat against HRDs throughout provinces of Afghanistan, but factors and severity of the threats differ from one province to another and from one city to another, though they share similarities in this regard.

1. Kabul

When I was on my way to home, the taxi driver told something that provoked me to think: “After twenty years, Taliban have newly understood whom they should target; they used to target street vendors and usual citizens but now they target famous, outspoken individuals.⁷¹ His words attest a tactical change by Taliban now understood even by usual citizens such as taxi drivers. Our work is continuing in district 5, we work on a bottom-up basis, from rural areas to cities. The urbanization culture has never demanded people to do acts of violence and they have not done so, especially the educated people. Today, in our cities we have people coming from rural areas who are responsible for IEDs explosions. They are inhabited in cities, they work in there and they are a violent stratum who are responsible for mines explosion and suicide attacks.⁷²

In a situation where HRDs are no longer safe and got attacked in the capital, people would have no opportunity to raise their voice in areas outside of urban centers.⁷³ We should initiate awareness raising from these areas and make them realize that in Islam killing one person is like killing all human beings and to save one person’s life means saving the lives of all humanity.⁷⁴

2. Herat

Speaking in terms of differences between geographical locations, one would say that in grade 2 and grade 3 provinces, in provinces where corruption is rampant and in certain urban areas where conditions are difficult for working, there are individuals who try to impede the process of democratization and realization of human rights.⁷⁵

At the time COVID 19 was on the rise, I was walking in the city and always thought someone would attack me with a knife or throw acids on my face; it could be someone not from Taliban but from these fundamental groups in Herat. Last year I felt comfortable and secure in any district I visited, but now we can neither go to cities nor the districts. We are scared.⁷⁶

Herat is a very big city and I think is one of the provinces with biggest size, having 19 districts. We also work in the area of elections and are in touch with all those districts. Conditions were really good last year, there were about 3-4 districts which were highly insecure where no civil and human rights activities were being conducted. But the situation has worsened these years and conversely, now there are only 2-3 districts which are secure where people can carry out activities in this area. There are about 15 districts where security conditions have worsened to a great deal and civil or social activities including human right works are rare and temporary.⁷⁷

68 Mohammad Baqeri, Ibid.

69 Mohammad Dorani, Ibid.

70 Mohammad Baqeri, Ibid.

71 Taxi driver, Qala-e Fathullah.

72 Nouria Safi, HRD, Kabul, January 16, 2021.

73 Wodood Pedram, Ibid.

74 Nouria Safi, Ibid.

75 Feraidoon Fakoori, Ibid.

76 Aziza Khairandish, HRD, Herat, January 10, 2021.

77 Mohammad Baqeri, Ibid.

3. Kandahar

In districts and villages which have smaller environments, there is lack of rule of law and knowledge and awareness levels are very low as compared to urban centers. They live based on the same traditions and customs they have had in the past, are less self-sufficient than urban residents. In these areas, there are many challenges for women who want to break taboos. Though certain activities could take place, the problem is that laying strong foundations for such activities is very controversial. In a situation where war is going on, if peace comes, the best measure would be to increase communications between urban and rural centers as much as possible.⁷⁸

There are different types of threats. In the past if Taliban threatened you, they would come and closed down the office, punish you with lashes or imprisoned you for two or three days, but now conditions have changed in a way that you cannot know the enemy, Taliban do everything they want, there are mine explosions, terror and any of such threats.⁷⁹

Within the cities and districts, there is unfortunately a close culture and we have not been able to implement the law. Naturally, there are cultural differences among communities. Residents of Helmand are socially very different from those who are living in Herat, Kandahar or Kabul. The very weak points they have in common, no matter where they are living, have sometimes caused violence to increase and the government, in these cases, have failed to implement the law evenly throughout Afghanistan to reduce these problems.⁸⁰

It is good if the government have programs like literacy training or tailoring courses, as such programs are rare. Specifically, there should be literacy training programs for both men and women to help them educate and raise their awareness levels.⁸¹

4. Balkh

Conditions, including for employment and program activities are worsening even for those who are living in there, it is due to the fear of not only themselves but also their families getting threatened. They would say when the situation is like this in urban cities, in the districts which are far from the cities, the situation would be much worse.⁸²

When every day we lose a loved one in the city, it is clear that how the situation would look in terms of threats against HRDs. We see what happens every day. There are certainly no security measures, neither from the government nor from supporters of journalists and HRDs. I hope that UNAMA, UN and organizations supporting HRDs make more efforts than before so that we can continue our civil, advocacy and human rights activities with a feeling of safety.⁸³

In Balkh we have 14 districts. In three of them, namely Dehdadi, Khulm and Narsai, which I visited several times to hold training sessions, the situation was relatively good, but since the beginning of 2020, my stance has been that 'if you even give me money and ask me to go to those districts, I would not accept.'⁸⁴

5. Nangarhar

But what we, I mean civil activists, media activists and other similar activists, face here is that in Jalalabad there are target killings, yesterday two targets were killed. They use adhesive mines and mines which are implanted beside the roads. The threat of target killings is high here. It has not been made clear that who is responsible for such events, Taliban or Daesh? They can take place anywhere.

