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WORLD

'God, what is my sin if you created me gay?': Taliban intensifying LGBTQ crackdown, activists say

Many members have gone on the run in Afghanistan, where being gay is now a crime: by law, "homosexuality" is punishable by death.

By **Marjan Sadat** Staff Reporter

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After months of living in isolation after August 2021, Jawid decided to leave the house and head into the city. The decision would prove costly.

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“For a moment, the world went dark in my eyes and I thought I was seeing death with my own eyes,” Jawid said via WhatsApp, speaking in Persian. The Star is publishing only his first name for security reasons.

Jawid, 22, a member of Afghanistan's LGBTQ community, who has been living secretly in Kabul for several months, told a painful story from his hometown of Herat.

He said that under the rule of the Taliban, he rarely went out of the house in Herat and knew that facing the Taliban fighters carries the risk of torture or death.

Jawid said that six months back when he was arrested, he was mocked by the fighters and they verbally harassed him. He said they then pulled his clothes off and sexually abused him.

“I said to myself every moment that I wish to die.”

Jawid said the fighters then made him lie on his face and beat him with a cable so much that his whole body hurt and he could not walk properly for several days.

“They tortured me in the most brutal way possible, they even burned the hair of my legs with a cigarette lighter.”

He said that after his release, the Taliban told him if they saw him again in that city, they would kill him. Jawid said he now lives secretly in a windowless hostel in Kabul, struggling financially and hoping to leave the country.

“These are the most bitter days of my life. Sometimes I say to myself, God, what is my sin if you made me gay?”

Jawid recalled the days during the Republic — before the Taliban's return in 2021 — which he said had its challenges but was more open and when there was no fear of being tortured or killed. Now, being gay is a crime: by law, “homosexuality” is punishable by death.

“We had a community, we could go out and we lived a relatively human life, but with the return of the Taliban, life lost colour and our birth was considered a crime.”

Last year, Laila Sabour, a well-known 65-year-old who is intersex, also claimed in a video that she was kidnapped by the Taliban and her legs were burned after sexual abuse. Laila Sabour fled from Afghanistan after this incident.

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assault or threats from Taliban members or supporters because of their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression.

While that report documented some abuses clearly linked to the Taliban forces, in many cases the first threats came from those closest to LGBTQ Afghans — family members, romantic partners and neighbours — who saw Taliban rule as an opportunity to act on their own prejudice or sought to curry favour with the new regime by turning in LGBTQ people.

Artemis Akbary, 25, founder of the Afghan LGBT Organization (ALO), was smuggled from Iran to Turkey before the Taliban regained power, and is now settled in the Czech Republic. He said that a number of LGBTQ people were killed, tortured or sexually assaulted under the Taliban. According to Akbari, the ALO has documented many cases.

“The situation of LGBTQ people in Afghanistan is terrible. Many suffer from severe depression due to the fear of the Taliban,” Akabary told the Star, speaking in Persian.

Akbary, who still heads the ALO and defends the LGBTQ community's rights through activism and media appearances, said that working with a number of governments, they have been able to evacuate some LGBTQ people to Europe and Canada. But he said some remain in Pakistan, Iran and Turkey in a precarious situation.

“Due to the conservatism of Afghan society, the danger to the LGBTQ community in Afghanistan has always existed, but the situation has become suffocating after August 2021,” Akbary said.

Akbary said that under the Taliban, violence against that community has been widespread, and some people have disappeared.

“The international community does not pay attention to the Afghan LGBTQ community and they are marginalized. This means the gradual death of a forgotten community.”

“Afghanistan under the rule of the Taliban has become a limbo of uncertainty, pain, suffering and sadness for the LGBT community.”

Matuba Mahlatjie, communications and media manager of Outright International, said that based on its recent report, the Taliban security officials now appear to be pursuing LGBTQ people — especially gay men and trans women — more

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“In several cases, the authorities have subjected people to public flogging for alleged same-sex relations, and the Taliban Supreme Court, on social media, has confirmed and defended the implementation of these punishments,” Mahlatjie said to the Star.

“We have also highlighted how paths to safety have disappeared from the worsening situation inside Afghanistan. The risk of violence complicates LGBTIQ people’s ability to seek aid from groups inside the country.”

Late last year, [Toronto-based Rainbow Railroad](#) said it was working with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada to resettle 600 LGBTQ Afghans, in addition to about 200 who were to arrive in 2022.

Mahlatjie said Afghanistan’s neighbours have made it harder over the past year for Afghans to cross their borders, and those countries are far from safe for LGBTQ people.

“Iran, Pakistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan also criminalize same-sex relations; in Iran, same-sex sexual acts can be punished by death.

“The U.S. and European countries provided far too few spaces for Afghans wanting to be resettled abroad, and even the few hundred LGBTQ Afghans accepted for resettlement have been forced to spend many months in dangerous limbo waiting for their cases to be processed.”



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