

AFGHANISTAN

GENDER COUNTRY PROFILE 2024



Funded by
the European Union



© 2024. UN Women. All rights reserved.

Produced by UN Women Afghanistan Country Office

Author: Michelle Gehrig and Caitlin Williscroft

Designer: Kruttika Susarla

This product was produced with the financial support of the European Union (EU). The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the EU.

Please cite this publication as follows: UN Women. 2024. Gender Country Profile: Afghanistan. Kabul: UN Women Afghanistan.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS	05
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	07
INTRODUCTION	10
Scope	10
Methodology	11
Gender data and statistics	11
GENDER EQUALITY IN AFGHANISTAN	12
Gender equality legislation and institutions (1978–2021)	13
DFA legal framework on gender equality	15
Women’s freedom of movement	18
Sociocultural gender norms	19
CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR AFGHAN WOMEN’S CIVIL SOCIETY	22
DFA restrictions targeting WCSOs	22
Ban on women working for NGOs	22
Funding challenges	24
Impact on the landscape of WCSOs	25
Intersection of the women’s rights crisis and the humanitarian crisis	25
KEY GENDER EQUALITY ISSUES PER PRIORITY AREA OF THE EU GAP III	28
ENSURING FREEDOM FROM ALL FORMS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE	28
Prevalence and impact	28
Justice and redress options	30
HEALTH, INCLUDING PROMOTING OF SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS	33
Access to health services	33
Sexual and reproductive health	34

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Mental health	35
Drug demand reduction	37
STRENGTHENING ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RIGHTS AND EMPOWERING GIRLS AND WOMEN	40
Women's employment	40
Women's economic empowerment	42
Access to education	45
ADVANCING EQUAL PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP	49
INTEGRATING THE WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY AGENDA	52
NAP implementation	52
Women's participation in peace and security initiatives	52
Conflict and militarism	54
ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES RELATED TO CLIMATE CHANGE, MIGRATION AND DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION	57
Climate disasters	57
Migration and displacement	59
Digitalization	62
SUPPORT FOR GENDER EQUALITY BY EU AND INTERNATIONAL ACTORS	65
Donor support for gender equality in Afghanistan	66
Gender equality interventions across the United Nations	67

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AIHRC	Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
CSO	Civil society organization
DFA	De facto authorities
DoWA	Departments of Women's Affairs
DRR	Disaster risk reduction
EU	European Union
EVAW	Elimination of violence against women
GAP III	Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in External Action 2021–2027
GBV	Gender-based violence
GEWE	Gender equality and women's empowerment
GiHA	Gender in Humanitarian Action
GoIRA	Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
ILO	International Labour Organization
INGO	International non-governmental organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
ISKP	Islamic State Khorasan Province
MHPSS	Mental health and psychosocial support
MoWA	Ministry of Women's Affairs
NAP	National Action Plan
NGO	Non-governmental organization

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNCDF	United Nations Capital Development Fund
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
US	United States of America
WCSD	Women-led Civil Society Organization
WHO	World Health Organization
WHRD	Women human rights defender
WoB	Women-owned business
WPS	Women, Peace and Security

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Afghanistan Gender Country Profile provides gender analysis and recommendations to the European Union (EU) to set policy priorities and identify key objectives for the EU in Afghanistan under the Gender Action Plan in External Action 2021-2027 (GAP III). The document provides a snapshot of the current situation regarding gender equality in Afghanistan across the six GAP III thematic focus areas, using research and data publicly available as of December 2023. This process included analysis of previous legal and institutional frameworks adopted under the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2001-2021) and current decrees, policies, and practices introduced by the Taliban since it seized power of state, which have fundamentally changed the status of women and girls and gender equality.

Key findings

In recent decades, Afghanistan has consistently ranked among the lowest scoring countries in various global indices, across a variety of gender equality indicators – due to deeply entrenched inequalities between men and women countrywide, and particularly in rural areas. Although the 20-year period of democratic rule between 2001 and 2021 saw significant development of laws, legislation and policies enshrining gender equality and women’s rights, this hard-fought progress has been swiftly rolled back by the Taliban following its military victory and takeover of the country in August 2021.

Since that time, the Taliban has systematically targeted the fundamental rights and freedoms of women and girls, via a tightly woven patchwork of decrees, policies, and practices. This litany of edicts continues to dictate attire, curtail freedom of mobility, and restrict access to education and professional opportunities – effectively erasing the voices and perspectives of women and girls from public spaces and impeding realization of their inherent human rights. Key international actors – including UN Member States,

GAP III Thematic Focus Areas

1. Ensuring freedom from all forms of gender-based violence
2. Health, including promoting of sexual health and reproductive health and rights
3. Strengthening economic and social rights and empowering girls and women
4. Advancing equal participation and leadership
5. Integrating the women, peace and security Agenda
6. Addressing the challenges and opportunities related to climate change, migration and digital transformation

the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Afghanistan, and the Chair of the Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls – have used terms such as ‘gender apartheid’ to describe the dynamic prevailing on the ground. To its core, the situation for women and girls in Afghanistan is dire.

Among an array of telling insights, the Gender Country Profile brings to light four findings of particular note.

- 1. Afghanistan is currently facing multiple, overlapping crises – economic, humanitarian, climate, and political, each of which is interconnected and exacerbated by the growing women’s rights crisis.** The current policies and practices of the de facto authorities (DFA) discriminating against women and girls are converging with decades of institutionalized gender inequality to compound and worsen the impact of the other crises faced.

These policies and practices curtail women’s and girls’ independent mobility, limit their educational and employment opportunities, and exclude them from influencing decision-making on issues critical to their well-being at the household, community, provincial and national levels. Taken together, this increases their vulnerability to the complex web of overlapping crises, sets back their economic and social resilience, and ultimately disempowers them in all spheres of decision-making. Women’s rights are the thread that runs through all key crises facing Afghanistan today, and is therefore critical to sustainably resolving and mitigating their impact.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2. Although there is currently no conventional legal framework in effect in Afghanistan, **there is an increasingly tightly interwoven patchwork of written and verbal decrees, policies, and systematized practices with gender discrimination and mass oppression of women at their core.** The purpose and impact of such DFA edicts restricting women's rights are mutually reinforcing, whereby the logic of one decree builds off another; that is, one decree is often used to justify the adoption or expansion of another.

Afghan women are affected on all levels, with restrictions targeting women's personal autonomy and dignity (e.g. independent mobility, educational opportunities) and their leadership role in both the public sector (e.g. via the ban on women working for NGOs) and the private sector (e.g. via removal of women's faces from television).

3. Since August 2021, **the operational space for national and international organizations – across all sectors – has been severely eroded and DFA decrees continue to restrict women-focused and gender-related programming, as well as gender mainstreaming** related to non gender-targeted interventions. Restrictions have led to a significant reduction in the scope and space for women-led and gender-focused civil society organizations (CSOs).

Those gender equality and women's empowerment (GEWE) stakeholders still operating in Afghanistan must navigate a complex and hostile environment in attempting to preserve access to services and life-saving programming for women and girls, as well as advance prospects for members of these groups to once again enjoy the full spectrum of their rights.

4. Taken together, **the situation in Afghanistan demands women-led, gender-transformative and evidence-based approaches** to ensure that programming and initiatives across the country neither exacerbate pre-existing sources of social inequalities, nor normalize or entrench current inequalities or ongoing rights violations. Gender data and statistics, gender analysis, and action-oriented research on the situation for women in Afghanistan are crucial for these efforts. Long-term efforts are also required to target behavioural change, and address harmful gender norms and stereotypes being entrenched by discriminatory DFA decrees, policies, and practices.

Key principles and recommendations

In the face of such profound, institutionalized gender inequality and restrictive, hostile operational environment on programming related to GEWE, it has become imperative for international and national actors and donors to adopt a measured and principled approach to humanitarian and development initiatives in Afghanistan. The importance of operating carefully in line with the “for women by women” principle cannot be overemphasized.

This is particularly important at a time where political, economic and humanitarian issues are increasingly decoupled from women's rights and gender equality – being addressed as separate rather than overlapping and mutually reinforcing issues – and where commitments to international law, particularly the Convention on the Elimination of All Violence Against Women and other central gender policy frameworks, such as the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, are being deprioritized, overlooked, or simply disregarded. A measured approach will include prioritizing agreed-upon principles, including establishing accountability measures, to ensure their operationalization.

The Gender Country Profile puts forward four key principles which should guide any interventions in Afghanistan:

1. COMMIT to strengthening women's civil society organizations (WCSOs), including through provision of long-term, flexible funding to registered and unregistered entities.

a. Provide funding to strengthen organizational capacities of WCSOs to enable their work to continue and adapt to evolving contextual dynamics, including by reducing administrative burdens and by making funding procedures and conditions more flexible.

b. Develop and implement strategies and criteria to mitigate the negative impacts of DFA policies on WCSOs, including by identifying and verifying CSOs that are genuinely led by women, despite operating in a context where the boards and leadership of women's organizations are increasingly male only.

c. Facilitate coalition-building among WCSOs with a view to supporting the resilience of the women's movement and identifying entry points to support the reopening of women-led organizations and networks that have ceased operations.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2. INVEST at least 30 per cent of all funding to Afghanistan in supporting initiatives that directly target gender equality and women's rights, and that no gender-blind interventions are supported.

a. Adopt the globally understood minimum percentage of funding for gender as a “principal objective” Gender Equality Marker (often 15 per cent) as a “floor” – not “ceiling” – of 30 per cent, given the unprecedented nature of the women’s rights crisis in Afghanistan.

b. Develop and agree among international actors upon a rigorous model to ensure gender as a “principal objective” projects are prioritized and, equally, that no gender-blind interventions are supported in Afghanistan.

c. Design and implement monitoring and reporting frameworks which clearly outline gender-related programming outcomes, outputs, budget allocations and expenditures, to enable tracking of GEWE commitments and achievements.

d. Prioritize funding of interventions based on needs identified through rigorous gender analysis per area of intervention.

3. ENSURE actions undertaken do not inadvertently contribute to or exacerbate normalization of discriminatory DFA policies, norms, or values – including strengthening DFA structures that could inadvertently repress women and girls, in addition to other segments of the population, through programming that implements measures to mitigate security as well as reputational and ethical risks.

a. Recognize and mitigate the impact that DFA bans are having on women and girls, including by ensuring the full participation of Afghan women in all phases of programming, investing in gender-responsive funding, and prioritizing gender data collection to ensure standardized evidence-based, human rights-oriented, and gender-sensitive programme design.

b. Ensure that Afghan women’s participation in decision-making is directly and indirectly supported at all levels, including by ensuring that women are: consulted in all decision-making processes; present in all international delegation meetings with the DFA; supported to directly negotiate between the DFA and Afghan women and to establish women-only decision-making and advisory structures.

c. Commit to “principled engagement” in any interactions on Afghanistan to measure the costs and benefits of engagement with the DFA and mitigate any harm to women and girls stemming from the normalization of relations.

d. Include costs in project budgets that create an enabling environment for women’s participation, including costs for mahram, childcare (including facilities), additional office space for women-only spaces, and other accommodations.

4. EMBED human rights, especially women’s rights, as a cross-cutting theme across all humanitarian action and basic human needs interventions, from the design to implementation and monitoring of all programming. Human rights are foundational and supportive to sustainably resolving the multiple crises severely impacting Afghan life.

a. Ensure that non-discrimination, particularly of women and girls, is embedded across all areas of intervention, including design and risk assessment. Where risks related to discrimination are identified, robust mitigation measures are required to ensure that the initiative does not entrench nor exacerbate sources of inequalities.

b. Put in place special measures to support the participation of women and other socially excluded groups to ensure their equal participation in the design, implementation and monitoring of activities.

c. Ensure that engagement in humanitarian action and human rights are constructed as mutually reinforcing strategies, and are not perceived as mutually exclusive or conflicting pursuits. This includes through coordination at various stages of programming, gender data collection availability, maximizing the scope and impact of gender-responsive programming.

d. Create targeted funding opportunities for women-led and youth-led organizations and build their capacity, skills and knowledge with a view to increasing their opportunities in developing programming that cuts across sectors, to the benefit of all Afghan women and girls.

INTRODUCTION

The European Union (EU) Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in External Action 2021–2027 (GAP III)¹ has been developed to accelerate progress on empowering women and girls, and safeguard gains made on gender equality and women's empowerment (GEWE) during the 25 years since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and its Platform for Action.²

GAP III aims to tackle the structural causes of gender inequality, by taking a transformative and rights-based approach and addressing the intersection of gender with other forms of discrimination. GAP III provides the EU with a policy framework built upon five pillars of action:

- 1. Making gender equality and women and girls' empowerment a cross-cutting priority** of EU external action. By 2025, 85 per cent of new EU actions should contribute to achieving this objective, with more actions including it as a main objective.
- 2. Working together with EU Member States as Team Europe** at multilateral, regional and national level, and fostering partnership with stakeholders, civil society organizations (CSOs) and women's organizations.
- 3. Accelerating progress** by focusing on six key areas of engagement:
 - Ending gender-based violence (GBV)
 - Sexual and reproductive health and rights
 - Economic and social rights and empowerment
 - Equal participation and leadership
 - Women, peace and security (WPS)
 - Climate change and digitalization
- 4. Leading by example**, by striving for a gender-responsive and balanced leadership, more capacity and expertise, and a reinforced network of gender focal points.

- 5. Putting the focus on results, accountability and transparency** through qualitative, quantitative and inclusive monitoring.

A key step in this process, and a mandate for all EU delegations globally, is the preparation of a *Gender Country Profile* document to provide gender analysis covering the six key areas of intervention identified in GAP III. The purpose of the analysis and recommendations outlined in the present *Afghanistan Gender Country Profile* is to support the preparation of a "country-level implementation plan", setting the policy priorities and identifying actions and key objectives for GAP III in Afghanistan during coming years.

There is currently no internationally recognized government operating in Afghanistan, with members of the Taliban wielding *de facto* power of government (referred to as the *de facto* authorities, or DFA), following the Taliban takeover of the State by violent means in mid-August 2021. As in various other areas, the DFA do not have an official counterpart for international actors to engage in GEWE interventions, especially as the Taliban abolished the Ministry of Women's Affairs and replaced it with the *de facto* Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice.

This reality shifts the focus of gender equality interventions to national and international organizations and agencies. Despite early indications among some members of the international community that international recognition could be granted if the DFA upheld women's rights and freedoms, the DFA have since doubled down on its abolition of women's basic rights and fundamental freedoms. The United Nations General Assembly Credentials Committee has repeatedly postponed its consideration of any DFA credential-related claims at the United Nations.

Scope

The current situation in Afghanistan provides a particular set of globally unprecedented challenges to delivering targeted interventions on gender equality. Since August 2021, the Taliban has undertaken an intensive and systematic process of dismantling Afghanistan's legal and institutional infrastructure, particularly targeting those who had supported the GEWE advances achieved under the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021. Significant discrepancies exist between the national and sub-national levels and data collection on issues relating to gender equality is increasingly difficult to undertake,

1. European Commission. 2020. [Gender Action Plan – putting women and girls' rights at the heart of the global recovery for a gender-equal world](#). Press release. 25 November 2020.
2. [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Beijing +5 Political Declaration and Outcome](#)

INTRODUCTION

especially following bans on women working for NGOs and the extension of this ban to the United Nations.

The present Afghanistan Gender Country Profile renders a **snapshot of the current situation** regarding gender equality in Afghanistan, noting the **previous legal and institutional frameworks** (from the period 1978–2021), and examining in greater detail the **current decrees, policies and practices** shaping the gender equality landscape under Taliban rule. The document then provides **detailed gender analysis across each of the six key priority thematic areas of the GAP III**, reviewing pertinent statistical data and studies to establish an overview of the prevailing situation in-country, particularly for women and girls. Each sub-section of this *Afghanistan Gender Country Profile* outlines **conclusions and recommendations**, identifying key challenges and opportunities in working towards gender equality in the complex operating environment of present-day Afghanistan. A **mapping of key stakeholders** working on gender equality and women's empowerment is presented at the end of this document.

Methodology

This *Afghanistan Gender Country Profile* has been completed through comprehensive desk review of reports and documentation from various United Nations (UN) agencies, international and national organizations, and civil civil society actors, and, where available, gender statistics and sex and age-disaggregated data.

Given the situation of governance under the DFA since August 2021, **official data from State institutions have not been updated since 2021, and have thus not been relied upon in rendering the current gender equality picture** in Afghanistan. Instead, quantitative and qualitative data, mainly collected by international organizations and UN agencies, has been analysed to provide the most up-to-date information. The desk review has been complemented by semi-structured key informant interviews, online consultations, and peer review by international and national experts working across the various areas of intervention, as well as Afghan women civil society actors.

Gender data and statistics

The importance of quantitative disaggregated data in Afghanistan has been increasingly highlighted, including through nationwide representative surveys conducted jointly with various former ministries under the Republic between 2001–2021. Such quantitative disaggregated data are critical for data-driven, evidence-based decision-making. Data play a key role in designing interventions, monitoring progress towards gender equality objectives, and evaluating the effectiveness of interventions in addressing the specific needs of different groups within the population.

Where available, this Profile has included disaggregated data. There is significant scope for greater collection and presentation of disaggregated data according to, at a minimum, sex, age and disability in Afghanistan. Large swathes of data collected are not adequately disaggregated, reducing the data to broad descriptions that do not allow for targeted interventions, monitoring and evaluation. Challenges in undertaking such research have only increase in tandem with DFA restrictions, including the process of obtaining approval for surveys, DFA review of questionnaires, and the general security of enumerators conducting door-to-door surveys. In a context where the engagement, or even mention, of women is sensitive, sex-disaggregated data collection becomes both more complex and more necessary.

Alongside quantitative sex-disaggregated data, data-informed programming in Afghanistan requires locally specific qualitative data to allow for a nuanced and in-depth understanding of the specific complex social dynamics and power relations operating in target communities. This includes a comprehensive understanding of community dynamics, historical influences, and the effectiveness of past interventions. Without this granular qualitative element, quantitative data alone risk reducing complex social and community processes to decontextualized and individualized numbers from a single moment in time. Greater emphasis in Afghanistan needs to be placed on using qualitative research not as an afterthought to explain quantitative results, but also as the primary method to inform the framing as well as outcomes of quantitative research.

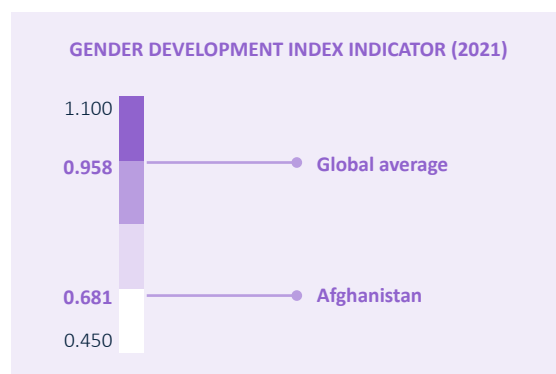
GENDER EQUALITY IN AFGHANISTAN

In recent decades, Afghanistan has consistently been one of the lowest-scoring States worldwide across a variety of gender equality indicators.³ Despite ongoing, widespread and severe gender inequity across the country, particularly in rural areas, the 20-year period of democratic rule between 2001 and 2021 saw significant progress achieved on women's rights, especially in establishing laws and policies to protect and advance women's rights and gender equality.

However, since August 2021, this hard-fought progress has been, and continues to be, reversed, demonstrating the vulnerability of the gains made. Those girls and women who gained rights during the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, as well as the national institutional frameworks underpinning this advancement, have been systematically erased from the Afghan landscape under the Taliban.

Since the Taliban takeover in 2021, the DFA have enforced a series of fundamentally discriminatory decrees and practices targeted at wholly abolishing the rights and freedoms of Afghanistan's women and girls. There are indications that this institutionalized and systematic approach is leading to shifts towards conservative and repressive social norms, which will deepen the repression of women and girls. Despite claims to the contrary immediately following its seizure of State power, it is clear from its past history as a group and its governance actions since that time that the oppression of and the structural denial of the personhood of women and girls is foundational to the Taliban vision for society.

3. In 2021, Afghanistan was placed 167th out of 170 countries on the UNDP [Gender Inequality Index](#); between 2005–2015 it was continuously ranked second-worst worldwide on this index. In 2021, Afghanistan was ranked 171th out of 172 countries on the UNDP [Gender Development Index](#); between 1993–2011, Afghanistan scored the worst worldwide on the GDI. In 2023, the [Global Gender Gap Index](#) by the World Economic Forum ranked Afghanistan as worst worldwide.