78 Maryam Dorani, *Ibid.*

79 Woman under threat (1), *Ibid.*

80 Golsoom Sediqqi, *Ibid.*

81 Anoosha Asadi, *Ibid.*

82 Tamana Habibi, *Ibid.*

83 Shazia Haqju, HRD, Balkh, January 17, 2021.

84 Tamana Habibi, *Ibid.*

This has become a torment for us. Today I had a meeting with a group of civil activists and they said they were also facing the same threats.⁸⁵

Even for men, writing and preparing reports is difficult in provinces. You may know that journalists cannot post news on their Facebook for their province, because if they do so, they would be accused of partiality and get threatened to death by Taliban. Unfortunately, we lost many of our colleagues this way. In remote areas, there are such problems even for men. For female journalists, such as TV programs presenters and reporters, preparing field reports is not an easy task, even in major cities like Mazar-e Sharif and Herat. This is while in such cities it is expected that culture of doing such activities should be in place, but unfortunately it is still not the case. For Example, Malala Momand was not a field reporter but she was a TV presenter, and even despite being a TV presenter, they thought she was a big threat and a woman shall never appear on TV. They finally took her life. More people in provinces and less people in Kabul hate women's activities, especially when they appear on TV and express their opinions. These issues are plentiful.⁸⁶

In remote provinces there is less rule of law and AOGs have more power and influence, dominance of customs and traditions are stronger and access to financial and human capital is more difficult. There is a plan for making a documentary on sodomy which is prevalent in remote areas, but doing such work is very risky given the existing insecurity.⁸⁷

Awareness raising and capacity building programs should be used, though I think it is impossible to ask a woman from a district to come or send her from city to a village. Instead, you may find someone from the same area who may be able to communicate content and message to the relevant people. But I think there is something that needs to be resolved; there is currently a big gap between people in districts and villages in terms of conceptual understanding and this is an area which needs to be worked on.⁸⁸

It is about one month I have posted nothing on Facebook, had no interviews with radios and TVs, and have not attended any meetings. Existing conditions have affected our activities which are mostly about conveying messages of the people, we are facing threats. Imagine! In the morning when I was wearing my gun belt, my five-year old daughter asked me "Father, what do you do with that gun, do you hit people with that?", No, my son, I protect myself with it, I replied.⁸⁹

Analysis of the questionnaire data

- ✓ The respondents of the questionnaires were mostly young individuals. 56-65 age group had the lowest number of participants. 61.6 % of the respondents were young individuals and 1% were adults.
- ✓ 58.1 percent of the respondents were male and 41.9 percent were female.
- ✓ 29 percent of the respondents were single and 71 percent were married.
- ✓ 83.9 percent of the respondents had ever travelled to outside of Afghanistan and the remaining 16.1 percent had not done so.
- ✓ Majority of the respondents were working to defend women rights (61.3 percent), while defenders of the victims of war was the smallest category, with children rights activists standing in the middle.
- ✓ Level of education was another indicator examined by the research. When asked about their level of education, most of the respondents checked BA, while those who had 12th grade diploma were a minority.
- ✓ Majority of the questionnaire respondents were Tajik and Hazaras were the smallest category.

85 Nasib Ahmad Atal, HRD, Nangarhar, January 14, 2021.

86 Zainab Farahmand, Ibid.

87 Tahera Sajjadi, Ibid.

88 Maryam Dorani, Ibid.

89 Nasib Ahmad Atal, Ibid.

- ✓ A minority of the respondents were followers of religions other than Sunni and Shia branches of Islam. Sunni people constituted majority of the respondents.
- ✓ Participants who completed the questionnaire included 1 respondent from Balkh, 3 respondents from Herat, with Kabul having the highest number of participants who completed the questionnaires (21). A total of 5 participants from the remaining provinces completed the questionnaires.

