They stayed to fight the Taliban. Now the protesters are being hunted down

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A month ago, Reshmin was busy organising protests against [Taliban](https://www.theguardian.com/world/taliban) rule in online groups of hundreds of fellow women’s rights activists. Now the 26-year-old economics graduate must operate clandestinely, dressing in disguise and only demonstrating with a select few.

“If things continue like this, there will be no future for women in [Afghanistan](https://www.theguardian.com/world/afghanistan). It’s better if the future never arrives,” says Reshmin, who spoke to the Guardian using only her first name, which means “silk” in Farsi, out of security concerns. “Each time we go out, we say farewell because we might not make it back alive.”

Since the Taliban’s lightning takeover of the country in August, Reshmin and her younger sister have attended a flurry of protests in Kabul, part of nationwide demonstrations where Afghan women have hoisted signs demanding the right to education and work, and chanted slogans such as “Freedom!” and “Eliminating women means eliminating human beings!”

They belong to a cohort of Afghan women’s rights defenders who chose not to flee this summer but stayed to tackle the Taliban’s clampdown on their freedoms. Buoyed up by the past 20 years of international support and encouragement, they have staged pockets of protest across Afghanistan, from quiet parks to urban thoroughfares. The Taliban have responded with violence, beating women with [electric batons](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-58491747) and detaining and [torturing the reporters](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/09/violent-attacks-on-afghan-journalists-by-taliban-prompt-growing-alarm) who covered the protests.

“The next generation will be brainwashed by the Taliban’s ideology, then it will spread like the Covid-19 virus. The world needs to pay attention for its own sake,” Reshmin says.

But international pressure to hold the Taliban accountable over the rights of women and girls is being ignored. A slew of foreign delegations, aid agencies and donors, including from the UK, have consisted of all-male teams and only “legitimises the Taliban’s patriarchal view of the world”, Heather Barr, of [Human Rights Watch, warned](https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/10/18/when-foreign-men-talk-taliban-about-womens-rights)this week.

Now, two months into Taliban rule, the activists say they are being hunted down. In recent weeks the Taliban have accelerated their crackdown on women’s groups by infiltrating and intimidating them.

Activists described how on several occasions members of the Taliban appeared at a private address that was only discussed on closed chat groups on social media. Ahead of a recent protest in Kabul, Taliban police called a group of women on their phones just before they set out to put up posters, Reshmin says.

“The only tool they know is to silence people through creating fear,” says Mina, a university professor and activist, who asked that a pseudonym be used for fear of retribution from the Taliban.

Zahra, another organiser in Kabul, describes methods ranging from having women pose as journalists to obtain personal information from protesters to spreading rumours among activists that their number had been shared with members of the Taliban.

“The Taliban know if they lash us on the street they’ll look bad and get criticised,” says Zahra, “but it’s easy to try to dismantle women’s groups online.”

Zahra, who obtained her master’s degree in urban design last year, was supervising the building of a women-only outdoor market when the Taliban swept to power. The European-funded project has been abandoned and she now pours all her energy into activism.

Last month the Taliban banned all demonstrations that do not have official approval, adding the requirement that slogans at the protests also be approved by the group first.

Mina says this is a tactic designed to expose them. “They are trying to identify some of the active members of the women’s movement. This is how they force them to submit,” she says.

Reshmin, who was protesting on Kabul’s streets last week, says she will not ask the Taliban for permission because “that would mean we have accepted their regime”.

Since the Taliban captured Kabul just over two months ago, there has been a cascade of miserable news for Afghan women and barely a day passes without their rights shrinking further as they are dismissed from jobs in state media, banned from most other work and secondary school, barred from sport and blocked from a now-obsolete system designed to protect women from violence.

“We believed that Afghan women would not go back in time. We believed that our war against the Taliban would be won,” says Roya Dadras, spokeswoman of the now-defunct women’s affairs ministry, which the Taliban took over as the headquarters of its draconian morality police. She spoke to the Guardian from Australia, where she sought refuge in early October after spending a month in hiding in Kabul.

Compounding this is the country’s dire economic situation: the notoriously bitter Afghan winter is approaching, and with the foreign aid that powered the economy still largely suspended, 95% of Afghans are not getting enough to eat, the UN has warned.

The number of female activists on the streets is decreasing, and the strain of trying to put on a brave face amid their troubles is taking a toll on their health. Taliban members badly beat Reshmin’s sister at a protest, leaving her right hand unusable for a month, and her skin now suffers from painful flare-ups.

Reshmin’s mother and three sisters started taking antidepressants several weeks ago. Mina’s teenage daughter, whose education stopped with the Taliban’s ban on girls attending secondary school, became so stressed that she started to lose her hair. Mina shared a photo of the back of her daughter’s head where large areas of skin are exposed.

In Nangarhar province in the country’s east, where there is less international media attention than the Afghan capital, women’s rights protests have been violently broken up by Taliban members, says Rahmani, an activist and former prosecutor. Several female protesters were also detained and tortured, she adds.

Fearful for her life, Rahmani has moved between relatives’ homes in recent weeks, bringing with her only a few items of clothing each time. “Activists cannot sleep soundly,” she says.

After spending the past month in hiding with her husband and three children, terrified that the Taliban would harm them, Mina and her family are trying to flee to a neighbouring country. She hopes to provide support to those still protesting. “I am trying to help the women and girls who are scared, depressed and anxious. Some are thinking about suicide.”