Source: UNDP Human Development Report (2021)

While measurements of Afghanistan's advancements on gender equality between 2001 and 2021 showed only moderate (and frequently inconsistent) achievement, the situation in the country has clearly deteriorated since the violent takeover of the Republic. Gender Development Index indicators across health, education and command of economic resources saw Afghanistan ranked 180th out of 191 States in 2021.⁴ In 2023, Afghanistan was ranked in last place in the Women Peace and Security Index, published annually by the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, with the aim of capturing States' advancements on women's inclusion, justice and security.⁵ Afghanistan also continues to have one of the highest global rates of GBV over a woman's lifetime.⁶ Against this backdrop, the gender-specific decrees put in place by the DFA reflect and add to a system of deeply entrenched patriarchal gender norms that concentrate social privilege, decision-making power, and control over assets and resources in the hands of Afghan men in the private and public spheres.

4. Estimated gross national income per capita, for example, was USD 533 for women and USD 3,089 for men; and expected years of schooling were 7.7 for women and 12.7 for men: UNDP (United Nations Development Programme). Gender Development Index. Available at: <https://hdr.undp.org/gender-development-index#/indicies/GDI>.

5. Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security. 2023. [Women Peace and Security Index](#).

6. Afghanistan is one of 19 countries in which 40–53 per cent of women experience violence by partners or family members during their lifetime: WHO (World Health Organization). 2021. [Violence Against Women Prevalence Estimates, 2018](#). Executive summary. Geneva: WHO on behalf of the United Nations Inter-Agency Working Group.

GENDER EQUALITY IN AFGHANISTAN

Gender equality legislation and institutions (1978–2021)

Under the communist government (1978–1996), women were targeted by social reforms, which included compulsory education for girls, a minimum marriage age of 16 years for girls, the abolition of the bride price practice, and the signing (but not ratification) of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), in 1980.⁷ These developments were part of a radical State atheism, which also prohibited women from wearing the *burqa*⁸ and provoked widespread discontent.

While women were permitted to participate in politics – with one woman serving as deputy head of State from 1980 to 1986, their role in decision-making bodies remained largely symbolic. Some estimates suggested that by the 1990s these policies had translated in urban areas into women representing 70 per cent of school teachers, 50 per cent of government workers and university students, and 40 per cent of doctors.⁹ While important inroads were indeed made during this period, underlying default structures persisted that ultimately did not transform the drivers of gender inequality in Afghan society.

Advancements regarding the status of women and girls observed during the communist era were sharply reversed following the Taliban seizure of State power by military means in 1996. The subsequent period, which was to last until 2001, saw girls over the age of 8 barred from education, women prohibited from working (with exemptions made in health and education), and reduced freedom of movement and access to services for girls and women by way of increased gender segregation and the obligation

to travel with a *mahram*.¹⁰ Women were subject to strict dress codes (obligatory *burqa*), prohibited from participating in sports, and the displaying of pictures of women and girls was banned. In 1999, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan smuggled out a video of a public execution of a woman, which shocked the world and exposed the Taliban's brutal misogyny. In short, women were prohibited from participating in almost all aspects of Afghan public life.

Arguments for the liberation and emancipation of Afghan women were used to underpin the 2001 military intervention in Afghanistan led by the United States of America (US) and its allies, which ousted the Taliban following the 11 September attacks in the US. This instrumentalization of women's rights – and apparent reproduction of colonial discourses of gender and empowerment – was used as a key rationale to build support for the military intervention against the Taliban; with this argument sitting in tension with evidence of the impact of militarism, and especially military interventions, on women, as well as gender equality more broadly (*see the sub-section "Conflict and militarism" of this Afghanistan Gender Country Profile document*).

Following the fall of the Taliban, the empowerment of women and girls became a significant focus of Afghan legal and institutional reform. The foundational Bonn Agreement, agreed in 2001, that set in motion a political transition and pathway to constitutional order included provisions for women's participation, protections of the rights of women and minorities, and established the Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission.¹¹

Between 2001 and 2021, the democratically elected Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GoIRA) oversaw the ratification of CEDAW (in 2003),¹² enshrined gender quotas in the 2004 Constitution of Afghanistan,¹³ for both houses of the Parliament of Afghanistan, and passed the Law on the Elimination

7. Nemat, O. A. 2011. *Afghan Women at the Crossroads: Agents of Peace – Or Its Victims?* New York: The Century Foundation. A full list of the treaties which Afghanistan has ratified is available from: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=1&Lang=EN.

8. Non-fitted black garment covering the entire body except for the eyes.

9. UN News. 2021. "Senior UN official says Afghan women key to building their country's future." Story. 20 November.

10. Under the Islamic traditional chaperoning system, a *mahram* is a male relative with whom marriage is prohibited because of their close blood relationship with the female chaperoned.

11. Inclusive Peace & Transition Institute. 2019. *Women in Peace & Transition Processes: Afghanistan, Bonn Agreement 2001*. Case Study Series.

12. The first State party report was submitted in July 2011: Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. 2013. *CEDAW/C/AFG/1-2*. Concluding observations on the combined initial and second periodic reports of Afghanistan. Additional State and civil society reporting can be reviewed at: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Countries.aspx?CountryCode=AFG&Lang=EN.

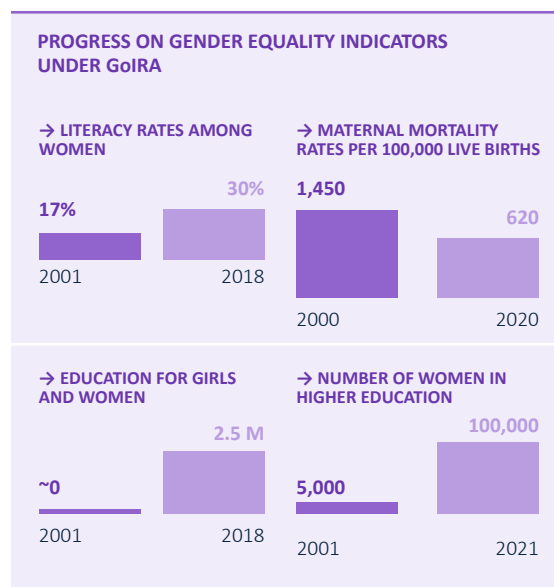
13. Articles 83 and 84 of the 2004 Afghan Constitution.

GENDER EQUALITY IN AFGHANISTAN

of Violence against Women (EVAW).¹⁴ The EVAW Law resulted in the appointment of 242 specialized EVAW prosecutors across various government departments, 300 female judges, and 800 defence lawyers, and the establishment of Family Response Units in all 34 Afghan provinces.¹⁵ Gender mainstreaming efforts led to the creation of institutions mandated in the field of GEWE, including the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA), its provincial Departments of Women's Affairs (DoWAs), the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), and the Women's High Council.

During this period, the GoIRA also enacted two monumental National Actions Plans (NAPs), the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (2007–2017)¹⁶ and the National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325-Women, Peace and Security (2015–2022).¹⁷ Cumulatively, while these changes did not fully transform Afghanistan into a gender-equal society, they did play an important role in increasing the visibility and presence of women in public decision-making, creating entry points into policy and processes for Afghan women to coalesce around, and providing protections for women to seek legal recourse.

These national-level efforts and the focus of national civil society and international assistance led to progress towards reducing gaps in different outcomes for Afghan women and men. Evidence of this development could be seen in reduced maternal mortality rates – 620 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2020, compared to 1,450 in 2000,¹⁸ increases in literacy rates among women – to 30 per cent in 2018, from 17 per cent in 2001,¹⁹ and increases in education for girls and women – 2.5 million girls attended primary school in 2018, from virtually zero in 2001, and the number of



Source: WHO.2022; UNESCO.2023.

women in higher education stood at over 100,000 in 2021 (up from 5,000 in 2001).²⁰

Following the seizure of State power by the Taliban in August 2021, these GEWE developments came to a halt. Since then, the institutional and legal gender equality architecture has been wholly dismantled and women's rights and fundamental freedoms abolished, leaving girls and women living under conditions similar to those seen during the Taliban regime from 1996 to 2001. **The DFA have systematically dismantled the MoWA, the AIHRC, the EVAW Law and its accompanying infrastructure, and abolished the former judicial system – removing judges, prosecutors and female lawyers, and stripping the Attorney-General's Office of its mandate and replacing it with the *de facto* Grand Directorate for Monitoring and Implementation of Decrees and Orders.** The codified promotion and protection of women that once existed has been transformed into a system predicated on the surveillance and control of women's lives and bodies. Institutionalized discrimination and misogynistic practices consolidate and strengthen the norms and structures that inhibit gender equality.

The DFA have reinstated the *de facto* Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, which is now the *de facto* entity charged by the DFA with overseeing the observance of DFA interpretation of sharia law and controls the "religious police".²¹

14. Ministry of Justice of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. 2009. [Law on Elimination of Violence Against Women \(EVAW\)](#). Official Gazette. Extraordinary Issue. Issue No. 989. 1 August.

15. UNAMA, OHCHR. 2020. [In Search of Justice for Crimes of Violence Against Women and Girls](#). December. Kabul: UNAMA.

16. Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. 2007. [National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan \(NAPWA\) 2007-2017](#); Ministry of Women's Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. 2019. [National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan Assessment Report \(2007-2017\): Progress and Challenges after 10 Years of Implementation](#).

17. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. 2015. [Afghanistan's National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325-Women, Peace and Security, 2015-2022](#).

18. Sustainable Development Goals data. Available from: <https://unstats-undesa.opendata.arcgis.com/>; WHO. 2022. Maternity Mortality Ratio. Available from: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.STA.MMRT?locations=AF>. Accessed 4 December 2023.

19. UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). 2023. ["Let girls and women in Afghanistan learn!"](#) News. 18 January 2023.

20. Ibid

21. Samim, S. 2022. [Policing Public Morality: Debates on promoting virtue and preventing vice in the Taliban's second Emirate](#). Afghanistan Analysts Network. 15 June.

GENDER EQUALITY IN AFGHANISTAN

Since the Taliban seized power, women have lost their jobs in government and affiliated institutions,²² their space in the private sector has been shrunk drastically, the majority of women-owned businesses (WoBs) have been shut down, and, in December 2022, Afghan women were banned from working for both national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) in Afghanistan – a decree that was extended to Afghan women working for the UN in April 2023.

With the Taliban achieving a series of victories on the battlefield, many Afghans who had benefited from two decades of education- and skills-building had already began to flee the national territory in the spring of 2021, with the culminating events of August 2021 sending this “brain drain” (from the public and private sectors alike) into overdrive.

DFA legal framework on gender equality

Since August 2021, the DFA have been ruling without a clear legal framework, having suspended the 2004 Constitution and all laws that they deem to be “inconsistent with sharia law”.

Under rule of Afghanistan by the Taliban during the period 1996–2001, the Taliban indicated undertaking a similar law reform process, but it did not ultimately produce any official legal framework.²³ The Taliban’s interpretation of sharia law is influenced by the Deobandi tradition from the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence, which (although currently not acknowledged by the Taliban) does provide precedents for women’s rights, founded on the understanding of intellectual parity between men and women.²⁴ Local traditions play a guiding role in the Taliban’s

policies. A law and constitutional review process is ostensibly ongoing, while individual decrees continue to be issued, meaning the legal foundation is largely a grey area comprising written decrees that are listed in the gazette published in May 2023,²⁵ written decrees that are not part of the gazette, and a myriad of other decrees introduced in different ways, including orally.

The current legal framework in Afghanistan around gender equality is a patchwork of individual decrees and policies passed by the DFA codifying gender discrimination. **Since August 2021, more than 70 edicts, directives and statements issued by the DFA,²⁶ alongside a hodgepodge of provincial-level decrees and practices, though inconsistently enforced, universally restricting the basic rights and fundamental freedoms of women and girls.** Confusion reigns on the ground, given the myriad formal and informal guidance that “govern” everyday life, and the resulting increased precarity of vulnerable groups.

In December 2021, the DFA set out rules intended to govern family law issues, ostensibly enshrining some women’s rights under Islamic law.²⁷ The DFA banned the forced marriage of women, prohibiting the practice of *baad*,²⁸ granting inheritance rights to widows, and ordering men who have several wives to be fair to each of them. The enforcement of this law is unclear, with instances of forced marriage being upheld documented by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and other organizations (*see the sub-section “Gender-based violence”*).²⁹

Some DFA decrees have worked to codify certain gender norms which target Afghan men. Men have been made responsible for violations of restrictions by women and girls in their family (*see the sub-section “Sociocultural gender norms”*). This reinforces men’s hold on decision-making power and control within the family unit, while also limiting their agency in

22. Jobs among women in the health sector and education were not directly targeted by the DFA, and some necessary positions were retained among women police or security in women’s prisons, for example.

23. Some analysts claimed that although a constitution was drafted, it was not formally adopted, due to a preference to avoid formalizing a political and legal system: Rahimi, H. 2022. “Afghanistan’s laws and legal institutions under the Taliban.” *Melbourne Asia Review*, 10, 6 June.

24. Emon, A. M., Rume A. and A. S. Chaudry. 2020. *Governing Afghanistan with the Taliban. A guide for negotiators*. Vancouver: Rockledge Research; Khan, H. 2015. *Islamic Law, Customary Law, and Afghan Informal Justice*. United States Institute of Peace. USIP Special Report. March. Washington, DC: USIP.

25. Afghanistan Analysts Network. 2023. [Decrees, orders and Instructions of Taleban supreme leader Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada](#).

26. A more comprehensive list of the decrees targeting Afghan women is available from: <https://www.usip.org/tracking-talibans-mistreatment-women>.

27. Samim. Policing Public Morality.

28. The practice of giving away girls to settle disputes over serious crimes. See UNAMA, OHCHR. 2010. [Harmful Traditional Practices and Implementation of the Law on Elimination of Violence against Women in Afghanistan](#). Kabul: UNAMA. December.

29. UNAMA. 2022. [Human Rights in Afghanistan: 15 August 2021–15 June 2022](#). Kabul: UNAMA. July.

GENDER EQUALITY IN AFGHANISTAN

The timeline of the DFA efforts to systematically curtail the rights of Afghanistan's girls and women includes (but is not limited to) the following main developments:

2021	September	Women are banned from playing sports.
		Dissolution of the Ministry of Women's Affairs and replacement with the de facto Ministry of Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice.
		Women government workers are asked to stay home from work.
	November	Women presenters and journalists are prohibited from appearing on television without a full face covering.
	December	Women are required to be accompanied by a <i>mahram</i> (male relative) when travelling distances of over 77 kms.
2022	March	Secondary education for girls is suspended beyond 6th grade.
	May	Women are required to observe "proper hijab", preferably by wearing a burqa or not leaving the home without a reason ("the first and best form of observing hijab").
	August	Women employees of the Ministry of Finance are directed to send a male relative to take their jobs.
	November	Women are prohibited from entering public baths, public parks, gyms, sports clubs and amusement parks.
	December	Afghan women are banned from working for national and international NGOs.
		Girls and women are banned from university education.
2023	April	Afghan women are banned from working for UN entities.
	May	Women doctors are banned from registering for the completion examination for specialization programmes at the de facto Ministry of Public Health.
	July	Beauty salons are ordered to close within one month.
	December	NGOs are banned from working on projects related to awareness-raising, conflict resolution, advocacy and peacebuilding.

GENDER EQUALITY IN AFGHANISTAN

presiding autonomously over the household, which reduces the space for more progressive household-level power-sharing in decision-making. In this way, **men are coerced into compliance and taking on enforcement roles, and women are treated like minors under the law, without the ascription of full agency as independent human beings.** Men have also been subject to the Taliban's particular interpretation of sharia law – in December 2021, for example, Afghan men were ordered to wear traditional Afghan clothes (rather than Western suits) and to not shave or trim their beards.

The DFA edicts targeting women and girls listed above stand in direct contravention of Afghanistan's obligations under CEDAW and other treaty obligations and commitments under international law. Specific obligations under CEDAW require States to take affirmative measures to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women, ensure equal rights in political and public life promote gender equality in education, employment, and health care, combat GBV, and address harmful traditional practices and stereotypes, while fostering women's participation in decision-making processes.

In a similar vein, as Afghanistan remains a State party to various international treaties,³⁰ the DFA is bound by a range of obligations that include preventing torture and inhumane treatment, upholding civil and political rights, considering the abolition of the death penalty, addressing enforced disappearances, combating racial discrimination, promoting economic, social and cultural rights, protecting migrant workers and their families, safeguarding children's rights, and ensuring the rights of persons living with disabilities, collectively mandating Afghanistan to protect and advance human rights comprehensively within its borders. UN reports on the human rights situation in Afghanistan indicate that DFA policies and actions contravene many of these international treaties.³¹ The independent assessment, mandated by Security Council resolution 2679, has made the fulfilment and compliance with international treaty obligations and

commitments a benchmark for the normalization and recognition of the Taliban as the governing authority of Afghanistan.³²

The DFA targeting of Afghan women and girls is increasingly being framed within international legal and political concepts, and international accountability mechanisms are being sought out by Afghan and international women's rights advocates.

Consultations undertaken since August 2022 with Afghan women inside the country have found that statements of condemnation by the international community are insufficient to improve the rights of women and girls.³³ Afghan women have observed that the current disjointed and *ad hoc* strategies implemented by the international community – largely limited to expressing concern and condemnation – have failed to improve their situation, instead urging alternative strategies and the development of tools that fit to respond to the unprecedented, State-sponsored nature of gender oppression.³⁴

In September 2023, consultations with over 500 Afghan women showed 50 per cent urging that international recognition be conditioned on an improvement of the women's rights situation.³⁵

The UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Afghanistan and the Chair of the Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls found, in June 2023, that DFA decrees constituted gender persecution and an institutionalized framework of "gender apartheid".³⁶ **Specifically, this refers to a "pattern of large-scale systematic violations of women's and girls' fundamental rights" coupled**

30. A full list of treaties ratified by Afghanistan is available from: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=1&Lang=EN.

31. See the various [UN Secretary-General's regular reports on the situation in Afghanistan](#); OHCHR. 2022. [Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan](#). Country Reports. 9 September 2022. A/HRC/51/6; OHCHR. 2023. [Special Rapporteur to Human Rights Council: the Systematic and Institutionalised Discrimination that Seeks to Exclude Women from All Facets of Life in Afghanistan Necessitates an Examination of the Evolving Phenomenon of Gender Apartheid](#). News. Human Rights Council. 11 September.

32. United Nations Security Council. [Report of the independent assessment pursuant to Security Council resolution 2679 \(2023\)](#). 9 November 2023. S/2023/856

33. UN Women, UNAMA and IOM consult Afghan women inside the country on a quarterly basis. Reports can be found on consultations conducted in [July 2023](#), [April 2023](#), [January 2023](#) and [October 2022](#).

34. UN Women. 2023. [Expert Group Meeting on International Strategies and Tools to Address the Situation of Women and Girls in Afghanistan](#)

35. In the same study, 46 per cent of women consulted stated that the Taliban should not be recognized under any circumstances: UN Women, IOM, UNAMA. 2023. [Summary report of country-wide women's consultations](#). September. Kabul: UN Women.

36. OHCHR. 2023. [Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan and the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls. Country Reports](#). 15 June 2023. A/HRC/53/21.

GENDER EQUALITY IN AFGHANISTAN

with “discriminatory and misogynistic policies and harsh enforcement methods”. The October 2023 extension for the Special Rapporteur’s mandate included the request that they prepare a report on the phenomenon of an institutionalized system of discrimination, segregation, disrespect for human dignity and exclusion of women and girls.³⁷

The characterization of gender persecution frames the systematic gender discrimination at the heart of Taliban ideology and rule as specifically targeting women and girls because of their characteristics and the social constructs that define gender roles, behaviour, activities and attributes.³⁸ This characterization would constitute a crime against humanity under article 7.1 (h) of the Rome Statute and could, consequently, have other implications, including providing grounds for Afghan women to apply for and be granted refugee status by host States under the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. Some EU States have already begun granting refugee status to Afghan women asylum-seekers, solely on the grounds of gender.³⁹

Although “gender apartheid” is yet to be explicitly codified under international law, despite some efforts being made,⁴⁰ it is being used internationally by some actors⁴¹ as a framework to understand the situation for women and girls in Afghanistan, acknowledging its unprecedented nature and link to State power and personification. UN Member States at the UN Security Council and Human Rights Council have used the term to describe the situation. Legal and human rights experts have also concluded that the concept

refers to already established international law on racial apartheid, and mirrors that systematic punitive deprivation of the rights of an entire population group.⁴²

Women’s freedom of movement

While the impact and relevance of most of the DFA edicts listed above are outlined further in each relevant sub-section below, restrictions on women’s freedom of movement are having a cross-cutting and compounding effect across all areas of intervention related to GEWE.