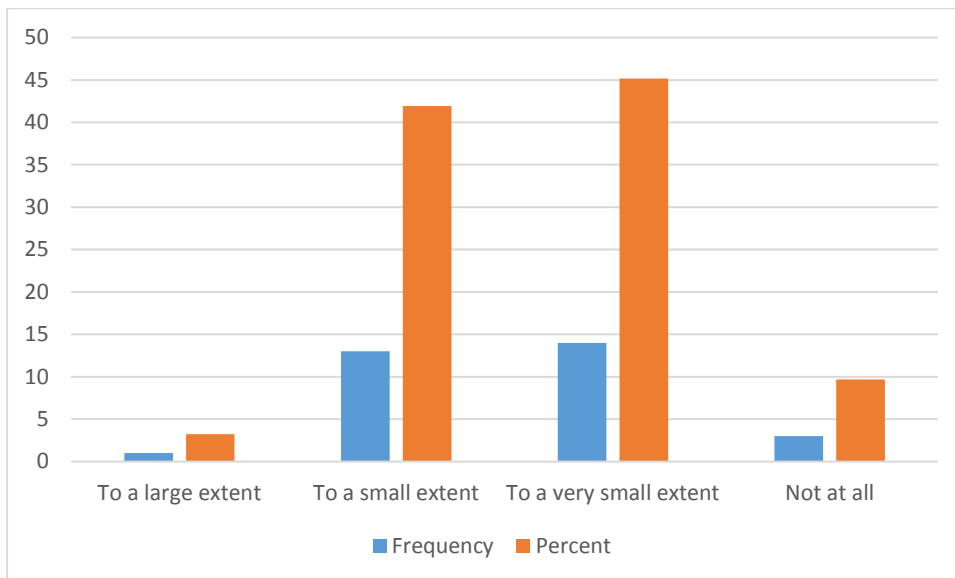


Chart 1 To what extent are conditions suitable for defending HRDs in Afghanistan?

- ✓ 9.7 percent of the respondents mentioned “conditions are not suitable.” In contrast, only one respondent believed that conditions were suitable to a great extent. “to a small extent” and “to a very small extent” constituted majority of the responses, as 45.2 percent of the respondents chose “to a small extent” and 41.9 percent chose “to a small extent”.

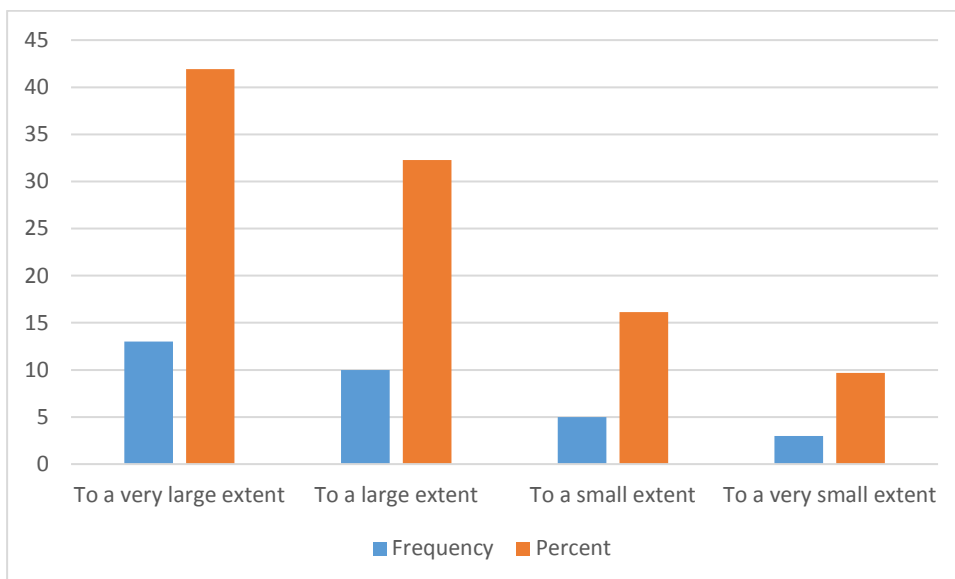


Chart 2 To what extent conditions are favourable for the violation of the rights of HRDs in Afghanistan?

- ✓ Conversely, in response to this question, 41.9 percent of the respondents chose “to a very large extent” while only 3 respondents (9.7 percent) chose “to a very small extent”. 32.3 percent of the respondents mentioned conditions were “to a large extent” favourable for the violation of HRDs’ rights and the remaining respondents (16.1 percent) chose “to a small extent.” None of the respondents believed that conditions were not favourable for violation of those rights.

