



PLAYING FOR FREEDOM

Within months of winning the national championship with her team Herat City, footballer Najma Arefi had to flee Afghanistan. She talked to Amnesty about settling in the UK, and her concern for her former classmates enduring Taliban rule.

I'm a member of Girl Power – the Afghanistan Development Squad. I've been playing football from the age of 13. A girl from our school said, 'We are going to make a football team'. I thought, 'No, you cannot imagine to play with boys. But they said: 'We can play together'. When I asked my father, he said it would be a nice hobby for me. My father supports me a lot.

I fell in love with football. I played for Herat City for three years. We went to Kabul for tournaments. In 2021 we won the national championship. We were getting ready for the next game when our coach told us: 'Please don't come to training, it is dangerous.' It was hard for us to accept.

TALIBAN TAKEOVER

Before 2021, I was in my last year of school doing exams to go to university. It was harsh to live in a culture where the men are not allowing



women and girls to speak up. But I was happy that we had our country and our home. I could not imagine that the Taliban would take power.

We didn't expect Kabul would be taken so easily. There were peace talks in Qatar and we were happy: they said they will share the government and will let the girls learn. But all that changed overnight. The Taliban banned us from everything.

ESCAPE

We wanted to fly to Qatar but on the day of our flight a bombing killed a lot of people in Kabul airport. Our sponsors, people helping us, said 'It's not safe, go back to your hotels or homes.'



We were so scared. We waited one month in hiding. Then we headed for Pakistan. It took us 12 hours to cross the border. When we entered Pakistan, we felt a bit free – no one forcing us to cover up – but it was scary. We lived in a hotel for two months. We didn't go out or see the sun. Our sponsors sent a lot of applications to different countries, and finally the UK accepted us.

SETTLING INTO THE UK

We feel free and lucky. My friends and I are safe in the UK. We are happy that we have the opportunity to play football, to study, to start a free life. I watch my small brother teaching my mum how to say words in English... it's so nice.

I miss my country, but I want to use the opportunities we have here. I work part-time as a waitress next to my college. I am studying English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), and I hope I can do GCSEs and go to university. I love football coaching, or I will be a dentist. It's hard for me to decide.

We live in Yorkshire. Four of the players live next to each other. Some of my friends are still in hotels because they can't find a home – they try so hard. Now the UK government wants to evict them from the hotels. It's hard to think about.

FOOTBALL WELCOMES

Khalida Popal, director and former captain of the Afghanistan women's national team, runs an organisation, Girl Power, helping girls to develop in leadership and sport. In 2022, Amnesty International UK invited our team to play against the UK Parliamentary women's team in London. It was a good day.

After that, six of us took part in Amnesty's Football Leadership Programme led by Sandy Abi-Elias in partnership with the English Football Association, training in coaching and how to be a good leader. At the end of the course, we went to St George's Park, home of all England national teams. It was a big dream for me.

The leadership training has changed me. I was a little insecure to speak up in front of a lot of people. My voice would be shaking. Our mentor, Sandy, Amnesty UK's women's football officer, told me how to have confidence and stay calm. I was invited to a book launch – *Escape from Kabul* – and I spoke in front of 800 people.

This year, Amnesty invited us back to play a friendly match against the parliamentary squad and the Comfort Angels refugee women's team. Afterwards we went to Parliament and talked to MPs.

We want the UK government to help the

PHOTOS
Opposite top: Herat City win the Premier League final match against Kabul, 16 October 2020 © Xinhua/Shutterstock
Inset: Najma Arefi with her certificate from the Amnesty Football Leadership Programme © MaggieLeft
Above: Girl Power (in red), the Liverpool-based refugee team Comfort Angels (in blue) and the UK women's parliamentary team get ready, 20 June 2023 © Marie-Anne Ventoura





PHOTOS
Left: Najma Arefi in training © Maggie Left
Below right: Afghan women protest in Delhi, August 2021 © PradeepGaurs/ Shutterstock

» girls who came here without their parents. It is tough growing up without them. And don't evict people from the hotels until you find a home for everyone, because now they feel so insecure and don't know their future.

Recently, with Khalida and Malala Yousafzai and over 100 parliamentarians across the world, we sent a letter to the world football governing body, FIFA, asking them to recognise the Afghan women's national team so they can play in international matches.

LIFE IN AFGHANISTAN

One of my sisters still lives in Afghanistan because she is married. She says the situation is very tough and painful for women and girls. They have to stay at home and are unable to leave the house. In Afghanistan women and girls do not have a voice. They are silenced.

