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LGBTQ Afghans face violence and sexual assault under the Taliban regime

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By [Peter O'Dowd](#)  and [Kalyani Saxena](#) 



Members of the Turkish LGBTQ+ community hold rainbow flags during a solidarity protest action to support Afghan women in Ankara on Aug. 25, 2021. (Adem Altan/AFP via Getty Images)

This article is more than 1 year old.

In Afghanistan, members of the LGBTQ community are in grave danger.

A recent [report](#) from the Human Rights Watch and [Outright Action International](#), an organization dedicated to LGBTQ rights across the world, found

that queer Afghans face increasing levels of violence under the Taliban regime.

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[Basira Paigham](#) knows this first hand.

Paigham, an Afghan activist who identifies as bisexual, escaped to Ireland a few months after the Taliban's resurgence.

While Afghanistan has never been safe for LGBT people, Paigham did enjoy some level of community before the Taliban seized control of Kabul last August. That freedom has ended.

“Everything changed. From day it turned to a very dark night,” she says. “I thought that this is the end of [the] world. I cannot continue after this, and we all will be killed.”

The Irish organization Paigham worked for offered to help her flee Afghanistan, but she was reluctant to leave home.

"It was very horrifying. I was hopeless. I couldn't think about getting out of Afghanistan, and I was thinking that if I go out of Afghanistan, what will I do there? Because all of my plans, all of my goals are related to Afghanistan," she says.

To protect herself from the Taliban, she married her best friend — a man.

The couple hid in a hotel used by international guests for two months. In those dark days, she says her hopelessness turned to desperation.

"I was getting too emotional, and I was saying that I will go outside and I will fight with Taliban soldiers. If they kill me, it's OK. I want to be killed," she says. "I want to die because this kind of living is not worthy of life."

Paigham and her husband eventually got a visa to Pakistan and then made their way to Ireland. But she says she still feels lost, especially when thinking about her future goals, something “ruined by [the] Taliban.”

Above all, Paigham longs to return to Afghanistan — her home despite the country’s many difficulties, she says.

While Paigham was able to escape, the situation is incredibly dire for those left in Afghanistan.

Lester Feder, senior fellow for emergency research at OutRight Action International, interviewed 60 LGBTQ Afghans for the report on the surge of violence against the queer community in Afghanistan.

One interview revealed “how desperate the situation was” when Feder says he talked to a young Afghan who had been hiding in an abandoned factory. This young man’s uncle had joined the Taliban. He was too

afraid to leave the factory for food or money, Feder says.

Feder adds that many LGBTQ Afghans have been hunted down by their family, friends or other loved ones who had joined the Taliban.

One woman was outed as a lesbian to her family and forced into a marriage by her parents to prevent her uncle from murdering her, he says.

“Her parents sent her and her new husband to a foreign country, telling him he'd have a better chance finding work there, and her cousin then managed to out her to her husband. And now she's in prison in a country where she knows no one and is being beaten daily,” Feder says.

Many have faced sexual violence at the hands of the Taliban. According to Feder's reporting, one man was

sexually assaulted while he attempted to pick up his paycheck.

“He was passing to work to pick up his paycheck and had to pass through multiple checkpoints,” Feder says. “And at one of them, he was taken into a room and ultimately gang raped for eight hours by four Taliban guards at that checkpoint.”

The only option for most LGBTQ Afghans is to flee. But that’s easier said than done.

Obtaining travel documents means risking exposure at multiple checkpoints. Officials could demand sex in exchange for processing documents, as was the case for one transgender woman the organization spoke with. And a visa doesn’t guarantee safety.

“You have to find a country that will take you. And if you look at a map, all of the countries that are easiest for Afghans to reach include places like Iran, Pakistan that also criminalized homosexuality,” he says.

The only thing that will help LGBTQ Afghans is international intervention — at the diplomatic level and personal level where people put pressure on their governments to do more, he says.

“There has to be a very clear message from the U.S. and other governments in every engagement with the Taliban around human rights that LGBTQ rights are human rights,” Feder says. “The international community must be clear that that's non-negotiable.”

Kalyani Saxena produced and edited this interview for broadcast with Todd Mundt. Saxena also adapted it for the web.

This segment aired on February 7, 2022.

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Peter O'Dowd  Senior Editor, Here & Now

Peter O'Dowd has a hand in most parts of Here & Now — producing and overseeing segments, reporting stories and occasionally filling in as host. He came to Boston from KJZZ in Phoenix.

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