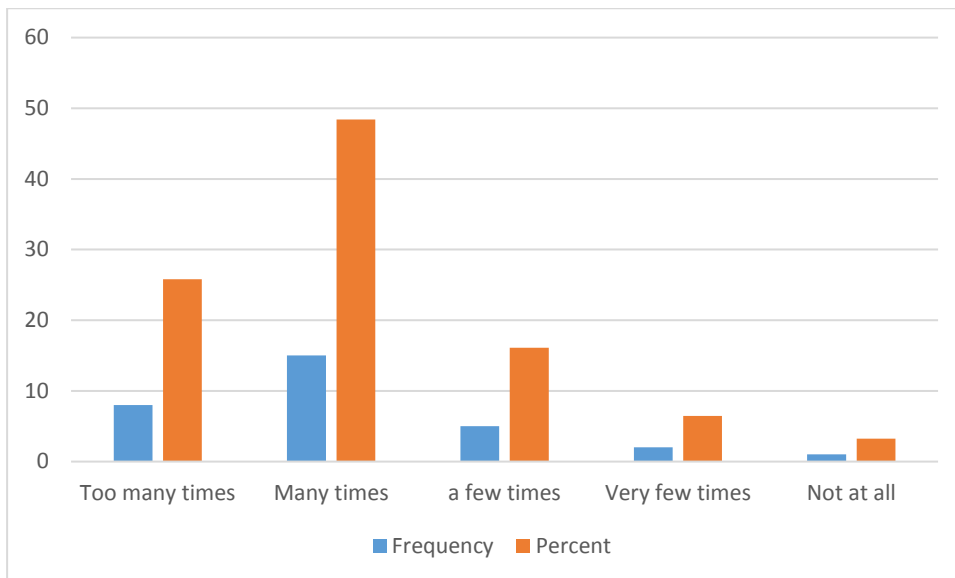


Chart 3 How many times have you personally been threatened because of your work?

- ✓ Majority of the respondents had been threatened during implementation of human rights work. From the second half of the spectrum, some frequencies have gone up significantly. 25.8 percent mentioned they had been threatened “too many” times. In contrast, one respondent mentioned “not at all.” 6.5 percent of the respondents chose “very few times”, and those who had been threatened “a few times” are very small in number, standing at 16.1 percent. Majority of the respondents mentioned that they had been threatened “many times”. In total, 48.4 percent of the respondents (nearly half of the respondents) had the experience of being threatened.

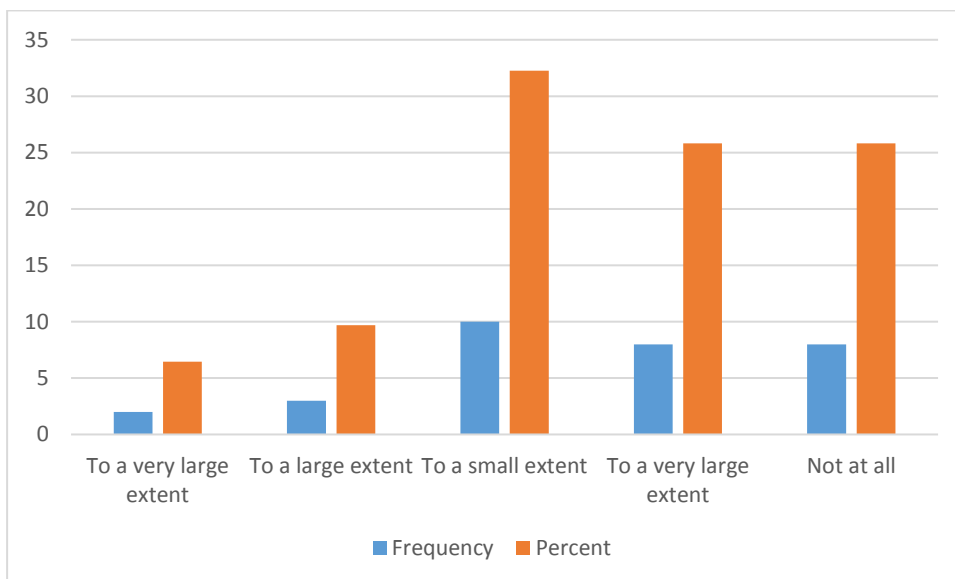


Chart 4 To what extent do you have access to supports for being a HRD?

- ✓ This finding indicates that the degree of threat is very high in Afghanistan and in contrast, supports are little to inadequate. 6.5 percent of the respondents said they had access to support to a very large extent. While in the previous question, 25.8 percent of the respondents had experienced threats, in response to this question 25.8 percent mentioned they had access to no supports and the same number said they had access to supports to a very small extent. In response to this question, majority of the respondents mentioned they had access to supports to a small extent (32.3 percent) while 9.7 percent had access to supports to a large extent. The trend looks like: high degree of threat with low, temporary support.