Sometimes my friends say, 'There is no hope here'. They cannot go out without a boy or man. There are checkpoints.

When we were in school, everyone was saying, 'I will be a teacher, I will be a nurse...' and it's so hard for me to see them now. Because we have the opportunity, we should be their voice and speak up for them: girls can study, girls can be everything they want to be.

The international community should not accept the Taliban. They should put pressure on them to recognise women's rights. The Taliban are not changed from 20 years ago, still thinking women cannot do anything. I want every single girl to be free in my country, to do whatever they want. Let them learn! ■

Amnesty International UK's Women's Football Leadership Programme, supported by the English FA, is part of our Football Welcomes campaign. The programme supports women from a refugee background with opportunities and skills in coaching, leadership, teamwork and English.

CASH APPEAL

The Taliban have obliterated the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan in less than a year. Peaceful protests are silenced, often with violent force. Journalists have fled or been silenced. If there's no one to witness the Taliban's brutal rule they can behave with impunity.

- ▶ A donation from you will help Amnesty International as it investigates the Taliban's activities and shines a spotlight on the atrocities they commit.
- ▶ Amnesty International's Evidence Lab is helping investigators get a full picture of what is happening on the ground using phone camera footage, remote sensing and satellite imagery.
- ▶ Your gift will also help us use the evidence we gather to put pressure on the UK government to support women and girls in Afghanistan, both by condemning the Taliban's actions and by supporting those who flee to the UK as refugees.
- ▶ Donate today and support women and girls fighting for their freedom



WHAT YOU CAN DO

Donate to support our work

- ▶ Scan the QR code
- ▶ Visit [amnesty.org.uk/AfghanSchools](https://www.amnesty.org.uk/AfghanSchools)

Take action
[amnesty.org.uk/AfghanistanWomen](https://www.amnesty.org.uk/AfghanistanWomen)

To learn about our campaign contact cherry.bird@amnesty.org.uk



Registered with
**FUNDRAISING
REGULATOR**

TOWARDS A FUTURE WITHOUT THE DEATH PENALTY

Progress to end the death penalty worldwide continues. But Amnesty International's annual global survey shows that a few countries have increased their use of executions to a shocking degree.

Six countries abolished the death penalty last year. Kazakhstan, Papua New Guinea, Sierra Leone and the Central African Republic all abolished the death penalty completely. Equatorial Guinea and Zambia abolished it for ordinary crimes – here it would be used only in exceptional circumstances, such as for crimes under military law.

There were also signs of progress elsewhere. Liberia and Ghana took legislative steps toward ending the death penalty. The Malaysian government introduced legislation to abolish the mandatory death penalty that currently applies to 11 offences. And the authorities in Sri Lanka and the Maldives said they would not implement death sentences.

But in other countries, executions skyrocketed to the highest figure in five years. A total of 883 people are known to have been executed across 20 countries in 2022, a rise of 53 per cent over 2021.

These numbers mark recorded executions and do not include the thousands of state executions that China is believed to have carried out last year. Other countries, including North Korea and Viet Nam, use the death penalty but their

figures are also shrouded in secrecy so the true global figure for executions is far higher.

Just three countries accounted for 90 per cent of the world's recorded executions last year. In Iran, executions soared from 314 in 2021 to 576 in 2022 as the country killed citizens for exercising their right to protest. In Saudi Arabia executions rose from 65 in 2021 to 196 in 2022, with 81 people executed in a single day. In Egypt 24 people were killed last year.

Afghanistan, Kuwait, Myanmar, the State of Palestine and Singapore all resumed executions last year. In the US, executions increased from 11 to 18.

Amnesty's review found that the number of people executed for drug-related offences more than doubled last year compared to the 2021 figure. These executions are in violation of international human rights law which states that executions should only be carried out for the 'most serious crimes' – crimes that involve intentional killing. Drug-related executions were recorded in China, Saudi Arabia (57), Iran (255) and Singapore (11), and amounted to 37 per cent of total executions recorded globally by Amnesty.

OUR CAMPAIGN

Amnesty International opposes the death penalty. We believe that no one – and no government – has the right to take away someone else's life. We began working to end executions in 1977 when only 16 countries had abolished the death penalty. By the end of last year, 121 countries had abolished it in law, and 23 had stopped using it in practice. Our map overleaf shows the situation at the end of 2022.

Our campaign includes lobbying governments, educating the public, and preventing executions. We will not stop campaigning until every country in the world has abolished the death penalty.

▶ READ THE REPORT
[amnesty.org.uk/DeathPenalty2022](https://www.amnesty.org.uk/DeathPenalty2022)