The DFA have codified numerous long-standing gender norms – such as accompaniment of women by a *mahram*, the segregation of unrelated men and women (*purdah*⁴³), and the observance of hijab⁴⁴ – which have traditionally created limitations on women’s independent access to public space. However, under the DFA, these norms have been directly enshrined in various decrees and have provided a logical basis for others. An example of this is **the banning, under the guise of *purdah*, of women and girls from using certain public spaces, including public bathhouses, parks, gyms, sports clubs, amusement parks and Afghanistan’s only national park. Non-observance of *purdah* and hijab have also been used as reasons to justify prohibitions on women’s employment.**⁴⁵

The *mahram* requirement arguably has the most pervasive effect in repressing women and girls in Afghanistan. Enacted in December 2021, it requires women to be accompanied by a *mahram* when travelling distances of more than 77 kilometres from

37. OHCHR. 2023. [Human Rights Council Concludes Fifty-Fourth Regular Session after Adopting 36 Resolutions and One President’s Statement](#). 13 October.

38. Gender persecution constitutes a crime against humanity under Article 7.1 (h) of the Rome Statute : ICC (International Criminal Court), Office of the Prosecutor. 2022. [Policy on the Crime of Gender Persecution](#). 7 December.

39. These states are Sweden, Finland, and Denmark: European Parliament. 2023. [Refugee status for all female Afghan asylum-seekers](#).

40. See detailed legal analysis proposing an amendment of Article 2(2)(h) of the Draft Crimes Against Humanity Convention: Atlantic Council. 2023. [Amending the Crime Against Humanity of Apartheid to Recognize and Encompass Gender Apartheid](#).

41. References to “gender apartheid” have been made by, among others: UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres ([January 2023](#)); High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell ([February 2023](#)); Special Rapporteur for Afghanistan, Richard Bennett ([March 2023](#)); former Swedish Foreign Minister, Margot Wallström ([April 2023](#)); UN Under-Secretary-General and UN Women Executive Director, Sima Bahous ([March](#) and [September 2023](#)). Reference was already made to this term to describe the Taliban’s discrimination against women and girls in 1999 by then UN Special Rapporteur on the Elimination of Intolerance and All Forms of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, Abdelfattah Amor ([April 1999](#)).

42. UN Women. 2023. [Expert Group Meeting on International Strategies and Tools to Address the Situation of Women and Girls in Afghanistan](#).

43. *Purdah* is a social norm proscribing unrelated men and women from mixing with one another, often resulting in strict gender segregation, and limiting interaction, including with shopkeepers and doctors. It is practiced less in certain parts of Afghanistan, for example in Kuchi, Shiite Hazara, and Tajik communities: de Leede, S. 2014. [Afghan Women and the Taliban: An Exploratory Assessment](#). International Centre for Counter-Terrorism.

44. In much of the Arab and wider Muslim world, “hijab” refers to a woman covering her head; but in Afghanistan, hijab tends to be used to refer to clothing that covers the head and body more fully. Under the DFA decree, this was defined as either a *burqa* or “customary black clothing and shawl” that is not too thin or too tight, presumably referring to an abaya worn with a niqab. As mentioned, the DFA additionally noted that the best “hijab” is for women to not leave their homes at all, unless it is absolutely necessary to do so: Clark, K. and S. Rahimi. 2022. [“We need to breathe too”: Women across Afghanistan navigate the Taliban’s hijab ruling](#). Afghanistan Analysts Network.

45. Butt, R. 2023. [“Aid agency chief: Taliban say guidelines on female NGO staff resuming work close to finalization.”](#) AP News. 23 May.

GENDER EQUALITY IN AFGHANISTAN

their homes. Like many of the DFA decrees, differences exist in the application of the *mahram* order across different geographic areas, and its application is also inconsistent across other factors, sometimes resulting in arbitrary enforcement against women within the specified 77-kilometre radius.⁴⁶ In these instances, the woman travelling solo is typically interrogated and harassed at checkpoints, regardless of the distance travelled. In some districts, women have been told to not leave their houses at all – in line with the aforementioned May 2022 decree requiring women to observe hijab, which stated explicitly that women should not leave their home unless absolutely necessary.⁴⁷ Ultimately, the disorientating tangle of (formal and informal, “mandated” and hearsay) decrees, directives, orders and guidance and their inconsistent communication and application have served to help to cultivate a general sense of anxiety and fear among women (and their relatives) around leaving the home.

Women’s access to services and employment outside the home has become largely dependent on them having a *mahram* available to escort them. This limits women’s ability to leave the home in a timely manner, which can have life-threatening consequences, particularly in health emergencies.

Confinement to the home also has significant mental health implications, limiting women’s access to physical exercise, social networks and communities, and adequate hygiene and sanitation facilities.⁴⁸ In the context of a grave economic crisis, it also creates additional financial stress on Afghan families – restricting women’s access to employment opportunities, (at least) doubling the cost of their public transport,⁴⁹ and forcing families to assign the time of a male relative, which could otherwise

potentially be spent generating income. Women who may not have a *mahram* (including widows and women heads of households) and women who must travel long distances to access services (such as women living in rural areas⁵⁰) are particularly affected by these restrictions.⁵¹

Sociocultural gender norms

Sociocultural norms have long dictated the roles of men, women, boys and girls in Afghanistan – across all ethnic and religious groups, although the ways in which sociocultural norms inform gender identity and roles varies widely, and intersect with other markers of identity, including age, education level, profession and sexual orientation.

The codification and enforcement of these restrictive norms risks entrenching this more conservative interpretation of women’s roles, rights and freedoms countrywide, and obscuring the diversity and progressive elements of norms and their evolution over time, ultimately reversing gains made towards more progressive norms under the GoIRA and, indeed, during various periods of Afghanistan’s history.

However, despite progress made between 2001 and 2021 in legislative and legal rights of women and girls, gender norms across Afghanistan have long been characterized by women’s subordination to men, a thread that runs through the history of Afghanistan. Deeply entrenched patriarchal gender norms dictate the roles, experiences and opportunities available to Afghan women, men, girls, boys and sexual and gender minorities. Within these social norms, **women and girls are often expected to limit themselves to reproductive roles, in the care and maintenance of the family through domestic tasks, childbearing**

46. GiHA Working Group in Afghanistan. 2023. Rapid Gender Analysis 2023.

47. Ibid.

48. Public baths are commonly frequented across Afghanistan, particularly by those without running water at home, leading to women being unable to access washing facilities, in some cases, for several weeks: UN Women. Forthcoming. Rapid Gender Analysis 2023. Gender in Humanitarian Action (GiHA).

49. Reports suggest that, in Kabul, shared taxis can require unaccompanied women to cover the cost of all seats: Doctors Without Borders. 2023. [Persistent Barriers to Access Healthcare in Afghanistan: An MSF report](#). 6 February.

50. In a February 2023 survey, 31 per cent of rural women noted this as the most common barrier to accessing health services, compared to 13 per cent of urban women: Ground Truth Solutions. 2023. [Against the odds: Strengthening accountability to women and girls in Afghanistan](#). Salma Consulting. February 2023.

51. Women in rural areas of Afghanistan were found to be more than twice as likely as women in urban areas to indicate that the *mahram* restriction as the greatest barrier to accessing health services (31 per cent compared to 13 per cent): Ground Truth Solutions. Against the odds.

GENDER EQUALITY IN AFGHANISTAN

and caregiving. The widespread patrilineal practice of sending women to live with their husband's family reinforces the perceived value of investment in sons over daughters – including in terms of education, employment and household decision-making capacity.⁵²

Although the role of Afghan women in decision-making and influence within the home and the wider community varies (across different households, rural and urban areas, and ethnic groups), Afghan men and women are typically both socialized to understand women (and their needs and wishes) to be subordinate to men (and their needs and wishes). Leadership, decision-making and control of assets and resources are understood to be the domain of men. A zero-sum approach to power dynamics often means that any decision-making power that Afghan women hold is perceived as an indication of men's weakness, both at home and at work with male relatives and co-workers.⁵³ The prevailing understanding of women's honour – as representing their family's honour – also works to exclude them from public spaces, as a key element – their perceived sexual propriety – is felt to be protected by adherence to norms such as *purdah*.⁵⁴

For their part, Afghan boys and men face significant pressure to adhere to social stereotypes of masculinity, which are linked closely to concepts of honour and the repression and control of the women in their households.⁵⁵ Men are expected to fulfil the role of decision-maker, breadwinner and provider for the household, and traditional views on masculine honour holds men responsible for the behaviour of the women in their household.⁵⁶ This strict understanding of male

dominance tends to find stronger expression in rural areas of Afghanistan and Pashtun communities.⁵⁷

The DFA have codified these social norms through their interpretation of sharia law, further emboldening men to control women in the household and entrenching these conservative social ideologies. For example, the hijab decree issued by the DFA specifically made a woman's *mahram* responsible for policing her clothing.⁵⁸ By holding men responsible for women's compliance with DFA directives, the DFA have also encroached upon men's individual authority and autonomy within the household, forcing them to adopt and enforce a more conservative worldview.

In this way, women's autonomy can be seen as a direct transgression of men's position in Afghan society and reflects negatively on men in their household.

As a result, women are dependent on the consent of male family members to access education and employment opportunities, financial resources, and leadership roles within the community. These norms feed into perceptions that women are not fit to participate in public life, and even that violence against women is justified should they resist the decisions made by male family members.⁵⁹

52. Arson, A. and N. Coburn. 2020. [Solidarity, Strength and Substance: Women's Political Participation in Afghanistan](#). Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), UN Women. October 2020.

53. Ibid

54. Perversely, this also has the effect of silencing women who are experiencing sexual harassment and violence: Larson and Coburn. *Solidarity, Strength*.

55. Concepts around honour include: "namus" – the responsibility of a man to defend female members of his family against danger (including endangerment of integrity, modesty, and respectability) at any cost; "nang" – a man's social capital tied to conceptions of masculine honour, bravery and shame; and "ghairat" – the honour, esteem, and virtue (or right to respect) assigned to people by their community: Echavez, C. R., Mosawi, S. M. and L. W. Pilongo. 2016. [The Other Side of Gender Inequality: Men and Masculinities in Afghanistan](#). AREU.

56. Men's responsibility for female family members' transgression of the DFA decree on wearing full hijab has been codified under the DFA.

57. One report showed that 68.9 per cent of Pashtun respondents indicated feeling that men should be breadwinners in the family, compared to 45.6 per cent of Tajik, and 44.3 per cent of Hazara respondents: Echavez, Mosawi and Pilongo. *The Other Side*; de Leede. *Afghan Women*.

58. Clark and Rahimi. "We Need to Breathe."

59. A recent study showed that at least one third of the Afghan population – including both men and women – reported tolerance of violence against women and girls, particularly in cases of "going out without permission" and "neglecting children": Spotlight Initiative. 2023. *Study on Protection Mechanisms relating to Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and Harmful Practices*; Echavez, Mosawi and Pilongo. *The Other Side*.

GENDER EQUALITY IN AFGHANISTAN

The pervasive impact of restrictive gender norms emphasizes the importance of engaging men as allies in the fight for women's rights. In particular, male religious leaders and community elders can be effective agents to break down resistance to change and foster greater support for gender equality initiatives within traditionally patriarchal societies.

This could be, for example, through education, advocacy and community mobilization interventions. This inclusive approach acknowledges that achieving gender equality is not solely a women's issue but requires the active participation and commitment of men and boys as well. In male engagement programming, it is important that a Do No Harm lens is applied to ensure that women's leadership and spaces for women are not undermined by the benevolent patriarchy.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR AFGHAN WOMEN'S CIVIL SOCIETY

During the 20 years between 2001 and 2021, Afghan women's civil society worked in close partnership with the international community to work towards GEWE in Afghanistan. Women's organizations are critical in providing contextualized and culturally appropriate services "for women, by women".

A survey undertaken by UN Women in 2022 found that the 127 women's organizations surveyed reached 1 million women beneficiaries across 17 provinces.⁶⁰ These organizations provide critical insights and information on the needs and perspectives of Afghan women on the ground, and reach women in need where male-only or male-majority organizations cannot.

DFA restrictions targeting WCSOs

Civic space in Afghanistan has virtually ceased to exist – in March 2023, Afghanistan was downgraded from "repressed" to "closed" by the CIVICUS Monitor, the lowest rating assigned by this global network of civil society entities.⁶¹ Since August 2021, women-led and women-focused CSOs and leaders have faced a targeted campaign by the DFA, which has led to a significant reduction in operations and staff capacity, forcing many to cease operations and others to fight hard to remain operational. This phenomenon has been particularly severe for organizations working on media, human rights – especially women's rights – and peacebuilding, where those delivering humanitarian aid face comparatively less scrutiny.

Ban on women working for NGOs

On 24 December 2022, the *de facto* Ministry of Economy banned Afghan women from working for national and international NGOs in Afghanistan. Since then, letters and verbal directives from the DFA have ordered women heads or deputy heads of organizations, as well as women board members, to resign and be replaced by men. The ban on women NGO workers directly impacts the more than 15,000 women employed in Afghanistan across 183 national and international NGOs.⁶²



Source: ACBAR.2022.

Exemptions from the restrictions were made for health and education NGO workers, although these exemptions are not uniformly applied or automatically granted. Similarly, exemptions negotiated by international and national organizations are often secured in response to ever-changing DFA policies and practices. As a result, they are often time-bound and for a specific project or location, making them short-term solutions that are susceptible to reversal. **Negotiations are also not always possible, with some reports suggesting that organizations that push back on the restrictions are threatened with license revocation or charges of corruption, leaving them with few options but to be seen to comply.** To date, negotiating exemptions to decrees has not resulted in the retraction of any of the decrees issued by the DFA targeting women.

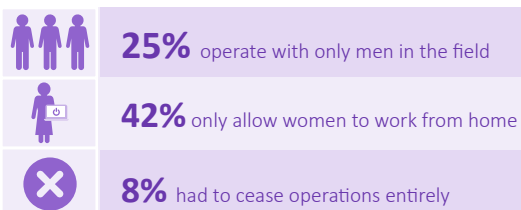
60. UN Women. 2023. [Gender Alert No. 3: Out of jobs, into poverty – the impact of the ban on Afghan women working in NGOs](#).

61. CIVICUS. 2023. [Afghanistan Sinks to Worst Rating in a New Global Report on Civic Freedoms](#). Monitor. 16 March.

62. ACBAR (Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief and Development). 2022. [Statement by ACBAR on Suspension of Women Staff working in NGOs, 26 December 2022](#). Articles. 26 December.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR AFGHAN WOMEN'S CIVIL SOCIETY

AN ASSESSMENT CONDUCTED BY UN WOMEN IN MAY 2023 SHOWED THAT, OUT OF 175 SURVEYED NGOS...



Source: GiHA.2023.

Despite exemptions, the impact of this ban can be seen on women's absence from NGOs. In May 2023, around 25 per cent of organizations surveyed in a study were operating with only men in the field, and 42 per cent with women working from home and only men in the office.⁶³ Afghan women also report that employers – in the NGO and private sectors – are increasingly disincentivized to hire Afghan women; between the ban on women working in certain sectors, increased complexity and cost in navigating DFA restrictions against women and requirements for gender segregation, and anticipatory behaviour by employers and families.⁶⁴ Taken together, this risks further consolidating male dominance and further reducing the few remaining opportunities in the labour market for women.

The leadership and participation of women in NGOs is critical to operational effectiveness of all sectors. They are highly skilled and uniquely placed to understand and integrate the needs and experiences of Afghan women into programming and to access women and girls with life-saving services.

Many women NGO workers are breadwinners,⁶⁵ with their dismissal resulting in tangible hardship for their own households, as well as their extended family and community members.⁶⁶

63. GiHA. 2023. [Tracking Impact Report on the ban on women working with NGOs, INGOs and UN in Afghanistan: Fifth Snapshot \(May 2023\)](#).

64. Gehrig, M. 2022. [Media Restrictions and the Implications for Gender Equality in Afghanistan](#). Kabul: UN Women

65. In January 2023, 84 per cent of the 127 organizations surveyed in a UN Women study reported that over 70 per cent of their women staff were the main breadwinners in their families: UN Women. 2023. Gender Alert No. 3.

66. In a study, 77 per cent of respondents stated that they assisted persons outside their household whenever they had an income, with 19 per cent supporting more than five people: UN Women, IOM, UNAMA. 2023. Summary report. September.

Unsurprisingly, the ban on women NGO workers has impacted women's organizations the most – as of May 2023, 16 per cent of Afghanistan's previously operational women's organizations were no longer operating(at all), with 38 per cent continuing operations with their women staff working from home.⁶⁷

Even prior to the ban, women NGO workers in Afghanistan faced significant challenges to carrying out their work, including the *mahram* decree that limited their mobility, security risks⁶⁸ and discriminatory organizational practices, which have increasingly worked to remove women from the workplace.⁶⁹ Despite decrees put in place, and longstanding barriers to women's leadership in the NGO sector, Afghan women continue to carve out spaces to continue their vital work seeking to meet the needs and improve the rights of all Afghans.

Civil society organizations are all attempting to cope with critical operational challenges in Afghanistan due to the impact of DFA restrictions on women staff, including in accessing their offices and ensuring their safety. More recently, reports suggest that the DFA have also directed organizations to replace the word "women" with "men" in project documents and remove women from beneficiary lists.⁷⁰ In one recent study, the women's organization surveyed cited bureaucratic constraints as the main reason for their organizations being unable to operate (32 per cent); followed by lack of

67. Ibid.

68. In 2022, 407 gender-motivated incidents (including 39 incidents of threats or intimidation against female aid workers and 57 incidents of restrictions on the movement of female aid workers) were attributed to the DFA: UNSC. 2023. [Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security](#). 27 February 2023. A/77/772-S/2023/151; OCHA. 2022. [Female Participation in the Humanitarian Action in Afghanistan \(September 2022\)](#).

69. DFA policies and practices have incentivized organizations to hire men, as hiring women arguably creates additional security and administrative risks and requires financial investments (e.g. to cover the costs of gender segregated workplaces and *mahram* travel). In this way, women have been increasingly marginalized in the workplace and gender-responsive policies have been deprioritized: GiHA. 2022. [Promoting the Recruitment and Retention of Women Humanitarian Workers in Afghanistan](#); OCHA. Female Participation.

70. UN Women. 2023. State of play of women's organizations in Afghanistan. August.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR AFGHAN WOMEN'S CIVIL SOCIETY

ACCORDING TO A RECENT SURVEY ON OPERATIONAL DIFFICULTIES FOR NGOS IN AFGHANISTAN...



32% were unable to operate due to bureaucratic constraints



28% were unable to operate due to lack of donor funding

Source: GiHA Working Group in Afghanistan (2023).

donor funding (cited by 28 per cent).⁷¹ Those organizations that manage to continue to operate in Afghanistan are forced to navigate harassment by DFA officials, particularly women's organizations working on sensitive issues such as protection, including GBV, health, and sexual exploitation and abuse.⁷² Local NGOs in particular are targeted and harassed by the DFA to comply with regulations, while international NGOs are better able to negotiate directly with the DFA and enable women staff to work remotely.

Women human rights defenders (WHRDs), including women protesters, in Afghanistan continue to face significant threats to their safety, security and protection, including arrest – in a context where infrastructure previously established to protect WHRDs has been abolished or moved underground.⁷³ DFA restrictions and practices have also forced women out of the media, requiring face coverings and self-censorship and, in some areas, banning them from being on the air altogether.⁷⁴

71. GiHA Working Group in Afghanistan. 2023. "We are breathing, but we are not living": Research on Challenges, Barriers and Opportunities for Women CSOs in the Afghanistan Humanitarian Crisis.

72. The Protection Cluster was the only cluster for which DFA restrictions were considered a greater impediment to service-delivery than underfunding: OCHA. Revised Humanitarian Response Plan.

73. OHCHR. 2023. [Taliban must immediately release women human rights defenders, say UN experts](#). Media Center. Press Releases. 31 October; Amnesty International. 2022. "Afghanistan: Women human rights defenders arrested by the Taliban must be immediately released." News. 14 November.

74. Gehrig, M. 2022. [Media Restrictions](#).

Funding challenges

Funding remains a critical issue for women's organizations in Afghanistan. Mirroring a global trend, in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) context, **for example, women's organizations receive 0.3 per cent of overall Development Assistance Committee (DAC) funding.**⁷⁵ Since August 2021, there has been a shift away from longer-term, multi-year development and peacebuilding funding towards short-term funding to meet immediate humanitarian needs – a shift in part due to the escalation of the humanitarian crisis after the culminating events of August 2021 and ongoing sanctions that largely prevent technical assistance and development funding from entering Afghanistan.