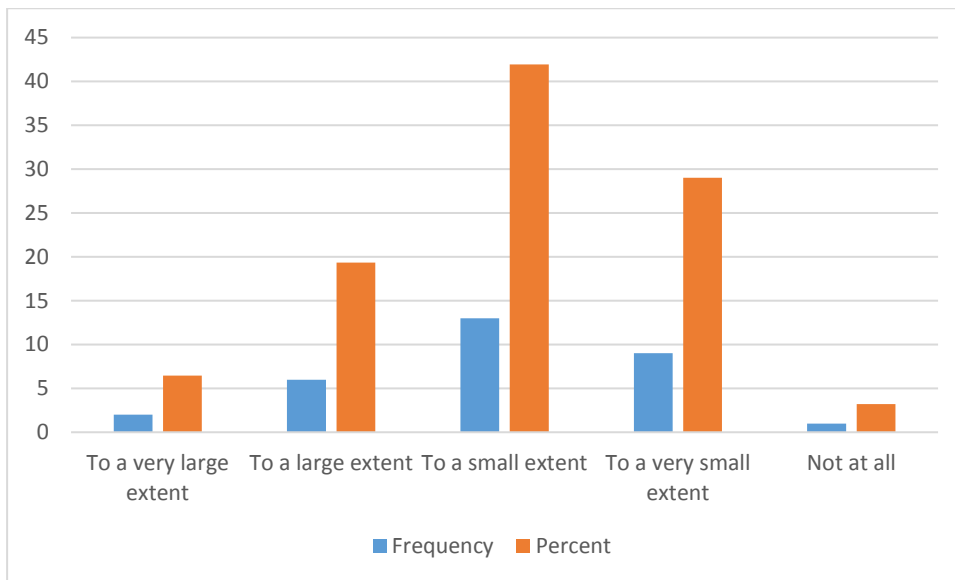


Chart 5 To what extent do you think female HRDs benefit from the support that is tailored to the general working conditions of women?

Gender structures have manifestations which are visible in any social activities. When asked to what extent they benefited from the supports tailored to their general working conditions, one female HRD mentioned she had not benefited from such support. This respondent believed that women were not benefiting from this type of support. In contrast, two respondent said they benefited from this type of support to a large extent. Majority of the respondents chose to a small extent (41.9 percent). To a very small extent and to a large extent were chosen by 29 and 19.4 percent of the respondents, respectively.

Analysis of the data drawn from interviews

Qualitative findings were drawn from the in-depth interviews conducted with 24 HRDs and civil society activists in five provinces of Afghanistan.

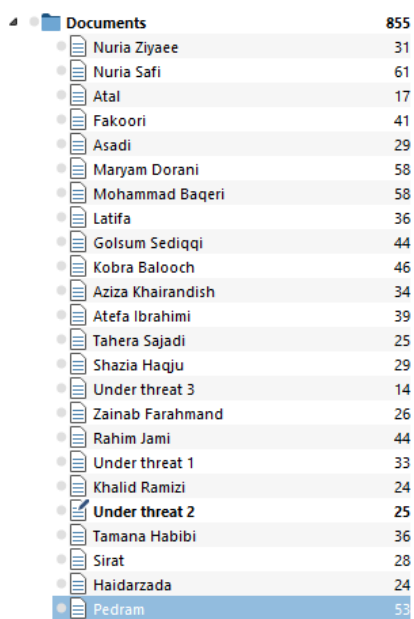


Figure 1 Codes and frequencies

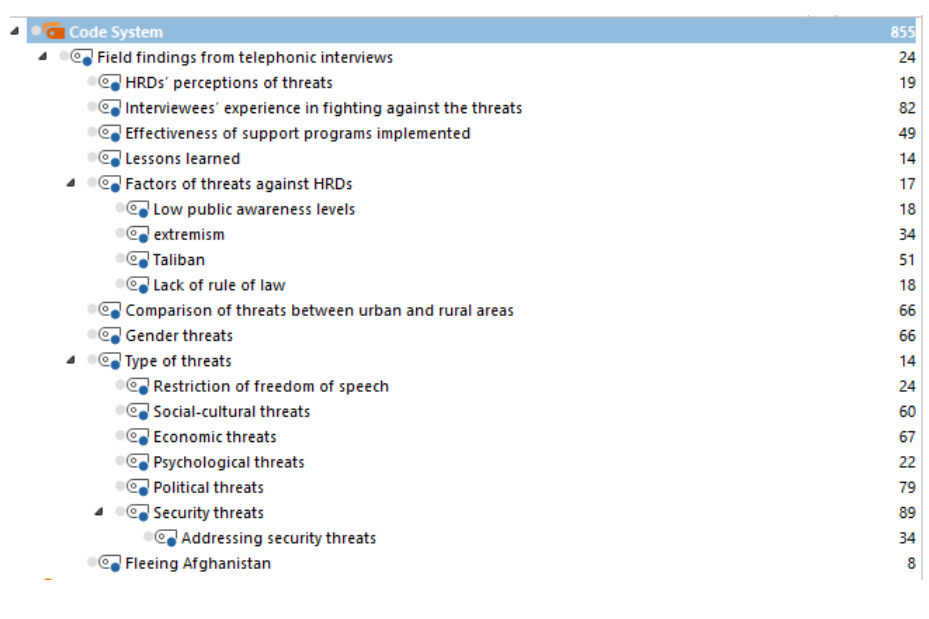


Figure 1 Interviews and codes extracted from each interview

- ✓ Figure 1 indicates that in total 24 interviews were conducted. From among the interviewees, Mrs. Nuria Safi referred the most to the codes (61 times), followed by Mrs. Maryam Dorani (58 times) and Mr. Mohammad

Baqeri. Figure 11 indicates that Maryam Dorani had the longest interview. These two interviews are the most content-rich interviews in this research. Interviews conducted with Mrs. GolsoomSediqi and Mr. Rahim Jami rank in the third place. Lowest number of times of referral to the codes was of the interview with third woman with high degree of threat, followed by Mr. Nasib Ahmad, and Mr. Khaled Ramozi and Mr. Mohammad Asef, who both stand in the third place.

