

UN Special Rapporteur Report from the International Association of Women in Radio and Television

International Association of Women in Radio and Television
Statement on Afghanistan Media Sector and Disinformation Campaigns
Dr. Michelle Ferrier, President, IAWRT
president@iawrt.org

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Digital and physical attacks on journalists are on par with the most serious human rights abuses, with ripple effects that go beyond the profession to personal and human rights abuses. Women journalists in particular have been targeted, their families used as pawns and leverage to get these women to stop reporting. Misinformation and smear campaigns put additional pressure on women journalists, with “presstitute” and “enemy of the state” and other gender-targeted harassment designed to bring shame and dishonor to the journalist. Family members have even committed “honor killings” to silence these women from their work.

Given the high rate of impunity, the collateral harms from misinformation and disinformation erode trust and support for free and independent journalism. The resulting damage: The erosion of civic dialogue, deliberation and debate and the loss of transparent and free societies. State-sponsored and state-aligned bad actors and others have used reputation damage, smear campaigns and other online gendered hate speech and threats to silence women journalists around the globe. We are seeing the results of this digital mis and disinformation campaigns in the devastation of the media sector in countries like Afghanistan and the Philippines.

Najiba Ayubi had been a journalist in Afghanistan for over two decades. During this time, armed men showed up at her home multiple times, but she continued to work despite the threats. She was managing director of Killid Group, a non-profit media network that includes two of the country’s most popular magazines and eight radio stations. She won the 2013 Courage in Journalism Award by the International Women’s Media Foundation in recognition for her work. But when the Taliban came to her door in 2021, she decided to get her whole family to safety, an ordeal that took them from Afghanistan to Germany and then to the United States.

Najiba and her family now reside in California, waiting for the asylum process to move on her case and those of hundreds of other media workers that have fled from Afghanistan since August 2021. Najiba’s team at Kallid Group and other Afghan journalists are now without their homes, their livelihoods, pursued even across borders, with threats and physical harassment. With temporary visas expired, no income and constant threats, the voices of Afghan women journalists and Afghan women have been silenced.

Life under the Taliban in Afghanistan has had negative impacts on the living conditions of people from different walks of life. Journalists, human rights activists, civil society members, minority groups, and women and girls have been marginalized from public life under the

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Taliban-run administration. Women and girls are prohibited from employment, moving about freely and other actions of free citizens. Recent actions by the Taliban on December 25, 2022 have effectively banned women in Afghanistan from the public sphere — and terminating female education and work rights across the country. Women held parliamentary seats, ministerial and diplomatic posts and senior offices, including as judges and chairs of independent commissions before the Taliban takeover. None remain in these positions today.

As women disappear from the public sphere, Afghan women journalists are vanishing at a rapid pace. The months since the takeover and installation of the de facto regime has seen a continued decline in human rights for women and in particular, women media workers, journalists, broadcasters and others. Of the total number of women journalists in 2020, only 5% live and work in Kabul since the de facto authorities took back political power, according to a report by the International Association of Women in Radio and Television-Kabul (released in October 2022). The report documents displaced journalists who are in hiding or have fled to Pakistan and other countries, where their safety is still fragile and their livelihoods have been lost.

- **67.86% of the respondents have lost their jobs since the Taliban takeover in August 2021.**
- **80.52% of the respondents said that Afghan media today is ‘very restricted.’**
- **46.75% respondents said that spokespersons of the authorities do not respond to female journalists.**

The Afghanistan press sector has been decimated. Of the 12,000-strong active media workers before the Taliban takeover, more than 7,000 have fled the country under harassment and threats to their media organizations and to their families. Now, more than a year later, only 750 active journalists remain in the country. More than 15 provinces in Afghanistan are without any journalists at all.

Strict restrictions have been imposed on women’s lives and on what the media can cover. Women journalists that remain in the country are shuttered in their homes, unable to work and without income. They live with the constant threat of harm to them and their families. Reporting under these conditions has not been easy, but journalists have continued to criticize abuse of power and injustice. Those who manage to escape to neighboring countries find themselves in limbo, unable to work and still under threat from the Taliban. No one can broadcast freely and the threats have created an environment of self-censorship and silencing.

The report’s statistics are horrific for women journalists, who lost everything with the Taliban hardline Islamic regime. The survey and report were conducted by the Kabul chapter of the International Association of Women in Radio and Television. The whole chapter now lives in exile.

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The International Association of Women in Radio and Television is concerned about the continued arrests, arbitrary detention and the situation of Afghan journalists in Pakistan, Turkey and in other geographies. Our members are women media workers and journalists, who are uniquely positioned to know and report these human rights violations. As an international organization, we work across cultures and geographies to support women journalists in telling stories with a gender-focused lens and an intersectional view.

Our members and their families continue to be pursued across borders. We have received reliable information about the arrest of Afghan journalists by the Pakistani police in Islamabad. This arbitrary detention of journalists and media workers who reside in a country with visas and legal documents is against all international norms and is a violation of international agreements on human rights, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

The International Union of Women in Radio and Television asks governments across the globe, international organizations and civil society to provide resources to combat the deterioration of free speech, and to strengthen initiatives for a free press and freedom of expression for women journalists, in Afghanistan and elsewhere. IAWRT would like to draw attention to the difficult and tenuous situation of Afghan refugees, especially women media workers, and to urge governments to provide a safe living environment for all immigrants, especially journalists, in accordance with international norms.

Statement to Condemn the Continued Detention of Filipino Journalist Frenchie Mae Cumpio

The International Association for Women in Radio and Television strongly condemns the legal attacks on its Philippines chapter member, Frenchie Mae Cumpio who currently is behind bars in Tacloban on spurious charges of illegal possession of firearms. After a year in jail, additional charges of aiding terrorism were slapped against Cumpio, preventing her petition for bail. The Philippine government attempted to serve warrants to Frenchie Mae in the second week of June with three additional charges for murder, frustrated murder, and attempted murder. Due to a wrong name on the warrant papers, the service could not proceed. Frenchie Mae remains behind bars.

Cumpio was editor of the alternative news outlet Eastern Vista when she was arrested on February 7, 2020. She also served as the program coordinator of [Radyo Tacloban](#), IAWRT's

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community radio project launched in 2013 in response to the aftermath of Typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan) which devastated the region. From the age of 21, Cumpio has already spent over three years in jail on false charges that keep getting compounded, in order to ensure that she is unable to secure an early release. This arbitrary detention leaves Cumpio behind bars and silenced.

These new charges are the latest in a series of attempts to falsely implicate Frenchie Mae Cumpio and four other political prisoners (collectively known as the Tacloban 5). These trumped-up charges are clearly an attempt to silence her and her organization and prevent the legitimate coverage of human rights and community media issues.

We condemn and call out this use of “lawfare” to target the voice of a community journalist who critically analyzed and courageously covered the struggles of the people of Eastern Visayas. We appeal to all international organizations working for freedom of expression and the legitimate rights of journalists to join us in condemning this misuse of the legal system to incarcerate Frenchie Mae Cumpio and to work for her early release.

Dr. Michelle Ferrier is the president of the International Association of Women in Radio and Television and the executive director of the Media Innovation Collaboratory, USA. She is the founder of TrollBusters and an editorial board member for the Journal of Online Trust & Safety.

Lives, Jobs, Homeland: Afghan Women Journalists Lose it All, a report by AWRT-Kabul and Internews: <https://iawrt.org/lives-jobs-homeland-afghan-women-lose-it-all/>