These factors have contributed to a reduction in funding for women's rights programming, leaving women's CSOs that only have experience in development and peacebuilding programming with major obstacles in accessing humanitarian funding.⁷⁶ This further compounds existing challenges around localization efforts for women-specific programming, which has long been underfunded at the national level.⁷⁷ Some initiatives have been implemented to build the capacity of non-humanitarian NGOs on humanitarian standards – including areas such as prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse – and coordination systems. Lessons from these initiatives could be scaled-up.

There is an urgent need in the Afghan context to operationalize the evidence base around how best to support women's organizations operating in conflict-affected contexts. **Longer-term funding cycles, flexibility in requirements, accessibility in language, and the ability to fund both registered and unregistered organizations are vital to keep the pipeline of women's civil society alive in this context of growing restrictions aimed at stifling the work of these entities.**

75. During the period 2020–2021, DAC States gave USD 574 million to women's rights organizations and movements, out of an overall USD 185.9 billion in funding: OECD. 2021. [Official development assistance for gender equality and women's empowerment in 2020-21: A snapshot](#).

76. GiHA. 2023.

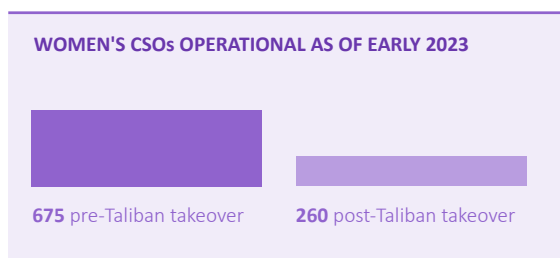
77. In 2022, only 6 per cent of overall GBV-pooled funding in Afghanistan ultimately reached national/sub-national organizations; the remaining 94 per cent went to INGOs and UN agencies: International Rescue Committee. 2023. "Why Wait? How the Humanitarian System Can Better Fund Women-Led and Women's Rights Organizations." Resource. 7 March.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR AFGHAN WOMEN'S CIVIL SOCIETY

Impact on the landscape of WCSOs

As a result of contextual restrictions and funding challenges, women-led or women-focused organizations have closed en masse.

From the 675 recorded by the Ministry of Economy prior to the Taliban takeover, this number has reportedly decreased to 260 (according to assessments as of early 2023).⁷⁸ Among those (humanitarian) organizations surveyed in July 2023, only 3 per cent were fully operational with only women staff, 27 per cent were fully operational with both women and men, and 43 per cent were partially operational with women and men.⁷⁹ These closures have in turn caused the shutdown of critical services for girls and women, and intensified the harmful impact of the various decrees targeting Afghanistan's women and girls, as spaces for protection and resistance gradually disappear. Despite the challenges they face, women leaders in Afghanistan are finding ways to continue operating in this complex and hostile environment, continuously adapting and negotiating space for their operations.



Source: UN Women State of Play



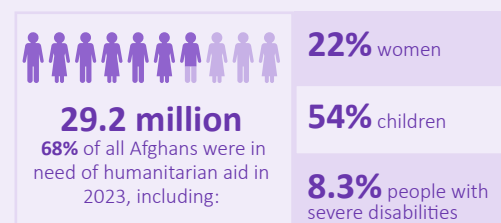
Source: GiHA. 2023.

78. UN Women. State of play.

79. GiHA. 2023. [Tracking Impact Report on the ban on women working with NGOs, INGOs and UN in Afghanistan: Sixth Snapshot \(July 2023\)](#).

Intersection of the women's rights crisis and the humanitarian crisis

DFA policies curtailing the rights of women and girls come against a backdrop of multiple overlapping crises, including a complex humanitarian crisis. In 2023, an estimated 29.2 million people (68 per cent of all Afghans) were in need of urgent humanitarian aid in order to survive – of which 22 per cent are women, 54 per cent are children, and 8.3 per cent are people living with severe disabilities.⁸⁰ In early 2023, the geographical breakdown of those affected was 78 per cent rural and 22 per cent urban.⁸¹ This crisis include high levels of food insecurity – **15.3 million people (38 per cent of all Afghans) were projected to be acutely food insecure between May and October 2023 – and basic health services are out of reach for roughly 25 per cent of the population.**⁸² Women and girls have long faced obstacles in accessing gender-responsive programming and humanitarian aid, and this has only been exacerbated by DFA policies.⁸³



Source: OCHA. 2023.

80. OCHA (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs). 2023. [Overview of Humanitarian Response in Afghanistan](#). Accessed 26 September 2023; OCHA. [Revised Humanitarian Response Plan \(June – December 2023\)](#).

81. OCHA. 2023. [Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023](#). Humanitarian Programme Cycle 2023.

82. WFP. May 2023 Situation Report; OCHA. 2023. Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023.

83. Among other things, women's disproportionate lack of civil documentation also excludes them from access to services, including humanitarian aid. Some 22.8 per cent of women do not have a Tazkira, compared with 9.9 per cent of men: Global Protection Cluster. 2021. [Protection Analysis Update – Quarter 3](#). October, p. 9.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR AFGHAN WOMEN'S CIVIL SOCIETY

The delivery of programming on basic needs and gender-responsive humanitarian response has been severely compromised by these developments.

Prevailing gender norms mean Afghan women are largely inaccessible to male NGO workers, leaving women excluded from male-run processes, compounded by male-dominance in community decision-making leaving women excluded from consultations and community feedback mechanisms.⁸⁴

This dynamic gives rise to significant obstacles for life-saving programming to directly reach Afghan women, particularly women-headed households, for selection processes, needs assessments, distribution and feedback mechanisms. In 2022, even before the introduction of the decree banning Afghan women from working for NGOs in Afghanistan, it was found that women were not systematically and consistently consulted, particularly in the context of needs assessments for humanitarian aid, resulting in programme delivery that did not meet their needs.⁸⁵

Humanitarian actors, in particular, are grappling with the complexities of operating within the confines of DFA restrictions and simultaneously adhering to fundamental humanitarian principles – humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. The ban on women aid workers in particular has complicated aid delivery as principles of humanity and impartiality come into tension with each other, due to the consequent restricted access to Afghan women beneficiaries where women humanitarian workers are essential for equitable delivery. The scale of the humanitarian crisis combined with the sensitive, repressive political context additionally muddle open discussions of ethical decision-making around compromise and concession across humanitarian principles, despite the ever-increasing importance of such conversations.⁸⁶ **Ensuring that**

human rights are not traded-off in humanitarian action is critical to ensure aid reaches all segments of the population in need.⁸⁷

In this way, the women's rights crisis is profoundly connected to the humanitarian crisis, and thus its response. Not only are restrictions on women specifically targeting the humanitarian sector – with the exclusion of women humanitarian workers weakening the overall effectiveness and quality of humanitarian action – but the impact and outcomes of both areas of intervention are deeply intertwined. DFA restrictions will determine who is most at risk in the immediate as well as short, medium and long term. To date, these restrictions have disproportionately heightened women's vulnerability and eroded their resilience, with consequences extending far beyond themselves or their households. Similarly limiting women's access to the economy, education, and health care has broad implications for the nation's overall development and resilience – its infrastructure, capacity to deliver social services and stability.

Incoherence in approaches towards the dual (women's rights and humanitarian) crises could sideline and deprioritize women's rights across all international responses. The interconnected nature of the humanitarian and women's rights crises further highlights the importance of ongoing discussions around ethical humanitarian decision-making and acceptable compromise on humanitarian principles.

84. In July 2021, 64 per cent of women surveyed reported not being involved in community-level decision-making, while 69 per cent of men reported that they were involved in such processes: CARE. 2021. [Rapid Gender Analysis: Drought in Afghanistan](#).

85. Less than 15 per cent of Afghan women recipients surveyed reported being consulted on the type of assistance they needed prior to receiving it, and only 19 per cent of women reported that the humanitarian assistance they received met their needs: CARE. 2022. [The Impact of the Food Crisis on Women and Girls in Afghanistan – November 2022](#).

86. Haver, K. & Carter, W. 2016. [Whatever It Takes: Principled pragmatism to enable access and quality humanitarian aid in insecure environments](#). Secure Access in Volatile Environments research programme (SAVEResearch).

87. OHCHR, UNHCR. 2013. [The Protection of Human Rights in Humanitarian Crises](#). Joint background paper, 8 May.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR AFGHAN WOMEN'S CIVIL SOCIETY

Key findings

- **The DFA have undertaken a targeted campaign to severely curtail the operations of women's CSOs**, forcing some to close and leading others to reduce staff and replace senior women with all-male leadership and boards, contributing to broader removal of women from public life. Despite these challenges, Afghan women continue to re-think and find new pathways to continue working in civil society and deliver services for all Afghans.
- **Lack of funding for women's organizations is a critical issue**, as long-term, flexible, multi-year funding for development and peacebuilding has shifted to short-term humanitarian funding, leading to the underfunding of women's rights programming.
- **The combination of DFA harassment and operational obstacles**, and the aforementioned funding shift, **has forced those women's organizations still operating in Afghanistan to shift programming to sectors deemed acceptable by the Taliban**, such as health and education, or to move some or all of their activities underground, putting staff and beneficiaries at risk.
- **Afghanistan is facing multiple crises**. The women's rights crisis is exacerbating the humanitarian crisis. These crises are interlocking, and solutions must be equally as interconnected.
- **The DFA have enacted policies to disproportionately curtail women and girls' access to life-saving humanitarian assistance** and compromise capacities for gender-responsive humanitarian response – including bans on women aid workers and restrictions on women's freedom of movement.

Recommendations

1. **ENSURE that funding of women's CSOs operationalizes good practices**, by delivering flexible, accessible funding to keep women's organizations operational – including unregistered or unbanked organizations – and develop organizational capacities to enable their work to continue and adapt to changing contextual dynamics. This includes by: reducing administrative burdens; extending time frames for funding; waiving registration requirements; supporting workarounds on restrictions; covering funding for *mahrams*; and prioritizing allocation of core funding.
2. **RECOGNIZE the impact that DFA bans are having on women and girls and work to mitigate these impacts** by using available contextualized gender-responsive strategies. This includes by: placing strategies and practical measures to ensure that Afghan women can fully participate in the design, assessments, implementation and monitoring of humanitarian response across all sectors of intervention; and providing support that is framed by principled engagement, which measures the costs and benefits for Afghan women.
3. **EXECUTE the establishment, by donors and international partners, of different common strategies and criteria** to identify and verify women-led CSOs to continue the provision of support in a context where the boards and leadership of women's organizations are shifting toward becoming male-only.
4. **UNDERScore the necessity of working with women staff** in all interventions across all sectors – implemented by UN organizations, NGOs and INGOs – to limit the impact of male-only programming on women and girls, ensuring that working without women is not normalized, and that the well-being of women staff is prioritized.
5. **EXTEND political support to Afghan women**, including by meaningfully consulting with diverse Afghan women to find pathways to raise their concerns and recommendations with the DFA, regional actors and the broader international community. Efforts to this end should include advocacy at high-level forums, including directly with the DFA on a full reversal of the bans, and facilitation of direct negotiations between the Taliban and Afghan women – a request consistently raised by Afghan women since the Taliban takeover in August 2021.
6. **ENSURE that women are present in all delegations**, particularly international delegations, meeting the DFA to signal and role model women in leadership roles.
7. **ENSURE that engagement in humanitarian action and human rights are constructed as mutually-reinforcing strategies** and not traded off against each other.⁸⁸

88. OHCHR, UNHCR. 2013. [The Protection of Human Rights in Humanitarian Crises](#). Joint background paper, 8 May.

KEY GENDER EQUALITY ISSUES PER PRIORITY AREA OF THE EU GAP III

I. Ensuring freedom from all forms of gender-based violence

Prevalence and impact

Gender-based violence is prevalent across Afghanistan. UNAMA reported extensively on GBV during the 2001–2021 period, clearly documenting the scope of the phenomenon and the obstacles in both preventing and prosecuting this criminal act.⁸⁹ Types of violence recorded by human rights treaty bodies included physical assault, forced labour, sexual violence, child violence, and psychological and economic violence, such as withholding alimony or depriving women of their inheritance.⁹⁰

Procuring accurate data measuring GBV represents a significant challenge, with underreporting likely (albeit immeasurably) commonplace due to stigmatization of the phenomena. This was already the case during the Republic era, and has worsened under the DFA rule – and referral services do not exist to enable ethical and safe data collection that meet international GBV standards.⁹¹ Notwithstanding these documentation challenges, humanitarian actors do report that **the number of people in Afghanistan in need of GBV assistance has grown between 2022 and 2023, from 10.1 million to 13.1 million (or approx. one third of the Afghan population).**⁹² These incidents are occurring against a backdrop of boys and girls being subjected to extremely high rates of violent discipline, with over 80 per cent of children having experienced violent discipline.⁹³

A 2018 SURVEY ON INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE SHOWED THAT OUT OF WOMEN AGED BETWEEN 15–49...



50.8% had experienced such acts at least once in their life, nationwide.

However, in some provinces, incidences of violence were significantly higher, with...



92% of women having experience violence at least once in their lifetime.

Source: UN Women Global Database on Violence against Women

Rates of intimate partner physical and/or sexual violence are extremely high in Afghanistan. In 2018, an estimated 50.8 per cent of Afghan women between the ages of 15 and 49 had experienced such violence at least once in their lifetime.⁹⁴ In some provinces, this figure was as high as 92 per cent.⁹⁵ The global average is 26 per cent, which puts Afghanistan in the top 19 States worldwide in terms of the prevalence of GBV among women.⁹⁶ Risk factors for intimate partner violence have worsened since August 2021, with DFA policies and practices fostering a sense of male empowerment and control of women,⁹⁷ a loss of women's autonomy and economic independence, and the abolition of GBV legal and protection infrastructure. Verbal and psychological violence is less recognized but was reported, in 2013, to be the second most common form of violence.⁹⁸ This includes verbal abuse and insults, mocking and humiliating, and threats that are documented to occur against women in all spheres of society, inside the family or with in-laws as well as in public spaces.

89. UNAMA, OHCHR. In Search of; UNAMA. 2018. [Injustice and Impunity: Mediation of Criminal Offences of Violence against Women](#). Kabul: UNAMA; UNAMA. 2015. [Justice through the Eyes of Afghan Women: Cases of Violence against Women Addressed through Mediation and Court Adjudication](#). Kabul: UNAMA; UNAMA. 2009. [Silence is Violence- End Violence against Women in Afghanistan](#). Kabul: UNAMA.

90. AIHRC. 2020. Report on Violence Against Women in Afghanistan (the first 10 months of 2020). 26 November. Kabul: AIHRC.

91. For more on ethical and safe research of sexual violence, see the [Murad Code: Global Code of Conduct for Gathering and Using Information about Systematic and Conflict-Related Sexual Violence](#).

92. OCHA. Revised Humanitarian Response Plan.

93. UNICEF, MICS, 2022–2023

94. Estimates made in 2017 by the Central Statistics Organization in Kabul are captured in the UN Women Global Database on Violence against Women, available from: <https://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/en/countries/asia/afghanistan#1>.

95. This was the case in Herat and Ghor provinces: Central Statistics Organization. 2015. Afghanistan Demographic and Health Survey. Kabul: Ministry of Public Health.

96. In these 19 States, 40–53 per cent of women experience violence by partners or family members. WHO. 2021. [Violence Against Women Prevalence Estimates, 2018](#). Executive summary. United Nations Inter-Agency Working Group on Violence Against Women. Geneva: WHO.

97. As noted above in the “DFA legal framework on gender equality”, male responsibility for female family members’ adherence to DFA decrees has been codified.

98. Hasrat, M & Pfefferle, A. 2013. [Violence Against Women in Afghanistan](#). AIHRC.

KEY ISSUE: ENSURING FREEDOM FROM ALL FORMS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

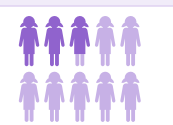
Furthermore, adherence to harmful social norms that permit the occurrence of GBV has also become more prevalent, among both men and women.

In a January 2023 study, one third of participants (men and women) reported feeling that violence against women was justified, especially for the perceived transgressions of “going out without permission” or “neglecting children”, with tolerance of GBV higher among respondents in rural areas, especially in the northern, north-eastern and central regions of Afghanistan.⁹⁹

The dire economic circumstances for many Afghan households and women’s confinement to the home also add to these risk factors. Moreover, the prevalence of mental health conditions among women in Afghanistan has been on the rise, which in turn has been found to increase the likelihood that they will experience GBV.¹⁰⁰

Rates of early, forced and child marriage among girls are high and reportedly increasing, given the dire economic and humanitarian crises, as a survival mechanism for those living in precarious settings.¹⁰¹ The Afghan Civil Law previously set the minimum age for marriage at 16 years for girls and at 18 years for boys; and, in December 2021, the Taliban’s supreme leader outlawed forced marriage, the practice of giving a woman in restitution (*baad*), and granted women the right to consent to marriage.

IN 2023 CHILD MARRIAGE DATA FROM AFGHANISTAN SHOWED...



28.7% of girls under the age of 18 were married



9.6% of those married were under 15 years of age

Source: UNICEF Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey

A minimum age for marriage, however, was not set. In 2023, data showed that 28.7 per cent of girls in Afghanistan under the age of 18 years were married, as well as 9.6 per cent of those aged under 15 years.¹⁰²

Statistical modelling shows the ban on Afghan girls education after primary school is estimated to be associated with an increase of the rate of child marriage by 25 per cent.¹⁰³ This would put 37.5 per cent of Afghan girls at risk of child marriage.

Early, forced and child marriages are being driven by the deteriorating economic situation for most Afghan families. A study exploring the continued prevalence in Afghan society of practices such as *baad* found that it was deemed acceptable in cases where the families involved benefit from the marriage, for 25 per cent of participants in Kandahar Province, 17 per cent in Paktya, and 15 per cent in Herat.¹⁰⁴ This phenomenon disproportionately affects girls from poor families and living in rural areas. In some situations, child marriage is used as a way to either avoid or secure marriage to Taliban members.¹⁰⁵

Child marriage has been shown to lead to severe negative outcomes for girls, including increased likelihood that a girl or woman will experience domestic violence, have limited access to reproductive health services, and receive only lower levels of education

99. Spotlight Initiative. Study on Prevention.

100. IOM. 2023. [Mental Health: Displacement trends and challenges in Afghanistan since August 2021](#). Research Brief.

101. Amnesty International. 2022. [Death in slow motion: Women and girls under Taliban rule](#). Research. 27 July 2022; OHCHR.

2023. Report of the Special Rapporteur.

102. UNICEF (United Nations Children’s Fund). 2023. [Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey 2022-2023](#).

103. This modelling demonstrates the risks of detrimental consequences within a five year time frame (2021-2026) if there is no change in DFA policies about education of girls and women after grade six: UN Women. Forthcoming. Statistical modelling.

104. Spotlight Initiative Afghanistan. Study on Prevention.

105. Amnesty International. Death in slow motion; Rawadiri. 2023. [The Human Rights Situation of Children in Afghanistan: Violations of Civil and Political Rights. August 2021 – October 2023](#). November 2023.

KEY ISSUE: ENSURING FREEDOM FROM ALL FORMS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

and nutrition.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, early motherhood tends to lead to increased risk of maternal mortality and morbidity, delays in early childhood development, and impediments to a woman's and girl's empowerment and financial autonomy.¹⁰⁷ **Statistical modelling shows the ban on Afghan girls education after primary school is estimated to be associated with an increase of the rate of early childbearing by 45 per cent, with consequential intergenerational negative social, emotion and economic consequences.**¹⁰⁸

A form of sexual violence and exploitation against Afghan boys which has been extensively documented is the practice of *bacha bazi* – a form of indentured sexual slavery in which boys are systematically exploited and violated by older men.¹⁰⁹ This practice was criminalized in the revised Penal Code in 2017, which came into effect in February 2018.¹¹⁰

Bacha bazi has been notoriously difficult to monitor, as it is practiced discreetly (particularly since its criminalization), mainly by higher-ranking, well-connected Afghan men. While the Taliban outlawed this practice during the period of Taliban regime rule between 1996 and 2001, it has not been explicitly addressed by the DFA since their seizure of State power in August 2021. Conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) by armed actors in Afghanistan has been well documented by the United Nations, INGOs and CSOs for several decades.¹¹¹ **In 2022, UNAMA verified 30 cases of conflict-related sexual violence, affecting 16 girls and 14 boys.**¹¹² Throughout the decades of war in Afghanistan, Afghan and US security forces, the Taliban and other armed groups have been

implicated in various incidents of conflict-related sexual violence.¹¹³ These cases have included acts of rape, forced marriage, sexual exploitation, sexual violence in detention and *bacha bazi*. These types of sexual violence continue to be reported under the DFA, although their verification is challenging. High ongoing levels of displacement – driven by conflict as well as climate and economic stressors – increase the risk of sexual violence against women and girls, who are particularly vulnerable when in transit or collecting food and water, and are put at particular risk by inadequate camp facilities, including unsafe shelters.¹¹⁴ Like other crises contexts – CRSV does not occur in a vacuum, it is part of a broader continuum of GBV.