- ✓ The “security threats” code has been referred to the most (89 times), followed by “interviewees’ experience of threat” code. “Political threats” stand in the third place. “Economic threats stand in the fourth place with 67 times of referral. “Gender threats” and “comparison of activity and threats against HRDs” each one with 66 times of referral stand in the fifth place. The code “fleeing Afghanistan” is the least referred code with 8 times of referral, followed by “lessons learned” and “different types of threats in general” each one with 14 times of referral.



Figure 1 Relationship between the codes and the interviews conducted

- ✓ Figure 3 indicates bold points in each interview, it shows what issues each interviewee has focused more on. Series on the left show the times of referral to the codes and the series on the bottom show the number of referrals in each interview. In other words, rows are the codes and columns are the interviews. Interviewee’s names are included on the columns and codes are included on the rows. The first interview belongs to Mrs. NuriaZiaee. Key points mentioned by NuriaZiaee include economic, psychological, political and security threats. In the interview that was conducted with Nuria Safi, second interview from the top, there is mention of “interviewees’ experience of “fighting with threats” which is expected from a 54-year old woman. The issue of “psychological and economic threats” has been a bold point during the interview with Mr. Atal.
- ✓ The bold point during the interview with Mr. Fakoori was “fighting with threats” while Mrs. AnooshaAsadi concentrated more on the issue of “gender threats.” Mrs. Maryam Dorani concentrated on “effectiveness of support programs”, “gender threats” and “social-cultural threats” in addition to the issues of “Taliban” and “economic threats” which were emphasized during his interview. In his interview, Mr. Mohammad Baqeri focused on two issues of “comparison of threats between rural and urban areas” and “addressing security threats”. Mrs. LatifaJafari spoke mostly about her personal experience and referred to “political threats”.
- ✓ GolsuSediqi focused on “security threats. KobraBalooch spoke about her personal experience, emphasizing on “political threats”. Aziza KhairAndish pointed more to “economic threats”. AtefaIbrahimi concentrated more on “effectiveness of programs”, “gender threats”, “socio-cultural threats” and “addressing security threats.” “political threats” was the bold point during the interview with TaheraSajjadi. Mr. ShaziaHaquj mostly concentrated on “security threats.” The third woman with high degree of threat concentrated

mostly on “the threat of Taliban”. Mrs. Zainab Farahmand regarded “political threats” as a serious issue. The second woman under high degree of threat concentrated the most on the “threat of Taliban.” Rahim Jami pointed to “political threats” and first woman with high degree of threat spoke mostly about the threat of Taliban and security threats while mentioning her personal experience. Khaled Romozi mostly emphasized on his personal experience and effectiveness of the support programs targeting HRDs. “Gender threats” was the bold point during the interview with second woman under threat. Tamana Habibi pointed more to security threats. Mr. Sirat emphasized on experiences and security threats. Perception of threat and comparison of activities and threats against HRDs between urban and rural areas has been the key point of Mr. Haidarzada’s interview. Finally, Mr. WodudPedram pointed more to the role of Taliban in threats and security threats.

