



On this International Women’s Day, the Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD) honors the resilience and leadership of women in the global fight against enforced disappearances. With the inception of the Women Elevating Discourse on Gender and Enforced Disappearances (WEDGED) initiative, AFAD highlights the indomitable spirit of women who lead the charge for justice, truth, and reparation. This initiative underscores the vital role of women in confronting this grave human rights violation and seeks to amplify their voices in the discourse surrounding gender and enforced disappearances. AFAD aims to create a platform for women to address gender issues in enforced disappearances. Through Women’s Congresses in three countries, it seeks to strengthen solidarity among women advocates. In Asia, women family members of disappeared individuals encounter various challenges including discrimination and coercion to halt their pursuit of justice. AFAD empowers these women through a ladderized approach, transforming them from victims to human rights defenders.

Enforced disappearances have a profound and multifaceted impact on women. As the majority of forcibly disappeared persons are men, women are left to navigate the aftermath, facing significant economic, legal, and psychological challenges. In Balochistan, for example, women like Bibi Madina have been thrust into economic despair following the disappearance of family members who were the sole breadwinners. The burden of economic hardship, coupled with the responsibility of caring for their families, falls disproportionately on their shoulders (Ashraf, Badshah, & Khan, 2023).

Moreover, women’s struggles are compounded by the threat of gender-based violence, including sexual violence, that accompanies enforced disappearances. The UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances highlights that women are affected in three primary ways: as direct victims, as relatives of disappeared persons, and as individuals suffering harm as a result of the disappearance. This complex victimization underscores the need for a gender-sensitive approach to addressing enforced disappearances (Bozkurt & Kaya, 2014).

In their relentless pursuit of justice, women have shown remarkable agency and resilience. Organizing protests, forming support groups, and engaging with international human rights platforms, they demand accountability for their disappeared loved ones. Drawn from their communities, they find strength despite facing threats and harassment. It’s noteworthy that AFAD includes women-led Member Organizations as part of their network, reflecting the empowerment and leadership roles women take within the movement.

AFAD stands in solidarity with these courageous women, recognizing their indispensable role in the movement against enforced disappearances. Through initiatives like WEDGED, we aim to bring attention to the gendered dimensions of this issue and advocate for policies that address the unique challenges faced by women. There is an urgent need for women family members to have a united voice in international forums and with their respective States. Understanding the gender dimension of enforced disappearances is crucial at both local and international levels. Women victim family members are best positioned to elevate this discourse and bring attention to these issues. As we commemorate International Women’s Day, we call on the international community to support the efforts of women leading the struggle against enforced disappearances. Their contributions are not only crucial to achieving justice for the disappeared but also to challenging and changing the systemic inequalities that perpetuate violence and discrimination. Together, let us renew our commitment to ending enforced disappearances and building a future where the rights and dignity of all individuals are respected and protected.

**PROTECTION,  
NOT PERSECUTION  
of Human Rights Defenders**