Justice and redress options

Patriarchal gender norms are a key hurdle to Afghan women and girls obtaining justice and redress.

These norms have led to widespread tolerance and normalization (among both men and women) of GBV against women and girls, and the perception that violence within the household should remain a private matter.¹¹⁵ Stigma and the occurrence of GBV in private spaces often render it invisible, denied and undocumented. Women are regularly double-victimised, facing social and legal repercussions after reporting an incident – they risk being charged with so-called “moral crimes” such as “running away”

106. Spotlight Initiative. Study on Protection Mechanisms; Global Protection Cluster. 2023. [Afghanistan: Protection Analysis Update](#). February.

107. UNICEF. 2021. [Early Childbearing](#).

108. UN Women. Forthcoming. Statistical modelling.

109. Borile, S. 2019. “*Bacha Bazi: cultural norms and violence against poor children in Afghanistan*.” *International Review of Sociology*, 29(3), pp. 498–507; Bertha, C. 2018. “*The Difficult Case of “Bacha Bazi”*.” *Journal of Military Ethics*, 17 (1), pp. 79–80.

110. Between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021, the Ministry of Interior reported referring 237 cases of *bacha bazi* to the Attorney General's Office: US Department of State. 2021. [2021 Trafficking in Persons Report](#). June 2021; Shajjan, S. J. 2018. “*The revised Afghanistan criminal code: an end for Bacha Bazi?*” LSE Blog. 24 January.

111. See successive reporting by UNAMA, available from: <https://unama.unmissions.org/women%27s-rights-reports>.

112. The number of verified cases should be understood to reflect merely a fraction of overall cases: UNSC. 2023. [Report of the Secretary-General on conflict-related sexual violence](#). 22 June. S/2023/413.

113. United Nations. 2020. [Conflict-Related Sexual Violence: Report of the UN Secretary General](#). 3 June 2020. S/2020/487; ICC. 2017. [Situation in Afghanistan: Summary of the Prosecutor's Request for authorisation of an investigation pursuant to article 15](#); SIGAR (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction). 2017. [Child sexual assault in Afghanistan: Implementation of the Leahy laws and reports of assault by Afghan Security Forces](#). United States Department of Defense; HRW (Human Rights Watch). 2003. “*Killing you is a very easy thing for us*”: [human rights abuses in southeast Afghanistan](#).” Report. 28 July 2003.

114. GIHA. 2023. [Rapid Gender Analysis Afghanistan](#). (forthcoming).

115. At least one third of respondents to a 2023 survey reported that violence against women can be justified. The most common reasons cited as justification for violence against women were “going out without permission” and “neglecting children”. The view that such violence should remain a private matter was disproportionately supported by Afghan men (72.1 per cent, compared to 59.2 per cent of women) and Afghans in rural areas (70 per cent, compared to 55.3 per cent of urban dwellers): Spotlight Initiative. Study on Protection Mechanisms.

KEY ISSUE: ENSURING FREEDOM FROM ALL FORMS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

or *zina*.¹¹⁶ Reporting GBV can also lead to social ostracization, expulsion from the home, and loss of child custody.¹¹⁷

Under the GoIRA, the 2009 Law on Elimination of Violence against Women was enacted to end impunity for GBV against women and girls. **The EVAW Law criminalized 22 acts of GBV against women and girls – including forced and underage marriage, rape, family and intimate partner violence, and the trading of women and girls¹¹⁸ – and established specialized EVAW prosecution offices in all 34 provinces of Afghanistan.¹¹⁹** However, despite these legal reforms and mechanisms, widespread impunity and normalization of GBV against Afghan women and girls persisted and continued to be reported.¹²⁰ This was found to be due to systemic failures of due diligence by authorities in investigating and prosecuting perpetrators of GBV against women and girls, including in “honour killings” and other murder cases of women and girls, and the coercion of survivors of violence into withdrawing complaints and “consenting” to mediation, reflecting a countrywide culture of impunity for such crimes against women and girls.¹²¹ While legal developments were critical in creating visibility for GBV and entry points for survivors, they were ultimately insufficient in themselves to end this type of violence.

After August 2021, the DFA initiated a legal review to examine existing laws for compliance with their vision and interpretation of sharia, creating uncertainty over the applicability of laws around GBV. The DFA subsequently dissolved the judicial architecture related to the EVAW Law – including the EVAW-specific offices, roles and mandates, removing a legal framework under which to prosecute cases of violence against women. These actions have reinforced the pervasive impunity for such criminal acts and leave Afghan women with few dispute resolution options. Expression of this dynamic could soon be seen, with, by mid-2022, none of the 87 incidents of GBV against women and girls documented by UNAMA in the preceding year (including two “honour killings”) having been legally prosecuted.¹²²

While female survivors still have outlets available to them to report incidents of GBV to DFA representatives, they are in practice discouraged from seeking help and reporting such cases, due to increasingly regressive patriarchal norms and stigma, a lack of women to report to, and increasing restrictions impacting women’s and girl’s access to the justice system. Women’s and girl’s access to the justice system is being severely curtailed by limitations on their freedom of movement, reliance on male family members (who may be the perpetrators of violence), and the absence of women lawyers and judges able to work in the legal system, as well as the absence of capacity within the DFA system to prosecute and adjudicate GBV cases in line with international standards.¹²³ Those women who have already managed to secure legal education have been removed from the justice system. Immediately following the Taliban takeover, women judges were dismissed en masse and women lawyers face significant obstacles to practise, including non-renewal of law licences and prohibitions to take bar exams.¹²⁴

The prevalence of the male-dominated *shura* structure serves to further limit the ability of women to access the judicial system in Afghanistan. These *shura* councils are linked to the formal judicial system, with, in some instances, councils being founded to first decide whether an issue merits judicial investigation. More commonly, cases are referred to informal justice mechanisms (of which *shura* structures form a part), which often results in mediation that ultimately sees the survivor forced to return to the residence occupied by the perpetrator of the abuse, as the overriding goal tends to be the maintenance of community cohesion rather than women’s safety. These risks keep many women and children trapped in cycles of violence, affecting all dimensions of life – mental and physical health, parenting, social cohesion, and economic productivity and livelihood.¹²⁵ The absence of women *shuras* that previously existed only compounds these issues.

Since August 2021, some *de facto* courts have been reconsidering the validity of divorces granted under the Republic for compliance with sharia, resulting in some divorced women being forced to return

116. UNAMA, OHCHR. In Search of Justice; UNAMA. Human Rights.

117. Larson and Coburn. Solidarity, Strength.

118. UNAMA, OHCHR. 2018. Injustice and Impunity.

119. United Nations. Conflict-Related Sexual Violence.

120. UNAMA, OHCHR. 2018. Injustice and Impunity.

121. Ibid.

122. UNAMA. Human Rights.

123. Gehrig. M. 2022. Legal and justice system changes and implications for gender equality and women’s rights in Afghanistan. Kabul: UN Women.

124. Ibid.

125. WHO. Violence Against Women Prevalence.

KEY ISSUE: ENSURING FREEDOM FROM ALL FORMS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

to dangerous situations.¹²⁶ A 30 March 2023 edict allowing *de facto* judges to review and adjudicate those civil and criminal cases that had not been finalized up to the Supreme Court level at the time of the August 2021 takeover will also impact divorce cases, which will be adjudicated based on a restrictive interpretation of sharia.

Key findings

- **GBV against women and girls has historically been pervasive** in Afghanistan, and since the Taliban takeover, the risk factors for GBV have increased and legal protection and supported services have been dismantled and driven underground.
- **The DFA have abolished the ERAW Law and protection support infrastructure and targeted the curtailment of women's and girls' rights and freedoms**, leaving women and girls with few avenues to obtain justice or protection, and fostering conditions of gender inequities which could encourage GBV.
- **Protection services and actors working on GBV face additional difficulties in continuing their operations**, due both to a lack of women staff (resulting from the DFA ban and the high proportion of existing female staff in the sector) and the sensitive nature of the area in the eyes of DFA officials limiting opportunities to negotiate exemptions.
- **The absence of women in community governance and dispute resolution structures**, like *shuras*, further limits the ability of survivors of GBV to access opportunities for redress and justice in Afghanistan.

Recommendations

1. **ADVOCATE for the reestablishment of a legal framework and judicial infrastructure in line with international standards** that protect women and girls, bans all forms of GBV, and punish perpetrators.
2. **SUPPORT social and behavioural change interventions aimed at preventing violence** and push back against the normalization of negative coping mechanisms, such as child, early and forced marriage.
3. **ADVOCATE for the comprehensive implementation of the DFA prohibition on forced and child marriage**, and the practice of *baad*, and advocate for its expansion to include a minimum age for marriage, in line with international standards.
4. **ENSURE that funding of women's CSOs working on GBV issues takes into account the guidance provided above** (see the sub-section "*Challenges and opportunities for Afghan women's civil society*") to deliver flexible, accessible funding, keeping women's organizations operational and developing organizational capacities, including to those that are unregistered and unbanked.

126. OHCHR. 2023. Report of the Special Rapporteur, para. 83.

KEY ISSUE: HEALTH, INCLUDING PROMOTING OF SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS

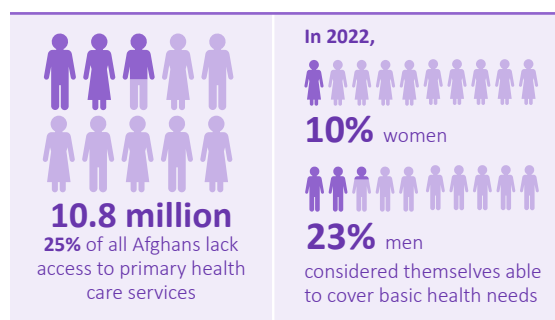
II. Health, including promoting of sexual and reproductive health and rights

Access to health services

Access to health services in Afghanistan is currently undermined by a systemic lack of resources (including facilities, medicine and equipment) and capacity, particularly in rural areas, requiring a near total dependency of the health system on donor funding. The cost of care and medicine is also prohibitive, given the current economic hardship facing the overwhelming majority of Afghans. In 2022, approx. one quarter of all Afghans (10.8 million people) lacked access to basic primary health-care services.¹²⁷ Auxiliary costs for patients, such as for transportation and accommodation, constitute additional barriers to Afghans accessing timely and adequate health care, particularly for those who live in rural areas and women, who must cover the extra cost of a *mahram* when seeking services. Indeed, barriers to accessing health care disproportionately affect women yet sex disaggregated data on access to health services and health needs are difficult to come by.

In 2022, only 10 per cent of Afghan women surveyed indicated being able to cover their basic health needs with the health services available to them, compared with 23 per cent of Afghan men.¹²⁸ Under the DFA decrees currently in force, women face additional economic hardship and restrictions on their mobility. In some provinces of Afghanistan, *mahram* requirements apply to both women health staff throughout their shift (in Kandahar) and women patients for the duration of their stay at health facilities, including inside the operating room (in Herat).¹²⁹

Women and girls with disabilities face additional barriers to accessing health services due to an even higher likelihood of mobility restrictions and social isolation as a result of the intersection of gender discrimination and stigma and barriers associated



Source: OCHA.2022; WHO.2022.

with their disability.¹³⁰ They are also more likely to experience higher rates of violence, and have less access to reproductive health care, even being at risk of forced sterilization.¹³¹

Restrictive gender norms in Afghanistan have long limited women's access to health care. Afghan women often lack the power to make health-related decisions impacting their lives, due to conservative gender norms placing responsibility on men for decisions affecting the health of women and children in their families. Gender norms also reduce the health-seeking behaviour of women during moments of resource scarcity as they are socialized to prioritize the well-being of others over themselves. Women's lack of autonomy and mobility in many areas of Afghanistan also result in delays and obstacles to accessing health care. This disparity was seen in the disproportionate number of Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) cases recorded – **Health Ministry data in 2020 showed women as comprising only 27 per cent of COVID-19 cases, indicating that women were less likely to be brought to health facilities when suffering from COVID-19.**¹³²

In more conservative areas, gender norms often require women patients to be treated only by women health-care workers, whom currently make up less than 30 per cent of health workers in Afghanistan and are mainly concentrated in urban areas.¹³³ The brain drain immediately following the Taliban takeover had already depleted key health professions of women specialists, especially in specialized care related to reproductive health. More female specialists in the

127. OCHA. Humanitarian Needs Overview 2022.

128. Ground Truth Solutions. 2022. [Protecting and improving healthcare: Community insights from Afghanistan](#). Awaaz Afghanistan, WHO. June 2022.

129. GiHA. (forthcoming). Rapid Gender Analysis 2023.

130. Human Rights Watch. 2020. ["Disability Is Not Weakness": Discrimination and Barriers Facing Women and Girls with Disabilities in Afghanistan](#).

131. OCHA. Humanitarian Response Plan: Humanitarian Programme Cycle 2023.

132. Glinski, S. ["Afghanistan's missing coronavirus patients: Women"](#). The New Humanitarian. News. 24 June 2020.

133. OCHA. 2023. Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023.

KEY ISSUE: HEALTH, INCLUDING PROMOTING OF SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS

fields of obstetrics and mental health are particularly needed given the high-level of maternal mortality in Afghanistan. Indeed, there is a distinct risk that the current numbers of women health workers in Afghanistan will significantly decrease, as these workers face significant obstacles in fulfilling their roles, and their replacement in the Afghan health system will be obstructed by DFA bans on girls and women attending secondary and tertiary education and training institutions. While the ban on Afghan women working for NGOs in Afghanistan exempts women health workers, these other restrictions targeting women stand to have a significant impact on the health outcomes for women now and for future generations to come.

Although exemptions do currently exist for the education of girls in health and medical schools, the ban on women's secondary and tertiary education closes the pipeline for newly qualified women health workers, meaning that, **should this dynamic continue in the long term, fewer and fewer domestically trained female health workers would enter the sector (and, eventually, none at all)**. In-service training to maintain or upgrade professional qualifications for women health workers is also being restricted, which will, over time, widen the gender gap between men and women in the health sector. Together, these limitations on education and training not only affect access to health services, but also the quality of health services available to all Afghans, particularly women and girls. This decreased inflow risks further weakening the Afghan health system as a whole and not only reducing capacity but also the quality of service, especially for women and girls. Should no redress of the situation be provided, this may ultimately lead to primary, secondary and tertiary health care becoming wholly unavailable to Afghanistan's women and girls.¹³⁴ In short, the DFA's decisions do not only impact the health outcomes of women and girls today, but also that of generations to come.

Sexual and reproductive health

Already in 2020, Afghanistan had one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world.¹³⁵

Since the Taliban takeover, maternal mortality and morbidity risks have only increased, in tandem with greater prevalence of poverty, mobility restrictions and a weakening health-care sector. Statistical modelling shows the ban on education for girls and women after primary school is estimated to be associated with an increase of the risk of maternal mortality by at least 50 per cent.¹³⁶ This estimate does not take into account the impact that the ban on education has in stemming the flow of new female health workers, and the perverse effect this will have – in combination with gender segregation – in limiting women's access to female doctors and thus to health services more broadly.

Mobility restrictions increasingly force mothers to give birth at home rather than in hospital delivery rooms.¹³⁷

A study conducted in 2022 among public and private health facilities in five Afghan urban centres showed perceptions among health professionals of an increase in maternal, infant and child mortality since August 2021.¹³⁸ Data gaps remain both on shifts in maternal mortality and on maternal morbidity (short- and long-term health problems resulting from pregnancy and giving birth). The shortage of women doctors, nurses and midwives that will only worsen under current restrictions, risks further increasing maternal mortality and morbidity in Afghanistan.

Women and girls in rural areas face additional complications in this regard, for many of whom timely antenatal care – which can help to mitigate

134. ACAPS (Assessment Capacities Project). 2023. [Spotlight on social impact: November 2022- February 2023](#). Thematic report. 12 April 2023.

135. 2020 is the most recent year for which data are available. Afghanistan's maternal mortality rate was 620 deaths for every 100,000 live births: WHO. 2022. Maternity Mortality Ratio. Available from: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.STA.MMRT?locations=AF>.

136. UN Women. Forthcoming. Statistical modelling.

137. Qaderi, S., Ahmadi, A. and D. E. Lucero-Prisco III. 2021. "Afghanistan: Taliban's Return Imperils Maternal Health." *Nature* 597, p. 495, 21 September.

138. Some 36.6 per cent of respondents reported their perception that mortality had "increased a lot", in surveys conducted between February and April 2022: Rubenstein, L., Jalazai, R., Spiegel, P. and N. Glass. 2023. "The crisis of maternal and child health in Afghanistan." *The Lancet* 401 (10371), pp. 87–90.

KEY ISSUE: HEALTH, INCLUDING PROMOTING OF SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS

pregnancy-related complications and prevent maternal and neonatal deaths – is not a feasible option. Each month, this reality affects the approximately 24,000 women who give birth in hard-to-reach areas of Afghanistan.¹³⁹ Unsurprisingly, those Afghan provinces severely affected by conflict between 2001 and 2021 reportedly have significantly higher maternal mortality and morbidity ratios.¹⁴⁰ Poor hygiene and menstrual health – worsened under current restrictions to women’s access to bathhouses and independent mobility – can also have severe negative effects on sexual and reproductive health for Afghan women and girls.¹⁴¹ **Food insecurity and malnutrition among pregnant and lactating women has increased since 2021, representing higher risks for themselves and their children, through premature births and/or potential deficiencies or disabilities.**¹⁴²

Women’s and girl’s agency and decision-making around sexual and reproductive health is constrained under DFA policies and practices, as well as cultural sensitivities. Typically, interaction between a woman health-care provider and a woman beneficiary can take place during a one-to-one interaction. Yet, in some areas, a *mahram* is required to be present during the consultation, limiting the ability of women to seek advice on sexual and reproductive health or contraception, or report incidents of domestic violence. While access to contraceptives is not formally banned, the level of access to these products is closely linked to the provincial context, with some provinces being more restrictive in this regard than others.

While adolescence carries new health considerations for both girls and boys, girls often face gender-specific vulnerabilities, including child marriage, early pregnancy, pregnancy frequency and associated health hazards, as well as maternal and infant mortality, many of which can have lifelong consequences. As noted above in the section on gender-based violence, rates of child marriage are high in Afghanistan. Further exacerbating these risks is the fact that sexual and reproductive health information and services often remain scarce and underfunded and difficult to access for large parts of this population group.

Mental health

The current humanitarian, political, and social context in Afghanistan appears to have sparked an acute mental health crisis, particularly among women and girls, whose distressing situation has given rise to a sense of hopelessness, anxiety and despair.

Mental health was recognized by the GoIRA as a critical issue affecting Afghans, after years of protracted violence and intergenerational trauma. The democratic government had set out a road map under the National Mental Health Strategy (2019–2023) for addressing urgent challenges – largely comprised by those same barriers facing the health-care system more broadly.¹⁴³

Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services are a critical component for safe delivery of basic services and humanitarian response and are a central component of GBV and protection programming.¹⁴⁴ MHPSS delivery in the Afghan context however has been debilitated by the DFA restrictions on civil society, limited number of trained and skilled mental health professionals in the public health system, funding cuts, and low investment in mental health interventions including drug and substance abuse. Moreover, stigma around accessing MHPSS services exacerbates the existing challenges encountered by the women and men of Afghanistan in accessing health services (*as noted in sub-section on “Access to health services”*).

Data on mental health issues in the Afghan context are difficult to obtain, in part due to the stigma typically associated with mental health as well as limited investment in evidence generation and mental health data collection. One conservative estimate suggested that, in 2018, 6 per cent of the population

139. OCHA. 2023. Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023.

140. Mirzazada, S. et al. 2020. [“Impact of Conflict on Maternal and Child Health Service Delivery: A Country Case Study of Afghanistan.”](#) Conflict and Health 14, 38.

141. World Bank, [“Menstrual health and hygiene”](#), 12 May 2022.

142. Doctors Without Borders. 2023. [Persistent Barriers to Access Healthcare](#); OCHA. 2023. Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023.

143. Ministry of Public Health of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. 2019. [National Strategy for Mental Health \(2019-2023\)](#).

144. GBV programming requires an operational referral system for survivors and family members, of which MHPSS must be an integral part.