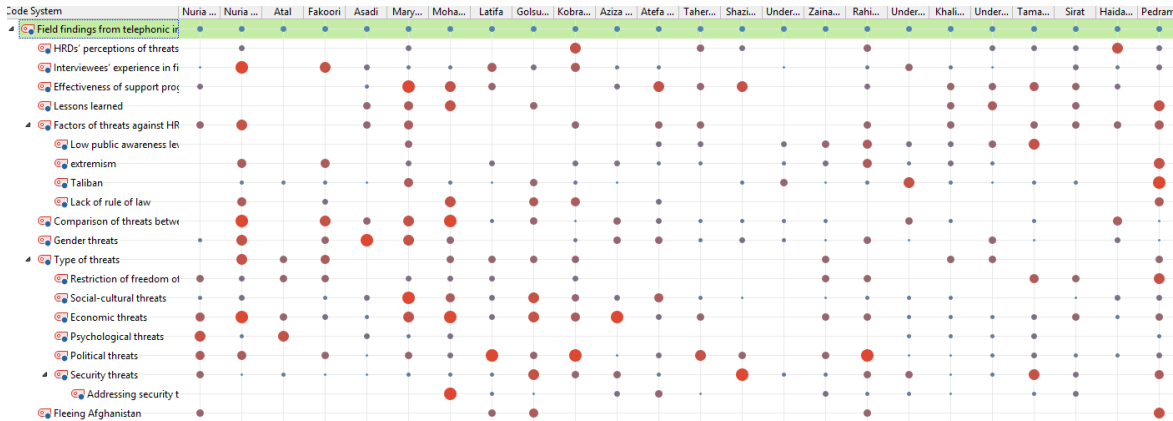


Figure 2 Relationship between the codes

- ✓ Figure 4 indicates casual relationships between the codes. Bold points are indicative of casual relationship between two variables. The first bold point is the relationship between factors of threats and Taliban. Findings indicate that most threats against HRDs come from Taliban side. The relationship between gender threats and personal experiences of the interviewees is bold, the same applies to the relationship between low public awareness levels and gender threats. Also, the relationship between gender threats and comparison of threats between urban and rural areas has been bold.
- ✓ It is interesting that there is a direct and bold relationship between socio-cultural threats and low public awareness levels on one hand. Such a relationship also exists between economic threats and gender threats, and between socio-cultural threats and extremism.
- ✓ Security threats, socio-cultural threats, Taliban, comparison of threats between urban and rural areas, extremism and gender threats have had the boldest relationships with other codes. In other words, factors of threat against human rights defenders included a complex series of Taliban, social, cultural, political, economic issues, low public awareness levels, gender issues, and being close to or far from urban centres.
- ✓ In such a complex environment it is almost impossible to identify primary and secondary factors, but one thing is clear: the existence of a war environment makes it difficult to trace any causes of threats against human rights defenders. On the other hand, interviewees associated the increase in threats with the peace talks of Afghanistan, and Taliban’s intention of gaining privileges in the peace talks was considered as the main cause of such increase.

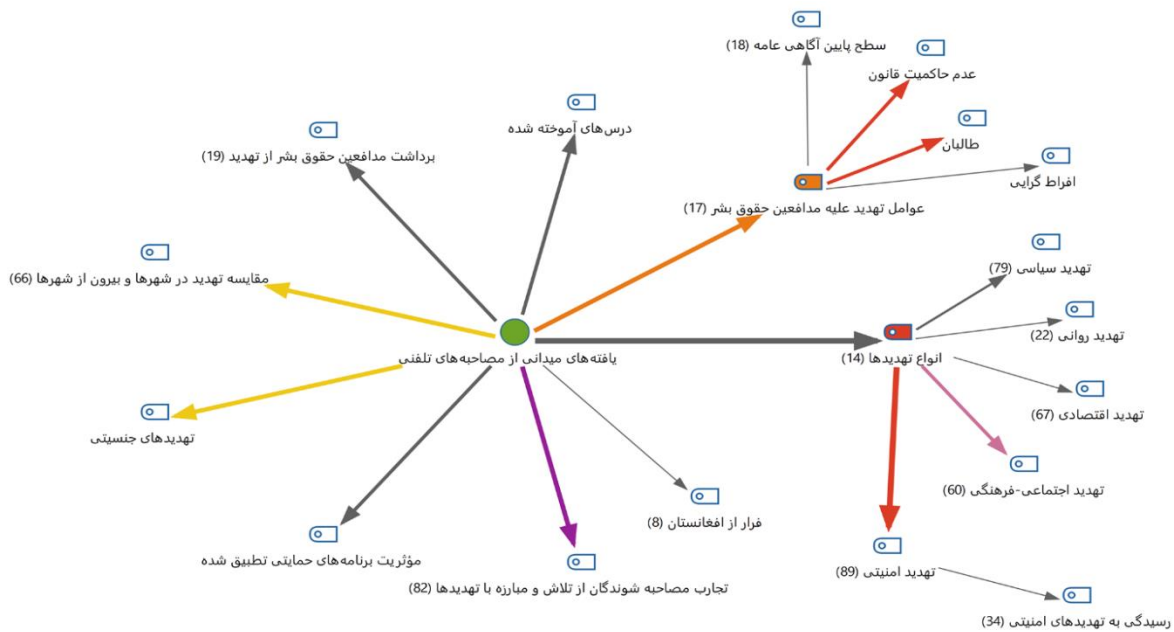


Figure 3 Map of Codes

- ✓ The hierarchical map of codes indicates that different types of threats against HRDs has been referred to the most, followed by factors of threats which has four sub-categories. Personal experiences of interviewees with fighting against threats stands in the second place by the number of referrals, followed by the comparison of threats between urban and rural areas. Gender threats stand in the second place, lower than the “perceptions of HRDs”. With regards to factors of threats, Taliban and the extremists stands on the two extremes.

