



Policy paper - Policy Brief

Media Freedom Crisis in Afghanistan: Findings, Urgent Concerns, and Policy Recommendations

On the Occasion of World Press Freedom Day (3 May)

Dialogue #5 Number of Audience: 150

Organised by: Dialogue Hub for common ground, EUHope e.V., Women’s Justice Movement, EVE, and the Self-Organized Afghan Women’s Movement

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3rd-MAY: INTERNATIONAL PRESS DAY

DIALOGUE SERIES: 2

TIME: 3RD MAY 2026 AT 17:00CET

			
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HOST: DIALOGUE HUB | EU HOPE E.V. | WOMEN JUSTICE MOVEMENT | INSAW | SMPWA







1. Executive Summary:

Findings from Dialogue Hub indicate that Afghanistan's media sector is experiencing one of the most severe and systemic crises in its history.

The discussion confirms a rapidly shrinking civic space characterized by systematic censorship, intimidation, arbitrary detention of journalists, and severe restrictions on independent reporting. These findings are consistent with assessments by international organizations, including UNESCO, Reporters Without Borders (RSF), and the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, all of which highlight a significant deterioration in press freedom since 2021.

According to UNESCO and related monitoring reports, approximately 40–50% of Afghan media outlets have ceased operations since the political transition in 2021, resulting in widespread job losses, weakened institutional capacity, and a sharp decline in independent information flows to the public. This has significantly undermined media pluralism and public access to reliable news.

Participants also emphasized that the shrinking media space is contributing to a wider climate of silence, fear, and information fragmentation, creating conditions in which misinformation and extremist narratives can spread with limited public scrutiny.

The webinar discussions and collected testimonies further confirm the ongoing detention of at least five journalists, including Bashir Hatif, Shakib Ahmad Nazari, Abu Zar Sarpali, Wahid Farhadi, and Aziz Watandost (Aziz Vatandwal).

In most cases, there is limited transparency regarding formal charges, and due process guarantees remain unclear. Dialogue Hub calls for their immediate and unconditional release, in line with international human rights standards, including Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

A particularly alarming dimension of the crisis is the systematic marginalization of women journalists. Restrictions on women's mobility, work, and public participation have drastically reduced their presence in media institutions. Many women journalists have been forced out of the profession or confined to highly restricted working conditions. This has led to a significant reduction in gender-balanced reporting and the loss of diverse societal narratives, a concern also emphasized in UN human rights reporting.

Economically, the media sector is facing near-collapse conditions. Reduced advertising revenue, suspension of international support mechanisms, and lack of sustainable funding have led to widespread unemployment among media workers, closure of local outlets, and forced migration of experienced journalists. This has weakened both professional standards and institutional resilience across the sector.

Overall, the evidence highlights a three-dimensional crisis in Afghanistan's media landscape:

1. **Human rights crisis** – arbitrary detention, intimidation, and legal insecurity for journalists
2. **Structural crisis** – collapse of media institutions and shrinking professional capacity
3. **Gender crisis** – systematic exclusion of women from journalism and public discourse

In conclusion, the current trajectory poses a serious threat not only to media independence but also to the fundamental right of Afghan citizens to access information. Without urgent and coordinated international action, the remaining space for independent journalism in Afghanistan risks irreversible collapse, with serious consequences for human rights, accountability, and long-term social stability.

2. Key Findings from

2.1 Systemic Restrictions on Media Freedom

1. Increasing censorship and editorial interference
2. Widespread self-censorship due to fear of reprisals
3. Lack of legal guarantees for journalistic independence
4. Criminalization of reporting in sensitive areas

2.2 Arbitrary Detention and Legal Insecurity

1. Journalists face unclear accusations and non-transparent judicial processes
2. Due process standards are not consistently upheld
3. Detentions often linked to routine journalistic activities

2.3 Collapse of Media Sustainability

- a. Severe economic decline of media institutions
- b. Loss of advertising revenue and funding channels
- c. Mass unemployment of media workers
- d. Forced migration of experienced journalists

2.4 Gendered Restrictions on Journalism

- a. Women journalists face systematic exclusion from media work
- b. Severe restrictions on mobility and public participation
- c. Closure or limitation of female-led media spaces
- d. Significant reduction in diversity of narratives and public representation

2.5 Shrinking Civic Space and Information Access

- a. Reduced access to reliable, independent information
- b. Growing information vacuum in local communities
- c. Increased reliance on informal and unverified sources
- d.

3. International Legal Framework

The current situation raises serious concerns under international law, including:

- a. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 19)
- b. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 19)
- c. UNESCO commitments on freedom of expression and media development
- d. Human Rights Council resolutions on the safety of journalists

4. Policy Recommendations

4.1 Immediate Actions

To de facto authorities in Afghanistan:

- a. Immediate and unconditional release of all detained journalists
- b. Public disclosure of charges and legal status of detainees
- c. Guarantee of due process and fair trial standards
- d. End arbitrary detention of media workers

To the United Nations and international actors:

- a. Establish a dedicated monitoring mechanism on media freedom in Afghanistan
- b. Urgent diplomatic engagement for journalist protection
- c. Regular reporting to the Human Rights Council

4.2 Protection of Journalists

- a. Establish international emergency protection pathways for at-risk journalists
- b. Expand relocation and asylum support programs
- c. Create emergency legal aid mechanisms for detained journalists
- d. Strengthen protection of women journalists in particular

4.3 Economic and Institutional Support

- a. Sustain and expand funding for independent Afghan media (inside and outside the country)
- b. Support community-based and digital journalism initiatives
- c. Provide direct financial assistance to struggling journalists
- d. Invest in infrastructure for secure, cross-border reporting
- e.

4.4 Capacity Building and Professionalization

- a. Long-term training programs for Afghan journalists (including digital safety, investigative reporting, ethics)
- b. Support UNESCO-led and independent training initiatives
- c. Strengthen mentorship programs linking experienced and emerging journalists
- d. Promote professional journalism standards across all platforms

4.5 Protection of Women Journalists

- a. Targeted protection programs for women journalists at risk
- b. Dedicated funding streams for women-led media initiatives
- c. International advocacy to ensure equal participation of women in media
- d. Safe digital and physical reporting environments for women professionals

4.6 Media Sustainability and Digital Transition

- a. Support transition from traditional to digital-first journalism models

- b. Promote independent monetization models for Afghan media
- c. Strengthen diaspora media collaboration frameworks
- d. Encourage multilingual content production to ensure wider reach

5. Strategic Outlook

The crisis in Afghanistan's media sector is not only a professional or institutional challenge; it is a fundamental human rights issue affecting access to truth, accountability, and civic participation.

Without urgent international engagement, the continued erosion of media freedom will further weaken civil society, deepen information blackouts, and silence critical voices—particularly those of women journalists.

6. Conclusion

Dialogue Hub #5 underscores the urgent need for coordinated international action to protect journalists, restore media freedom, and prevent the complete collapse of independent journalism in Afghanistan.

The protection of journalists is not optional it is a core pillar of democratic accountability and human rights protection.

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