KEY ISSUE: HEALTH, INCLUDING PROMOTING OF SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS

had war-related mental health problems.¹⁴⁵ **Among adolescents, mental health problems increase, with 23 per cent of adolescent girls and boys aged 10–14 and 20.2 per cent aged 15–17 reporting anxiety, and nearly 14 per cent of adolescents aged 10–14 reporting depression.**¹⁴⁶ The compounding political, economic and humanitarian crises currently affecting Afghans will likely have only worsened existing conditions, with disproportionate strain placed on Afghanistan's women and adolescent girls and boys.

Indeed, grave concern for the mental health of Afghanistan's women is becoming increasingly widespread, in part due to the social isolation they are being forced to endure,¹⁴⁷ and the additional barriers they face in using positive coping strategies. The options available to Afghan women for managing their mental health continue to contract, in tandem with their shrinking free access to public spaces, social connections and community programmes. Gender norms in Afghanistan also dictate that women are less likely than men to be perceived as being "justified" in experiencing mental health issues in part due to the caregiving role ascribed to women.¹⁴⁸ Mental health conditions among men and women also increase the likelihood that women and children will face situations of domestic violence (*see the sub-section "Gender-based violence"*).

Key mental health concerns in the current Afghan context include anxiety, depression, post-natal depression, and the increased prevalence of suicide and suicidal ideation. Although difficult to verify, some reports suggest an increase in suicide among Afghan women and girls.¹⁴⁹ In a March 2023 survey, 48 per cent of respondents indicated knowing at least one woman or girl who had suffered from anxiety or depression since August 2021 and, alarmingly, 8 per cent of respondents indicated knowing a woman or girl who

145. See: Lee, J. 2018. *Afghanistan: A history from 1260 to the present*. London: Reaktion Books. Lee cites a Ministry of Health report which states that 6 per cent of the population suffers from war-related mental health problems.

146. UNICEF. 2023. [Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey 2022-2023](#).

147. A June 2023 study found that 15 per cent of women surveyed had not met once with women outside their immediate family in the preceding three months, and 31 per cent had met with other women less than once per month during the time frame: UN Women, UNAMA, IOM. 2023. [Situation of Afghan women – Summary report of country-wide women's consultations](#).

148. IOM. Mental Health.

149. Ibid

A SURVEY CONDUCTED BY OHCHR IN MARCH 2023 INDICATED THAT...



68% respondents knew at least one woman or girl who had suffered from anxiety or depression

8% respondents knew at least one woman or girl who had attempted suicide

Source: OHCHR.2023.

had attempted suicide.¹⁵⁰ **Already in 2018, reports suggested that up to 80 per cent of people who committed suicide in Afghanistan were women.**¹⁵¹

Afghan women's psychological distress is being fuelled by restrictions on their rights and freedoms as well as the current humanitarian and economic crises.¹⁵² Media reports commonly cite domestic violence, absence of sufficient support for women survivors of abuse, and poverty as reasons for individual suicides.¹⁵³

Suicidal ideation and suicide among men is also reportedly increasing, alongside an increase in substance abuse.¹⁵⁴ The economic crisis in particular has severely limited the ability of men in Afghanistan to fulfil their socially expected role as provider for the family, adversely impacting the sense of self-worth of many Afghan men and leading to increased prevalence of negative coping mechanisms and drug use among this group.

150. DROPS. 2023. [Bishnaw March 2023 Survey: Impact of Taliban Restrictions on Afghan Women's Economic Conditions and mental Health](#).

151. It should be noted that this is contrary to worldwide trends, where more males commit suicide than females: Safi S. 2018. ["Why Female Suicide in Afghanistan is So Prevalent."](#) BBC News. Asia. 1 July 2018.

152. UN Women, IOM, UNAMA. Forthcoming. Quarterly consultations with Afghan women.

153. Nader, Z. and Zan Times reporters. 2023 ["Despair is settling in": female suicides on rise in Taliban's Afghanistan.](#) The Guardian. World. 28 August 2023; TOLO News. 2022. ["Attempted Suicide Cases, Mostly of Women, Rise in Badakhshan."](#) Afghanistan. 16 May 2022; Khan, H. 2022. ["The families losing their loved ones to hunger suicide in Afghanistan."](#) Prospect. 9 March 2022; and Safi. "Why Female Suicide."

154. Restrictive gender norms mean that the social stigma and shame of drug use is higher for women, making drug use socially more costly and thus less likely for women than men: IOM. Mental Health.

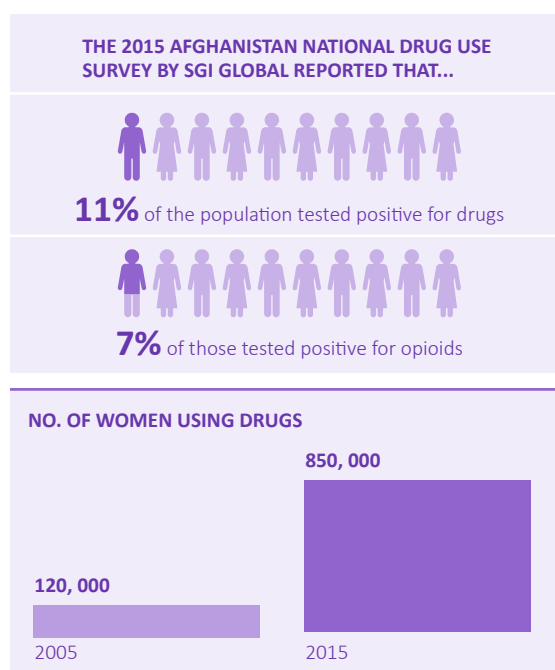
KEY ISSUE: HEALTH, INCLUDING PROMOTING OF SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS

Drug demand reduction

Drug use in Afghanistan is high – with 2015 estimates suggesting that some 11 per cent of the population tested positive for drugs, with 7 per cent testing positive for opioids and rural areas disproportionately represented among these figures.¹⁵⁵

Opium production has reportedly declined by 95 per cent due to DFA efforts to eradicate its production, transportation and use, while methamphetamine production and trafficking continues to surge.¹⁵⁶ While there are no accurate data available on the rate of drug use among Afghans under DFA rule, risk factors for initiating drug use have substantially increased since the Taliban seized power.¹⁵⁷ The DFA have taken a hardline approach, forcibly rounding up people perceived to use drugs and bringing them to compulsory drug treatment centres with limited access to health and sanitation services.¹⁵⁸

The number of women in Afghanistan using drugs was estimated at 850,000 in 2015, an exponential increase from the 120,000 recorded in 2005.¹⁵⁹ The three most common drugs that women use are opioids (6.7 per cent), sedatives (1.5 per cent) and cannabis (1.5 per cent). Another significant challenge is that among women who use opium, 78 per cent reported having given opium to their children or another family



Source: US Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs. 2015. *Afghanistan National Drug Survey 2015*.

member.¹⁶⁰ With a high fertility rate, large household size, and women's position as the main caregiver, a woman's substance use can have a radiating effect and compromise family stability. Active, harmful substance use by any household member can be destabilizing for a family, particularly in Afghanistan, which lacks any enforced child protection system to ensure that children are physically and mentally safe.¹⁶¹

Drug use was found to be particularly prevalent among widows, unemployed women and women with low levels of education. Afghan women who take drugs are often introduced to these drugs by a male relative¹⁶² and use of illicit substances is prevalent among Afghan women as a means of self-medication to treat physical pain, particularly in rural areas, where access to health services is limited. Given this dynamic, women's access to adequate health services is likely to impact use of painkillers as a means of self-medication

155. Nine per cent in rural areas compared with 3 per cent in urban areas. This figure does not necessarily reflect active drug use, but rather the prevalence of biological samples showing drug exposure. These are the most recent accurate figures on drug use prevalence: The Colombo Plan. 2016. [Afghanistan National Drug Use Survey 2015](#).

156. UNODC. 2023. [Afghanistan opium survey 2023](#). UNODC Policy Brief.

157. Risk factors had been high for decades prior to the Taliban takeover: cheap and easy availability of drugs, limited access to drug treatment unstable economic conditions, insecurity, displacement, and high prevalence of mental health issues.

158. Bewley-Taylor D, Eventon R, Southwell M. [From bad to worse? Drug use and treatment in Afghanistan](#). Policy brief 19.

159. Drug use among children also increased during this period: Momand A.S. and H. E. Jones. 2022. ["Drug Use Among Women and Children in Afghanistan: The Complexities of An Important Public Health Issue."](#) HSOA Journal of Addiction and Addiction Disorders 7 (1), p. 33.

160. US Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs. 2015. *Afghanistan national drug survey 2015*. <https://colombo-plan.org/wpcontent/uploads/2020/03/Afghanistan-National-Drug-Use-Survey-2015-compressed.pdf> (accessed Aug 20, 2023).

161. Momand AS, & Jones HE. (2020). Drug Use Among Women and Children in Afghanistan: The Complexities of An Important Public Health Issue. *HSOA J Addict Addict Disord*. 7(1):033. PMID: 32226928; PMCID: PMC7100898.

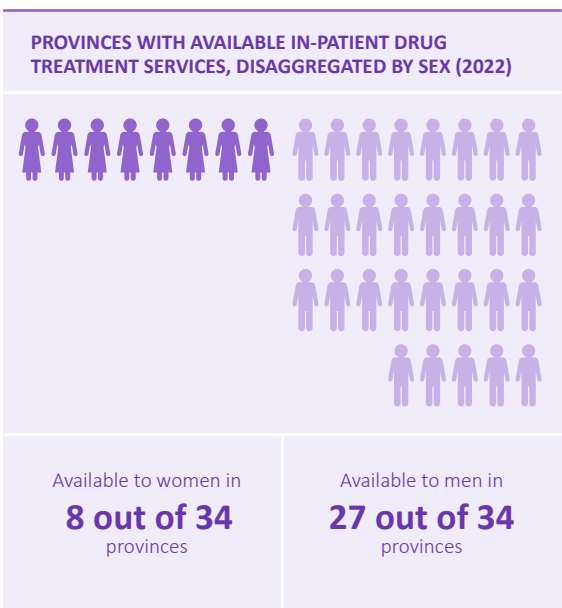
162. Momand A.S. and H. E. Jones. 2022.

KEY ISSUE: HEALTH, INCLUDING PROMOTING OF SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS

and subsequent drug use. Drug use is also linked to GBV; it is a major contributing factor to violence against women, and women who are experiencing violence are also more likely to initiate or increase substance use.¹⁶³

Although men constitute the majority of people in Afghanistan who use drugs, prevailing gender norms and restrictions mean that women’s drug use is more likely to be stigmatized and subsequently largely hidden, with those women who abuse drugs and may benefit from addiction treatment thus also remaining disproportionately untreated, compared to their male counterparts. Since August 2021, many drug treatment centres have closed across Afghanistan, leaving women with significantly less access to treatment than men.¹⁶⁴ The ban on women working for NGOs also impacts the ability of women to seek help. In December 2022, in-patient services available to women were operational in only eight Afghan provinces (those available to men were operational in 27 provinces).¹⁶⁵

Furthermore, **access to the centres in those eight provinces who offer in-patient drug treatment services for women, remain out of reach for most women who use drugs and live in those provinces, due to the gendered stigma around drug use and the cost and logistics of long-distance travel** (in addition to requiring accompaniment by a *mahram*). Interventions targeting drug use among Afghanistan’s women are ongoing yet face particular operational constraints in negotiating access and approvals by the DFA, due to the prevalence of particular gender norms stigmatizing drug use among women.



Source: UNODC Assessment.2022.

Many Afghan youth, particularly adolescents, have sustained serious psychological trauma and have resorted to substance use as a result of the impact of prolonged conflict on them and their environment. Differences in drug use between Afghan boys and girls mirror those between which exist between Afghan men and women – boys are more likely to use drugs than girls on the whole, and when girls do use drugs, they are more likely to use opioids and sedatives.¹⁶⁶

163. Simonelli, A., Pasquali, C. E. and F. De Palo. 2014. “Intimate partner violence and drug-addicted women: from explicative models to gender-oriented treatment.” *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 5 (1), 24496, September.

164. Mapping exercises in 2015 and 2022 showed 68 centres overall reduced to 53 centres providing residential or in-patient services, and 34 centres providing outpatient services decreasing to 17 centres. Those centres still operating lack human and financial resources, essential medicine, adequate supply of nutritious food, sufficient access to clean drinking water and electricity: The Colombo Plan. Afghanistan National Drug; a WHO/UNODC substance use disorder treatment facility survey was carried out by UNODC in December 2022.

165. Namely, Badakhshan, Balkh, Farah, Herat, Jawzjan, Kabul, Nangarhar and Bamyān provinces (which became recently operational). These in-patient services were offered by the DFA and NGOs. Out-patient services are offered entirely by NGOs and are available in seven provinces, for both men and women, based on the UNODC assessment conducted in December 2022; comment made during interview on 5 November 2023 with expert on drug use in Afghanistan.

166. Twelve per cent of 13-18 years olds (14 per cent of boys and 8.5 per cent of girls) reported using a substance (including alcohol) at least once in the preceding 12 months: UNODC. 2018. [Study on Substance Use and Health among Youth in Afghanistan 2018](#).

KEY ISSUE: HEALTH, INCLUDING PROMOTING OF SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS

Key findings

- **Restrictions on women's mobility (including mahram requirements) and patriarchal gender norms place additional barriers on women's and girls' access to an already weak and ill-equipped health system.** Underinvestment in the public health system and donor dependency, including mental health services, has long impacted on women's and girls' access to equitable, quality, affordable, accessible and acceptable health services.
- **The pipeline of new women health workers is being severely narrowed due to bans on girls' education,** meaning that over time, primary, secondary, tertiary, and life-saving health care may become wholly unavailable to Afghan women.
- **Maternal mortality rates in Afghanistan are among the highest worldwide,** with risk factors on the rise and the number of female reproductive health professionals decreasing. Women and adolescent girls in rural areas are particularly affected. High rates of adolescent fertility, driven by increases in child and early marriages exacerbate risks, compounded by limited access to comprehensive, age-differentiated information and services on contraception and family planning.
- **Afghan women are suffering under the weight of an acute and growing mental health crisis,** with the current humanitarian and economic crises adding to trauma arising from decades of conflict. Restrictions on women's rights and freedoms have created a pervasive sense of hopelessness and despair among women and girls, and, perversely, effectively eliminate opportunities to access MHPSS services and establish positive mental health strategies.
- While most drug users in Afghanistan are men, **women face particular, gendered stigma around drug use.** The impact of this stigma is combining with ongoing restrictions on women's mobility and a reduction in the availability of drug treatment facilities to increase the likelihood that drug use among Afghanistan's women remains largely hidden, and addiction untreated.

Recommendations

1. **INVEST in increased equitable and accessible health service-delivery and distribution,** in particular at the community level and directing attention towards rural areas, women, adolescent girls and children, and underfunded services like MHPSS.
2. **ADVOCATE for the removal of decrees restricting girls and women's education in health-related fields,** particularly for health training institutes and in-service training, and support the low-profile development of adaptive interventions, including via mobile teams and online services.
3. **PRIORITIZE the expansion of access to evidence-based, human rights-oriented, and gender-sensitive mental health services and treatment for drug use disorders and prevention.** To effectively address these problems, it is essential to continue to simultaneously address the underlying social, economic and security issues and raise awareness around the harms of drug use.
4. **ADVOCATE for and support increased data collection** and data availability in the health sector to build a solid evidence base ensuring that, while taking safety precautions, research is made publicly available in English, Dari and Pashto.
5. **INVEST in building the capacity of local authorities, service-providers and programme managers** to understand the equity and gender gaps and implement programmes and services for the most marginalized communities, following a holistic family approach, which will also benefit women.
6. **ADVOCATE for the expansion of exemptions for girls and women's education in health-related fields,** particularly for health training institutes and in-service training, to ensure delivery of trauma-informed, survivor-centred care.

KEY ISSUE: STRENGTHENING ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RIGHTS AND EMPOWERING GIRLS AND WOMEN

III. Strengthening economic and social rights and empowering girls and women

Women's employment

Women in Afghanistan have historically been largely excluded from the labour market. Although the numbers of women participating in the national workforce increased between 2001 and 2021, employment rates for women remained significantly lower than for men.

In 2021, women made up only 23.3 per cent of the labour force in Afghanistan.¹⁶⁷ In response to widespread poverty, women's labour force participation in Afghanistan is at an all-time high – with 45 per cent reporting participation in the labour market.¹⁶⁸

However, it should be noted that this figure is largely due to the dire economic and humanitarian situation in country, rather than a shift in social norms or attitudes. Indeed women report limiting their employment efforts to DFA-approved and socially acceptable forms, such as home-based work in feminized industries, such as embroidery and handicrafts. The figure includes unemployed female job-seekers and as a result does not reflect an improvement in women's employment situation as such. The overall figures for unemployment have more than doubled since the Taliban takeover.¹⁶⁹

Women's overall employment rate decreased disproportionately to that for men in 2022, falling by 25 per cent by the end of the year (relative to June 2021), compared to a decline of 7 per cent for men.¹⁷⁰ This highlights the targeted impact of DFA restrictions and practices.¹⁷¹ Young women are particularly affected, with youth employment also estimated to have



Source: ILOSTAT; ILO.2023.

decreased by 25 per cent between August 2021 and December 2022.¹⁷² Close to one in three young Afghan males are currently unemployed, creating economic challenges as well as ramifications in terms of social cohesion.¹⁷³

Under the current *de facto* authorities, opportunities for women's livelihoods continue to be whittled away and increasingly shaped around traditional gender norms.¹⁷⁴ Central to the DFA targeted measures in this regard have been the order for women government workers to stay home, encouraged to send a male relative in their stead (August 2022); the ban on Afghan women working for NGOs (December 2022), and the extension of this ban to include UN entities (April 2023); and the closure order on beauty salons (July 2023). As noted in the sub-section on "*Gender-responsive humanitarian response*", **the number of women working for NGOs in Afghanistan stood at more than 15,000 in December 2022, with reports indicating that more than 60,000 women worked in beauty salons across Afghanistan.**¹⁷⁵ In certain sectors such as health and education, where the DFA have made exemptions allowing women to work, women are still not represented in the same numbers as men

167. With men making up the remaining 76.7 per cent: ILO. Labour Force Survey. Available at: <https://ilostat ilo.org/data/#>.

168. World Bank. 2022. [Afghanistan Welfare Monitoring Survey](#).

169. The World Bank. 2023. [Afghanistan Welfare Monitoring Survey: Round 3](#).

170. ILO. 2023. Employment in Afghanistan in 2022: A rapid impact assessment. ILO Brief. March.

171. Ibid.

172. ILO. 2023. Employment in Afghanistan in 2022: A rapid impact assessment. ILO Brief. March 2023.

173. The World Bank. 2023. Afghanistan Welfare.

174. Cited by more than 70 per cent of female-headed households, in comparison to 12 per cent of male-headed households: UNDP. [Afghanistan Socio-Economic Outlook 2023](#).

175. ACBAR. Statement by ACBAR; Yawar, M. Y. and C. Greenfield. 2023. "[Beauty salon ban in Afghanistan a blow to women's financial freedom](#)." Reuters. Asia Pacific. 24 July.

KEY ISSUE: STRENGTHENING ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RIGHTS AND EMPOWERING GIRLS AND WOMEN

as many organizations are preferring the employment of men over women.

The ban on education for girls and women and the shrinking of the pool of jobs potentially available to Afghan women was projected to have reduced Afghanistan's annual gross domestic product by an estimated 2.5 per cent or USD 500 million in the first year of Taliban control.¹⁷⁶ This short-term loss will only increase the longer women are banned from secondary and tertiary education. In the medium-term, the skills and upward momentum of girls, women and Afghan society at large gained during the democratic period 2001–2021 will degenerate, leaving Afghanistan increasingly less equipped over time to build a prosperous, stable State.