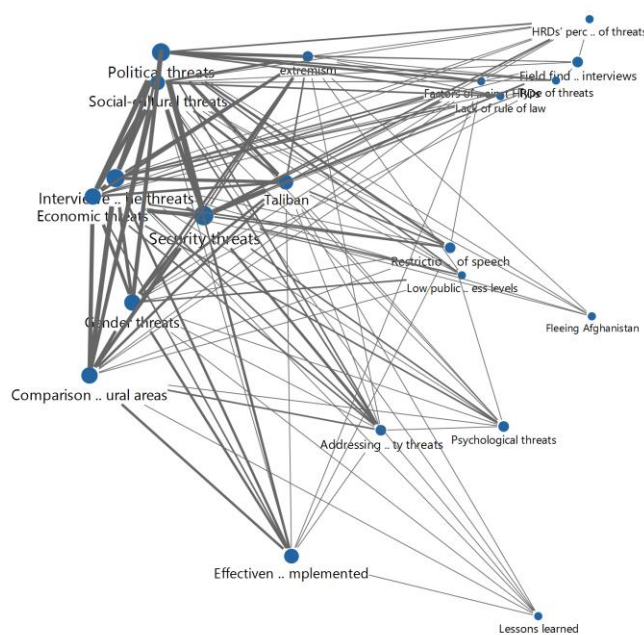


Figure 4 Casual relationship between the codes

- ✓ Casual relationships between the codes indicate that Taliban are in the centre which interlinks other bold points of the codes. Most of the codes are interlinked. However, there is no relationship between lessons learned, psychological threats, fleeing Afghanistan and effectiveness of the implemented programs. In other words, none of the HRDs want to leave Afghanistan for psychological threats. However, there is relationship between fleeing Afghanistan and extremism, as well as between Taliban and security threats, and vice versa.

- ✓ The relationship between Taliban and security threats against HRDs is very bold, as Taliban stand on the point where security threats and the degree of threats against HRDs in urban and rural areas converge, with highest degree of threats being in rural areas and the relationship between Taliban and factors of threat are bold to the same point.
- ✓ On the other side of the spectrum, there is close relationship between gender threats and low public awareness levels, as well as between gender threats and comparison of threats against HRDs in urban and rural areas. There is a linear, almost direct relationship between gender threats and security and political threats, as political threat is the point where the two converge. Taliban, psychological threats and security threats form a triangle, with the bold line being Taliban-security threats.
- ✓ From a multi-factor perspective, there is a relationship between a cause and other causes. This finding confirms this conclusion that threats against HRDs are complex in nature. From a multi-factor perspective, Taliban again stand in the centre but socio-cultural and political threats have been more emphasized and are closely tied to each other.
- ✓ Factors and types of threats mostly stand around Taliban. The focus of what was told by interviewees was on security threats, location of threats, Taliban, extremism and gender threats, while psychological threats, emerging as a result of existence of such threats combined with restriction of freedom of speech, are closely tied with these. Low public awareness levels is shown on the bottom and different types of threats and lack of rule of law are shown on the top of the figure. In other words, lack of rule of law presents the main threat against HRDs, while low public awareness levels paves the way for such threats to take place.
- ✓ Comparison of number of paragraphs in each interview indicates that the longest interview was the one that was conducted with Mrs. Maryam Dorani, with third woman under high threat having the shortest interview. The former had 42 paragraphs and the latter had 11 paragraphs.
- ✓ The central term of the research has been “threat”. On the top of the Word Cloud, there is the term “support”. “Rights, Afghanistan, against, society, defenders, social and program” were the most used words during the interviews.

Conclusion

- ✓ Factors of threats against HRDs include a complex series of absence of rule of law, Taliban, socio-cultural, political, economic issues, low public awareness levels, gender issues and distance from the cities. Absence of rule of law in Afghanistan has paved the grounds for Taliban, AOGs, opportunists and abusers including religious, political individuals, narcotics and economic mafia and even some of the soldiers in defense and security forces to threaten human rights defenders. Threats against human rights defenders take place in a context of low public awareness but what intertwines all these is the current war or insecurity, with attempts to get privileges in the peace talks by Taliban acting as the factor increasing threats against human rights defenders.
- ✓ In such a complex environment it is almost impossible to identify primary and secondary factors, but one thing is clear: the existence of a war environment makes it difficult to trace any causes of threats against human rights defenders. On the other hand, interviewees associated the increase in threats with the peace talks of Afghanistan, and Taliban’s intention of gaining privileges in the peace talks was considered as the main cause of such increase.
- ✓ Men look at the threats in a more objective way than women. In contrast, the way women look at the threats against human rights defenders is less objective. In other words, security threats mostly affect men while women are more affected by socio-cultural threats. On the other hand, men take economic threats more seriously while see gender threats due to discrimination and low public awareness levels among women as more important. Security aspects of threats, including target killings of HRDs affect men more, while women are more affected by psychological threats and the fear of such terrors.

Disclaimer of responsibility:

Views expressed during the interviews are of the interviewees and the rest of them are of the writer and do not essentially reflect opinions of ADDO and AWSDC.