The various restrictions on women now in place in Afghanistan combine with other factors (e.g. prevailing gender norms and high fertility rates) to increase underemployment among women, and leave them without critical skills and relegated to caregiving roles. Low levels of literacy and employment skills fostered by bans on education during Taliban rule of Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001 and restrictive gender norms concerning women and girls have limited women's access to the labour force, particularly skilled labour and in urban areas where agricultural work is less prevalent.¹⁷⁷ Women's literacy rates in Afghanistan, for both women living in rural areas (16 per cent) and women living in urban areas (40 per cent), are significantly below the average national literacy rate for men (55 per cent).¹⁷⁸ Women in rural areas are involved in agricultural work at higher rates compared to other sectors, providing opportunities for both income and food security.¹⁷⁹

Gendered divisions of labour in both rural and urban areas across Afghanistan tend to limit many women to unpaid labour, in traditionally expected roles such

LITERACY RATES IN AFGHANISTAN



16%	for women in rural areas
40%	for women in urban areas
55%	national average for men

Source: OCHA Humanitarian Needs Overview (2023)

as caregiver. **Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated these trends globally, women in Afghanistan spent more than three times as much time as men on unpaid care and domestic work.**¹⁸⁰

As a result, Afghan girls are more likely to leave school early, reducing their future potential for economic participation and increasing the risk of early, forced or child marriage.¹⁸¹ Remuneration is also heavily gendered within the agriculture sector. Although women's participation in this sector is high, it is often limited to unpaid feminized work on the family plot for household consumption, compared to men who work as paid seasonal workers.¹⁸²

Sexual harassment and assault have long acted as additional barriers to women's political and economic advancement (*see the sub-section "Sociocultural gender norms"*). While women's ascent to high positions was still possible during Republic rule, patriarchal gender norms undermined their credibility and safety. Harassment and violence (often by members of the Taliban) targeted many of those women holding public roles, whom were frequently the target of rumours alleging use sex to achieve professional advancement.¹⁸³ Reports also surfaced of Afghan women who were part of institutionalized efforts to increase the number of women working in male-dominated security institutions facing pervasive

176. UNICEF. 2022. [Depriving girls of secondary education translates to a loss of at least US\\$500 million for Afghan economy in last 12 months](#). Press release. 14 August 2022.

177. This trend was already noted prior to the Taliban takeover, in 2020: Khadimi, A. 2020. ["Women's Inclusion in Afghanistan's Civil Services."](#) DROPS (Organization for Policy Research and development Studies). Journal on Women and Public Policy 6, 2020, pp. 1–12.

178. OCHA. [Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023; UNESCO. 2023. UNESCO stands with all Afghans to ensure youth and adults in Afghanistan, especially women and girls, achieve literacy and numeracy by 2030](#). Press release. 20 April 2023.

179. Leao, I., Kar, A. & Ahmed, M. 2017. [For rural Afghan women, agriculture holds the potential for better jobs](#). World Bank Blogs.

180. UN Women, Afghans for Afghanistan's Development. 2019. [The Impact on Unpaid Care and Domestic Work in Afghanistan. Insights from the Afghanistan Time Use Survey](#).

181. In 2019, the expected length of schooling for girls was 7.7 years, compared with 12.5 years for boys. UNDP. 2020. [Human Development Report 2020](#). Table 4: Gender Development Index, p. 358.

182. Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock & Food and Agriculture Organization. [National Strategy on Women in Agriculture \(2015-2020\)](#).

183. Nemat, O. 2015. [Women and the Elections: Facilitating and Hindering factors in the Upcoming Parliamentary Elections](#). Policy note. Kabul: AREU. See also: Coburn, N. and M. H. Wafae. 2019. [Violence Against Women in Afghanistan's 2018 Afghanistan Election](#). Briefing paper. Kabul: AREU; AIHRC. 2017. [Situation of Women Employed in Defense and Security Sectors](#). Kabul: AIHRC.

KEY ISSUE: STRENGTHENING ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RIGHTS AND EMPOWERING GIRLS AND WOMEN

sexual harassment and abuse from male colleagues and superiors.¹⁸⁴

Ultimately, harassment served to limit women's inclusion in the Afghan labour force, particularly in the civil service, defence and security institutions and political office. These norms and experiences provide a basis for DFA decrees around gender segregation and continue to, even in a setting where most are attempting to cope with extreme hardship, make Afghan families reluctant to allow women family members to work outside the home (in the limited areas where this option still exists).¹⁸⁵

In Afghanistan, child labour is a serious issue affecting girls and boys. In 2013, the AIHRC reported that 52 per cent of children were working "in one way or another".¹⁸⁶ Child labour in Afghanistan tends to be gendered, with home-based activities such as carpet weaving falling more to girls than boys. Under the GoIRA, Afghanistan's Labour Law made employment of children aged below 14 years illegal, and these requirements were reiterated under key international treaties on child labour ratified by the GoIRA.¹⁸⁷ In an Afghanistan characterized by economic and humanitarian crises and restrictions limiting women's earning potential, reports indicate that child labour is becoming more prevalent under the Taliban.¹⁸⁸ On average, more Afghan households have boys working than women working, demonstrating the gendered nature and impact – on women, boys and girls – of the norms and decrees in operation.¹⁸⁹

184. Rubin, A. 2013. "Afghan Policewomen Say Sexual Harassment is Rife." The New York Times. Asia Pacific. 16 September; Jardine, M. 2022. Women, Police and Security: Reforming the Afghan National Police. London: Wordzworth Publishing.

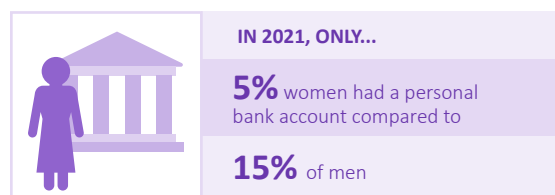
185. An up-to-date list of the DFA decrees restricting women's right to work is available from: <https://www.usip.org/tracking-talibans-mistreatment-women>.

186. AIHRC. 2013. [Children's situation summary report](#). Research Unit.

187. HRW. 2016. "They bear all the pain": Hazardous child labor in Afghanistan." Report. 14 June.

188. One report suggests that 18 per cent of families sent children out to work in 2022: Save the Children. 2022. "Afghanistan: a fifth of starving families sending children to work as incomes plummet in past six months." News. 14 February.

189. The average household in Afghanistan has 6.6 members, of whom 1.6 work, mainly men (1.19), the other working family members comprise adult women (0.15) and children (in practice, mostly boys: 0.23 compared to only 0.03 of girls): UNDP. Socio-Economic Outlook 2023.



Source: The World Bank.

Women's economic empowerment

Economic empowerment is critical to improving outcomes for women across all areas – health, education, security and poverty reduction. Women's financial independence – through income-generation, bank account ownership, and the ability to control earnings and assets – directly influences women's participation in the labour force and bargaining power within the home.¹⁹⁰

Conversely, lower levels of education, literacy and ownership of assets such as land limit women's financial independence and force them into lower-paid jobs – **for 2019, the average gross national income per capita for Afghan females was estimated to stand at less than one quarter of that for Afghan males.**¹⁹¹ Women in Afghanistan are less likely than men to be able to access credit, loans and financial institutions, tending to rely more heavily on support from local friends and family members as a key source of income. In 2021, only 5 per cent of Afghan women had a personal bank account, compared to 15 per cent of men.¹⁹²

190. The World Bank. 2021. Women, Business and the Law 2021; Field, E. et al. 2016. On Her Account: Can Strengthening Women's Financial Control Boost Female Labor Supply? Harvard Business School. Working paper.

191. Disaggregated income data was not available for these figures, so are estimates: UNDP. [Human Development Report 2020](#), p. 358.

192. The World Bank. 2021. [The Global Findex Database 2021: Financial Inclusion, Digital Payments, and Resilience in the Age of COVID-19](#).

KEY ISSUE: STRENGTHENING ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RIGHTS AND EMPOWERING GIRLS AND WOMEN

Home-based self-employment has become the predominant form of women's participation in the labour market.¹⁹³ Both women who have lost their jobs in the public and private sectors since August 2021 and those who previously identified as housewives are reporting a shift to working as self-employed.¹⁹⁴ This often means engaging in small-scale economic activities, such as in the role of seamstress, making handicrafts, or tending to livestock and engaging in small-scale agriculture. Under current political and economic conditions, women producing goods face significant challenges in obtaining critical supplies and raw materials and accessing markets to sell their goods (restrictions such as *mahram* impede access), and in meeting business requirements (such as obtaining a tax identification number).

Opportunities for home-based online employment are particularly limited for women, as they are less likely than men to be educated, own their own electronic devices (such as mobile telephones), or be literate – including technologically literate. This is particularly true in rural areas of Afghanistan, where access to the internet, a consistent electricity supply and computers is low.

Women entrepreneurs in Afghanistan also face increasing impediments to starting and operating their own business. At least 42 per cent of women-owned businesses (WoBs) in Afghanistan reported a declining security environment for businesses in 2022, compared to 12 per cent of men-owned businesses.¹⁹⁵ Mobility restrictions limit women's access to markets and women-only markets have closed in many areas. Where women-only markets remain operational, *mahram* requirements for both buyers and sellers impose practical impediments to the emergence of a healthy business climate. Some women working in embroidery and carpet-weaving attempt to survive by finishing products for larger (men-owned) companies.

These constraints on women entrepreneurs work to consolidate men's control over women's economic empowerment, whereby women face low-paid, labour-intensive work, and risk exploitation by male intermediaries (family members or otherwise) who are

able to access markets on women's behalf. In 2020, a total 2,471 licenced businesses owned and run by women were registered with the Afghanistan Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industry, with 54,000 informal businesses across Afghanistan being owned and run by women at that time.¹⁹⁶ Altogether, these businesses created over 130,000 jobs and supported over 100,000 women artisans in rural areas to sell their work in Afghanistan's cities. Support for WoBs and microfinance initiatives provide women with a critical opportunity to build resilience by obtaining a bank account and establishing a relationship with a financial institution.



Source: Wafeq 2022. Just Security.

Despite the severe restrictions imposed by the DFA, the *de facto* Ministry of Economy is still able to issue business licences to most women-led businesses. Afghan banks can accept women customers and can now facilitate many international bank transfers. Nevertheless, women have often had little experience in establishing relationships with financial institutions, including building strong credit history. Most Afghan companies can continue to employ women – although discriminatory practices are widespread. The suspension of international donor investment in the private sector in response to the DFA violations of women's rights risks further decreasing private sector capacity to provide employment for men and some women.

193. ILO. Employment in Afghanistan.

194. The World Bank. 2022. [Afghanistan Welfare Monitoring Survey: Round 2](#).

195. Ibid. Afghanistan Development Update: adjusting to the new realities – October 2022, p. 15.

196. Wafeq, M. 2022. ["Afghan Women Entrepreneurs Battle to Retain Economic Freedom."](#) 26 August. Just Security.

KEY ISSUE: STRENGTHENING ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RIGHTS AND EMPOWERING GIRLS AND WOMEN

Key findings

- **Women in Afghanistan face an increasingly inaccessible employment environment** outside the home, with mutually-reinforcing DFA restrictions strongly impacting women's employment across the public and private (and international) sectors. Women have been disproportionately affected by job losses. Yet, the dire economic and humanitarian situation is forcing women to seek employment in unprecedented numbers.
- **Home-based self-employment and small-scale economic activities have become the predominant form of employment among women in Afghanistan.** Under the current political and economic conditions, women producing goods face challenges in obtaining supplies, selling their goods and meeting business requirements. These small-scale activities are a lifeline, but ultimately insufficient in economically empowering women.
- **Afghan women and girls face additional obstacles, compared to men and boys, to accessing many types of employment** – due to lower levels of literacy, mobile telephone/electronic device ownership, and access to the Internet. On the other hand, though in the past it has largely been unpaid, work in the agricultural sector remains open to women's participation.

Recommendations

1. **FOCUS** on supporting activities that can maximize the spaces left open to women to earn a living and participate in public life. This could include resuming and expanding private sector programming, such as the grants provided to women-led companies by several aid agencies; as well as scaling up UN and NGO initiatives to help women-led businesses to obtain and repay loans from microfinancing institutions – including assistance in building a (strong) credit history.
2. **SUPPORT** further investigation into how to best support women's productive contribution to the household and the national economy, given the unprecedented labour force participation rates, by engaging in livelihoods and adaptive

economic empowerment initiatives. Women's contribution should be examined across all sectors, including moving from unpaid work to paid work in sectors such as agriculture.

3. **EMBED** strategies to build long-term resilience among women beneficiaries of economic empowerment programming, by addressing structural issues (e.g. financial autonomy and relationships with financial institutions) and limiting factors (e.g. high fertility rates, low literacy levels and access to electronic devices, the Internet and reliable electricity) and shifting norms that reduce women to unpaid work.
4. **SUPPORT** domestic business financing innovations (including through direct investment) that will facilitate the improved functioning of women-led companies and those that employ women, such as the development of new Islamic finance instruments that can be tailored to the needs of women and investment in digital cash programmes. Consideration should be given to supporting women-only spaces in major markets and shopping centres, where women can more freely establish and run their own businesses, or support e-commerce and other trade with reduced risk of harassment by the authorities.
5. **SEEK** advice and support among majority Muslim States and/or Islamic international bodies, particularly the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, to expound upon women's economic and social rights according to Islam, to differentiate these sociocultural interpretations from other positions, such as those held by the Taliban. This could include seeking out best practices on opportunities for women, such as Islamic financing, and reviewing DFA decrees limiting women's economic and social rights in line with sharia law.
6. **REBUILD** previously existing women's economic organizations and networks, including the Afghanistan Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industry, CSOs and other women-led organizations, thereby strengthening women's economic participation.

KEY ISSUE: STRENGTHENING ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RIGHTS AND EMPOWERING GIRLS AND WOMEN

Access to education

Access to education for all Afghan children, particularly girls, soared between 2001 and 2021. In 2001, at the end of the previous Taliban rule, it was estimated that virtually no girls were formally enrolled in education.¹⁹⁷ By 2020, enrolment had grown to 9.5 million pupils, of whom 3.7 million were girls (equivalent of 39 per cent).¹⁹⁸

This reflected increased support among Afghans for girls' education across the country.¹⁹⁹ Indeed, across consultations with Afghan women between 2022–2024, access to education was also considered the top priority, seen by most women as critical for gender equality and Afghanistan's long-term development.²⁰⁰

Although primary schools largely remain open for girls, enrolments among both boys and girls in primary education has dropped to 5.7 million students in 2022, compared to 6.8 million students in 2019.²⁰¹ **Nearly 30 per cent of girls in Afghanistan have never entered primary education, due to prevailing sociocultural norms and access issues.**²⁰² The reduction in primary school enrolment is slightly higher among boys, dropping by 18 per cent over the 2019–2022 period – compared to a decline of 12 per cent for girls.²⁰³ For boys, economic reasons are more likely to cause their absence from primary school (cited in 66 per cent of cases of absenteeism, in comparison with 47



Source: UNESCO (2022)

per cent for girls).²⁰⁴ For those girls and boys who do remain in school, concerns exist over DFA adjustments to curricula that make content more conservative and religion-oriented, leading to more alignment of curricula with practices observed in Islamic education institutes.²⁰⁵

Since August 2021, the DFA have imposed increasingly strict prohibitions on girls' access to education, with secondary school for girls suspended in March 2022 and university in December 2022.²⁰⁶ As of April 2023, 80 per cent of school-aged girls and young women – 2.5 million people – were out of school, including a cohort of 1.1 million secondary school-aged girls. Over 100,000 female university students were banned from education in December 2022.²⁰⁷ Subsequently, in January 2023, the DFA banned girls from taking the *kankor* university entrance examination – reversing examination participation rates for girls which, in some provinces, had exceeded those for boys.²⁰⁸

More recently, in June 2023, the DFA banned INGOs from implementing community-based education activities – through which many girls are still receiving education but which is also formally recognized under the *de facto* Ministry of Education – instead, asking that these activities be transferred to national NGOs. After the deadline for transition (December 2023), the *de facto* MoE directed INGOs to hand over any classes that had not been transitioned to national NGOs to *de facto* Provincial Education Departments (PEDs).

197. As compared to boys: 21 per cent primary school enrolment; 12 per cent lower secondary; and 12 per cent upper secondary: UNESCO. 2021. [The right to education: What's at stake in Afghanistan? A 20-year review](#). Paris: UNESCO.

198. Save the Children. 2021. ["Please open the school to my sisters": Afghan boys skip school until girls can return to the classroom](#). News. 19 October 2021.

199. The Asian Foundation. Survey of the Afghan People.

200. UN Women, IOM and UNAMA. 2023. [Summary report of country-wide women's consultations- September 2023. Forthcoming quarterly consultation report by UN Women, IOM and UNAMA \(February 2024\)](#).

201. UNESCO. January 2024. Gender and Crisis Sensitive Education Situational Analysis Report. (Manuscript for publication).

202. UNESCO. 2023. ["Let girls and women in Afghanistan learn!"](#)

203. UNESCO. January and 2024. Gender and Crisis Sensitive Education Situational Analysis Report. (Manuscript for publication).

204. OCHA. Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023.

205. OHCHR. 2023. Report of the Special Rapporteur.

206. UNESCO. 2023. ["Let girls and women in Afghanistan learn!"](#); as of December 2022, secondary school-aged girls in 21 out of 34 Afghan provinces had no access to education, while there were varying levels of access across the 13 remaining provinces: Education Cluster and UNICEF monitoring data as per OCHA. Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023.

207. UNESCO. 2023. ["Let girls and women in Afghanistan learn!"](#)

208. In Herat, girls' participation was 51 per cent in 2018, 52 per cent in 2019, and 59 per cent in 2020: Omar. 2020. ["Herat witnesses record female participation in Kankor exam."](#) Salaam Times. Education. 12 August.

KEY ISSUE: STRENGTHENING ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RIGHTS AND EMPOWERING GIRLS AND WOMEN

It remains unclear whether *de facto* PEDs have the financial or technical resources to effectively manage these classes – including the ability and willingness to prioritize teaching girls. **Estimates suggest that while female teachers constitute 43 per cent of the public education system workforce, this falls to 35 per cent in community-based education.**²⁰⁹ The reduction of female teachers and restrictions on education – at all levels – are weakening the quality of education in Afghanistan for girls and boys alike with girls facing additional obstacles in equally accessing education due to prevailing sociocultural norms that prioritize the boy child, rise in child, early and forced marriages, and restrictions curtailing the rights of women and girls more broadly.²¹⁰

The DFA is in the process of expanding Islamic education centres, madrasas, in the public education system. In Afghanistan, there are both private and public madrasas. Young Afghan children attend mosque-based education in addition to school. As of 2022, there were 1,142 Islamic educational institutions with a total enrolment of 342,678 students, of which only one third of students – or 29 per cent – are women and girls.²¹¹ While Islamic education is open for girls beyond primary levels, their inclusion in madrasas is limited to 27 per cent of the student population.²¹² Public madrasas are required to fully adhere to the *de facto* MoE approved curriculum where religious subjects constitute approximately 60 per cent of curricula with the rest of content – 40 per cent – dedicated to general education.²¹³ Textbook content has also changed – all subjects relating to democracy, women's rights, human rights have been removed.

While data on Islamic educational institutions is limited, indicative data shows that standard science-based curriculum preparing students for university education

and employment – like math and science – are often omitted. Reports also suggest that these religious centres for boys are more prevalent than those for girls, meaning that this form of education is not automatically a pathway to build equal opportunities between girls and boys. Afghan women inside and outside the country have also raised concerns about the inclusiveness and equity of this form of education, highlighting the importance of schools as public good and vehicle to socialize boys and girls to inclusion, rights and equality.

Barriers to women's and girls' access to education have long existed in Afghanistan and, where gaps still exist, continue to limit the opportunities available for them. In rural areas, transportation costs, distance and safety concerns connected to travelling to and from school in particular limit girls' attendance. In some areas of Afghanistan, harmful gender norms foster negative attitudes toward girls' education, which further limit girls' access to education in these areas. Girls living with disabilities face particular challenges in accessing education, leaving an estimated 80 per cent unable to attend school.²¹⁴



Source: HRW. 2020. "Women with Disabilities Face Systemic Abuse"

Afghan women and girls out of school are deprived of future employment opportunities, potentially cementing their economic vulnerability, and guaranteeing long-term cycles of poverty and dependence. The overall enrolment in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions decreased by 18 per cent, especially among girls and women, following the takeover in 2021. This decline is a result of the DFA's suspension of education for girls and women beyond grade 6, leading to a reduction of over 10,000 female students, equivalent to 89 per cent, in TVET institutions.²¹⁵

209. UNICEF. 2023. School Census 2023; UNICEF. 2023. Community-based Education Dashboard.

Comment made by a UN education expert on 6 December 2023.

210. Human Rights Watch (HRW). 2023. "Schools are Failing Boys Too": The Taliban's Impact on Boys' Education in Afghanistan. December 2023.

211. Islamic education centres encompass: Madrasas, which offer comprehensive Islamic education across three levels; Darul Uloom extend madrasa to grades 13–14 and offers Islamic education across five levels; Darul Huffaz focus on memorization, pronunciation, and Quranic reading and accent; Jihadi madrasa formally introduced by DFA in 2022; moves away from modern sciences and uses, old, outdated textbooks; mosque-based education informally structured with early Islamic teaching at a primary level in local mosques.

212. Ibid.

213. UNESCO interview with Ministry of Education staff from the Curriculum Development Department.

214. HRW. 2020. "Women with Disabilities Face Systemic Abuse: Barriers, Discrimination in Health Care, Education." News. 27 April 2020.

215. UNESCO. 2024. Gender and Crisis Sensitive Education Situation Analysis. February.

KEY ISSUE: STRENGTHENING ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RIGHTS AND EMPOWERING GIRLS AND WOMEN

Girls out of school face increased risk of exploitation, forced marriage, domestic violence, and anxiety and mental health issues.²¹⁶ In the long term, this curbing of girls' educational access will also halt the flow of new female teachers, health workers and doctors into the workforce, limiting, in turn, the opportunities for women and girls to seek education and health services, and reinforcing harmful gender norms and male societal dominance.

It also limits development outcomes for Afghanistan, given that this also contributes to maternal mortality, child/infant mortality, limitations in peace and security (as per UN Security Council resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security). **It is also important to note that the economy of Afghanistan is estimated to lose USD 9.6 billion, equivalent to two-thirds of today's GDP, by 2066 if the suspension of women's access to higher education remains in place.**²¹⁷

Considering the importance of family and intergenerational support in children's and youth's learning trajectory, community-based literacy and skills-development classes are being provided to adolescents and adults, fostering intergenerational lifelong learning opportunities to fight against illiteracy, which is one of the highest globally, and raising awareness of the right to education for youth and adults, especially adolescent girls and women. Despite a high demand for literacy, especially skills-based literacy, in the country, the youth and adult literacy sub-sector remains under-resourced.²¹⁸ For example, literacy schools across the country face major infrastructure problems and lack basic equipment and facilities for a conducive teaching and learning environment.

Key findings

- While important strides have been made in facilitating access to education by children in Afghanistan prior to August 2021, particularly at primary level, **a significant number of girls and boys remain out of school, with consequent multigenerational negative impacts** for life outcomes.
- **Afghan girls have been banned from education beyond primary level, limiting future opportunities**, potentially cementing their dependence on men and boys and the prevalence of poverty, while causing severe mental health issues. Should this trajectory continue in the long term, all domestically trained skilled professionals in Afghanistan will be men – teachers, health workers, lawyers, limiting women's access to the services they provide, including life-saving services.
- **The ban on women accessing university will have a direct knock-on effect** on the ability of Afghan women to seek life-saving and essential services from women professionals.
- **Greater understanding of Islamic education centres is required.** Current indications suggest that while providing an opportunity for girls to undertake religious studies in a school-type environment, most do not appear to teach curriculum such as, English, math and science. Indicative data also show a gender gap in enrolment in Islamic education centres, highlighting that they are not a panacea for resolving issues related to girls' education.

216. Save the Children. 2023. "[Afghanistan: Eighteen months after ban, classroom doors must open for secondary school girls.](#)" News. 16 March 2023.

217. UNESCO. 2023. Costs of continued suspension of women's access to higher education and work in Afghanistan.

218. UNESCO. February 2024. Gender- and Crisis-Sensitive Education Situational Analysis.

KEY ISSUE: STRENGTHENING ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RIGHTS AND EMPOWERING GIRLS AND WOMEN

Recommendations

- 1. INVEST in girls' education wherever possible**, including support for adaptive programming targeting all available educational pathways, including community-based education, online and radio-based opportunities and Islamic education centres, focusing on the inclusion of girls and women and access to science-based educational curricula.
- 2. PROVIDE distance and online learning scholarships to female students residing in Afghanistan** to enrol in such higher education programmes in collaboration with international universities while continuing to advocate for the reopening of higher education to women.
- 3. PROVIDE income-generating skills training for women and youth** relevant to the local context.
- 4. PROVIDE short-term specialized courses** aimed at enhancing employment- and market-friendly skills for men and women.
- 5. PROVIDE coordinated inputs to research on Islamic centres** (both public and private) to better understand limitations and opportunities for pursuing general education in these spaces.
- 6. CONDUCT a skills demand assessment** to determine areas of focus for programming that best suits labour market conditions and targets localized development and economic improvements.
- 7. SUPPORT local institutions and community-based programmes** that deliver market-relevant vocational training.
- 8. SUPPORT schools and learning centres to meet minimum standards for safe infrastructure** that are girl-friendly.

KEY ISSUE: ADVANCING EQUAL PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP

IV. Advancing equal participation and leadership

The DFA have abolished women's political participation at all levels of public decision-making, reversing significant progress made during the period from 2001–2021 on increasing the number, visibility and influence of women in politics, the civil service, the judiciary and the security sector. Currently, no women hold positions within the DFA's structure. Elections have not taken place, nor are indicated as scheduled to take place, and none of the individuals holding national or provincial positions as *de facto* officials have been elected to their posts, all of whom are male (and predominantly Pashtun in ethnicity). Surveys show that Afghan women are not engaging with local DFA officials on issues that are important to them,²¹⁹ nor do they feel that they have influence over decision-making at provincial or national levels.²²⁰

Under the GoIRA, women's representation in public life was prioritized and accelerated through temporary special measures, as permitted under CEDAW; for example, the 2004 Constitution enshrined a mandatory quota for women representatives in public office, with at least 27 per cent of seats in the lower house of the Afghan Parliament being held by women. Indeed, political and legal developments during this period yielded significant gains in terms of the status of women; for example, in the 2018 parliamentary elections, more than 400 women candidates ran for office and over 3 million women registered to vote.²²¹

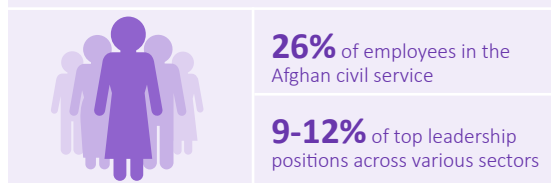


219. In the quarterly consultations conducted by UN Women, UNAMA and IOM with Afghan women, some 81 per cent of women indicated having not engaged at all with local *de facto* authorities on issues important to them, between January and June 2023: UN Women, UNAMA, IOM. Situation of Afghan Women.

220. During the period from January through March 2023 and the period April through June 2023, the percentages shifted as follows (respectively): at a provincial level, 4 per cent to 2 per cent; and at a national level, 5 per cent to 2 per cent.

221. Bjelica J. and R. Soroush. 2018. [Afghanistan Elections Conundrum \(20\): Women candidates going against the grain](#). Afghanistan Analysts Network. Issues Paper. 19 October.

WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN AFGHANISTAN (2020)



Source: National Statistics and Information Authority of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. 2021. *Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2020*.

Nevertheless, representation ultimately fell short of the 30 per cent quota target set forth in the NAP on UNSCR 1325-Women, Peace and Security (2015–2022). In 2020, women made up 26 per cent of employees in the Afghan civil service, and between 9 and 12 per cent of top leadership positions across various sectors.²²² While legal and constitutional backing of women's political participation opened the door for women to have a seat at the table, representation often did not translate into influence. Gains at the central level also did not necessarily filter down to the sub-national level.

Ongoing conflict, security threats directed at women and the prevalence of patriarchal gender norms played significant roles in stifling women's political participation and representation. These were particularly impactful at lowering women's participation in the 2004 elections,²²³ yet, over time, the legal frameworks enshrining women's political participation did work to reduce these obstacles and open space for women to engage in Afghan public life.

Alongside these formal roles as elected officials, women during this period held positions in various decision-making processes, from national to sub-national levels. Although heavily male-dominated, traditional *jirga* processes also saw occasional participation from women (either by themselves or alongside male relatives), with their skills, knowledge, judgement and decisions recognized and, at times, reflected in decisions.²²⁴ When national *jirgas* were convened to deliberate on questions of national importance,

222. National Statistics and Information Authority of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. 2021. *Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2020*. 44, April 2021, pp. 29–31. Kabul: Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

223. One survey showed that 18 per cent of men did not want their wives to vote: HRW. 2004. *Between Hope and Fear: intimidation and attacks against women in public life in Afghanistan*. Briefing Paper.

224. Tariq, M. O. 2008. [The Tribal Security System \(Arbakai\) in Southeast Afghanistan](#). Crisis States Research. Center. Occasional Paper no. 7. December 2008.

KEY ISSUE: ADVANCING EQUAL PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP

women were often in attendance, although some claimed that women's contributions were captured by elite politics, thus the women engaged in such roles did not necessarily represent independent voices.

Afghanistan's women also played a role in conflict resolution during the period, including through Community Development Councils, albeit largely without any authoritative role in decision-making and often in roles that varied widely across Afghanistan, with women tending to exert more influence in less conservative areas.²²⁵ This type of participation in public life gave exposure and status to women, which was otherwise limited. Many women who held key roles in public life – across government, politics, the judiciary and civil society – have since fled Afghanistan, as they have been, and continue to be, the target of intimidation, harassment and detention.²²⁶

Women's participation in Afghan public and political life have long been restricted by various sociocultural factors, a thread which has run through Afghanistan's history and continues in the current context (*see the sub-section "Sociocultural gender norms"*). **The factors driving this dynamic include restrictive religious beliefs and sociocultural norms (such as purdah restrictions and the prevailing assumption that women are "without knowledge"), lower levels of education (due to inequitable access to education for girls), sexual harassment, exclusive, male-dominated political structures, the reduction of women to symbolic roles, perceptions that successful women did not gain their positions through merit, and security issues such as targeted violence.**²²⁷

The perception of good leadership qualities has consistently been linked to gender roles – prevailing perceptions include men being perceived as educated and able to speak to all types of people, including government and high-level officials; whereas, the value of women tends to not be defined by their educational prowess or broadly applicable interpersonal skills but by their ability to help people within their immediate

vicinity and fulfil their household responsibilities.²²⁸ Nevertheless, education levels have been seen as a key factor in legitimizing women's presence in decision-making roles.²²⁹ The current DFA bans on education for girls beyond primary school – and employment in the NGO sector – thus risk limiting women's perceived legitimacy in the long term, reinforcing harmful narratives that women do not hold knowledge nor power as the rationale driving their exclusion from public and political roles.

Informal influence and indirect access to decision-making – both within the household and the local community – have been left as the only avenues for public engagement currently open to women in Afghanistan. Yet, even these types of access are significantly constrained by restrictions on freedom of movement and deteriorating relationships between Afghan men and women inside the household, due to economic stress and worsening mental health on all sides. This is reflected in women's self-assessment indicating worsening relationships with male family members and reduced influence over household decision-making.²³⁰ Moving beyond influence to agency or authority within the household is also typically perceived in Afghanistan as a contravention of prevailing gender norms, which ascribe decision-making authority to men.

225. Including through the National Solidarity Programme and the Community Development Councils: Ganesh, L. 2012. *Women's Economic Empowerment in Afghanistan, 2002–2012*. AREU. Situational Analysis, Kabul: AREU.

226. Yawar, M. Y. 2023. ["Former female Afghan MP Nabizada shot dead in Kabul."](#) Reuters. Asia Pacific. 16 January.

227. Nijat, A. 2014. [The Dilemma of Women and Leadership in Afghanistan: Lessons and Recommendations](#). AREU. Kabul: AREU; Khadimi, A. "Women's Inclusion"; Azadmanesh, S. and G. Ihsanullah. 2020. [Women's Participation in the Afghan Peace Process: A Case Study](#). AREU, UN Women.

228. Wakefield, S. 2004. *Gender and Local Level Decision Making: Findings from a case study in Mazar-e Sharif*.

229. Wakefield, S. and B. Bauer. 2005. *Place at the Table: Afghan Women, Men and Decision-making Authority*. Kabul: AREU.

230. Consultations with Afghan women suggested that their relationships with male family members deteriorated between January and June 2023. Thirty-nine per cent of women surveyed noted a deterioration in relationships during the period January through March 2023. This number increased to 48 per cent for the period April through June 2023. In parallel, influence over household decision-making decreased from 54 per cent to 40 per cent: UN Women. 2023. [Summary report of country-wide women's consultations - September 2023](#).

KEY ISSUE: ADVANCING EQUAL PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP

Key findings

- **Afghan women, and their diverse experiences and perspectives, are currently being wholly excluded** from political and public decision-making, at all levels – including in informal structures at the community level.
- **Under the parameters of the DFA bans currently in place, women are forcibly absent from DFA political structures and traditional decision-making bodies** such as *shura* councils. In the long-term, bans on education and employment limit possibilities for women to develop key skills and expertise needed to reach political decision-making and leadership positions when they again become available to women.
- Informal influence and indirect access to decision-making, both within the household and the community, now comprise the only avenues for public engagement left open to Afghan women. **These small ad hoc openings to decision-makers are also being eroded by the enforcement and prevalence of increasingly restrictive, patriarchal social norms.**

Recommendations

1. **ENCOURAGE** international actors to employ a **multitude of levers and incentives** – including diplomatic and political tools to influence the establishment of an inclusive and representative government in Afghanistan, inclusive of women and marginalized groups.
2. **IDENTIFY AND SUPPORT** formal and informal **forums and social spaces where women meet**, make decisions, and advocate for themselves to enhance existing participatory mechanisms and incorporate the views and perspectives of Afghan women into national and international policy and interventions.
3. **PRIORITIZE** the **facilitation of dialogue and safe engagement between the DFA and women** to support access to decision-making and allow these groups to vocalize their needs and experiences directly with the DFA.
4. **ADVOCATE** for the DFA to meet reporting requirements around international treaty obligations and other commitments under international law, particularly CEDAW, encouraging engagement, dialogue and, over the long term, accountability.
5. **ADVOCATE** and support the development of **women-only decision-making and advisory structures** in governance contexts, including through diverse influential women's groups, to provide a safe and accessible outlet for women's needs and concerns. In parallel, acknowledge that male family and community members are critical allies in reversing the restrictions on women's rights currently in place in Afghanistan.

KEY ISSUE: INTEGRATING THE WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY AGENDA

V. Integrating the women, peace and security agenda

NAP implementation

Progress made under the National Action Plan (NAP) on UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (2015–2022), spearheaded by Afghan women and adopted by the GoIRA in 2015, has been unravelled by the DFA.²³¹ This is illustrated symbolically by the building that previously housed the Ministry for Women's Affairs being taken over by the *de facto* Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, which controls the morality police tasked with enforcing the Taliban's interpretation of sharia law.

This full-scale reversal of the WPS agenda can be attributed both to the Taliban's idiosyncratic worldview and to the way they came into power: through violence.

The Taliban seizure of the power of State by military means in 2021, without any negotiated political settlement, followed US-Taliban talks in 2020, which did not address women's participation nor women's rights – sending the message that these are not critical peace and security (and thus governance) issues. Indeed, immediately prior to the Taliban takeover, women's rights were not a key topic on the proposed negotiation agenda.²³²

During the Republic era, the GoIRA instituted a range of offices, mechanisms and strategies as part of gender mainstreaming initiatives to advance gender equality and women's empowerment vis-à-vis the WPS agenda.²³³ Constructive actions taken to this end included the development and enactment of two NAPs; the creation and operation of the national MoWA

and provincial DoWA institutional infrastructure; the establishment of the AIHRC; and the setting up of the Women's High Council (in 2020).

Progress under the NAPs was slow and uneven, implementation of laws and policies was often poor, ingrained customs and norms proved difficult to change, and coordination, funding and political will remained a challenge.²³⁴ However, the creation of this GEWE infrastructure challenged patriarchal control over institutions and public life in Afghanistan, creating an entry point and framework for Afghan women to coalesce upon and around. No similar policy framework or infrastructure exists under the DFA.

Women's participation in peace and security initiatives

Women's inclusion in peace talks, peace-related entities and the security sector was set as a NAP target under the GoIRA, ultimately going unmet and not meaningfully prioritized.²³⁵

The inclusion of women was hindered by patriarchal norms reinforcing male dominance, threats to their physical security, including sexual harassment, and being assigned token, lower-profile and lower-paid roles.²³⁶ Women were present at only 15 of the 67 (approx. 22 per cent) high-level formal or informal peace talks that took place in Afghanistan between

231. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Directorate of Human Rights and Women's International Affairs. 2015. [Afghanistan's National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325-Women, Peace and Security \(2015-2022\)](#).

232. The Taliban included an agenda item on "Ensuring the rights of women in line with Islamic principles and national traditions," and the government made no specific reference to women: Adili, A. W. 2021. [Intra-Afghan Talks \(1\): Rules of procedure agreed, but still no agenda as talks resume](#). Afghanistan Analysts Network.

233. Larson, A. 2008. [A Mandate to Mainstream: Promoting Gender Equality in Afghanistan](#). Kabul: AREU.

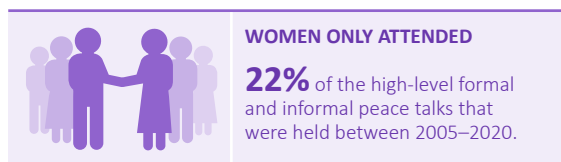
234. "(The) MoWA was originally intended to take full responsibility for gender mainstreaming. The co-existence, though, of both a Ministry of Women's Affairs, to which women's issues are often relegated, and a policy for implementing gender mainstreaming across all sectors, for example, seems somewhat incongruous. It appears the attitude taken – at least at the initial stages – was one of having "as many gender mechanisms as we can get." This approach has continued since the Bonn process." Larson. A Mandate, p. 12:

235. No clear road map was created for women's inclusion in peace talks. Targets to increase the number of women in the security sector were not met and ultimately revised downward – a 2010 goal of 10,000 female Afghanistan National Police recruits and 5,000 Afghanistan National Army recruits by 2020 was not met, with reduced targets then being set out in a new July 2021 road map: Zawulistani, J. 2018. ["A Battle of Several Fronts: Afghan Women in the Security Forces."](#) The Diplomat. The Pulse. 30 April 2018.

236. AIHRC. Situation of Women.

KEY ISSUE: INTEGRATING THE WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY AGENDA

2005 and 2020.²³⁷ Those women present were mostly Members of the Afghan Parliament, occupants of high government positions, or well-known civil society leaders – mainly educated women from urban areas.



Source: Oxfam.2021.

Despite the advocacy of Afghan women, this sidelining of women and gender equality considerations continued up until the US-Taliban troop withdrawal agreement of February 2020, which did not include any conditions relating to women's rights or political inclusion. Where women did participate in male-dominated structures, such as the peace process and the security sector, it was often the result of sustained advocacy on the part of local women's rights networks combined with international actors' efforts to this end.

Since the Taliban takeover in August 2021, Afghan women inside the national borders have been nearly completely shut out of all discussions related to WPS. Only few Afghan women report even meeting directly with *de facto* officials.²³⁸ In response to their exclusion from public decision-making structures, Afghan women, especially those in exile with access to decision-makers, have increasingly turned to international forums to advocate for their rights.

Afghan women have indicated that the protection element of the WPS agenda has been elevated in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover, shifting the focus to women's needs and vulnerability (at the expense of women's leadership and agency). Therefore, Afghan women continue to call on the international community to prioritize the participation pillar of the WPS agenda and create meaningful pathways for them to have to input into international decision-making forums – on all topics under discussion.²³⁹

Despite continuous calls for women to be granted a seat at the international decision-making table, their exclusion largely continues in 2023. Since the Taliban seized power, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has heard directly from 14 Afghan women representing civil society, during quarterly meetings held on Afghanistan, and introduced progressively stronger language on women's rights and participation as the situation in country has deteriorated for women and girls.

However, Afghan women have been excluded from high-level international meetings discussing the prevailing situation and the future of Afghanistan, including the May 2023 meeting convened by the UN Special Envoys on Afghanistan in Doha, Qatar.²⁴⁰

For their part, Afghan women have highlighted how this lack of representation is compounding their erasure from Afghan public and political life, and call on the international community to not let this dynamic continue to prevail.²⁴¹ Women's rights advocates highlight the importance of systematic "principled engagement" by all international actors "that is carefully designed to measure the costs and benefits, and to engage in ways that mitigate the harm that is caused through the legitimization and normalization that comes from engaging with the Taliban".²⁴²

Afghan women inside the national borders have also consistently called on the international community to put women's rights at the centre of their engagement with the Taliban, including in humanitarian

237. Oxfam. 2021. "Leading the Way": Women driving peace and security in Afghanistan, the Occupied Palestinian Territory and Yemen. Oxfam Briefing Paper. January 2021.

238. During consultations undertaken by UN Women, UNAMA and IOM, 81 per cent of Afghan women interviewed reported not engaging at all with the DFA on issues important to them. UN Women, UNAMA, IOM. Situation of Afghan women.

239. UN Women. 2022. [After August: Insights from Afghan women on the Women, Peace and Security agenda.](#)

240. Donnelly, P. 2023. ["You Can't Ignore the Voices of Afghan Women: Interview with Heather Barr."](#) IPI Global Observatory. 10 October 2023.

241. Wardak, A. 2023. ["Disregarding Security Council's Groundbreaking 1325 Resolution: About Us Without Us."](#) PassBlue. Opinions. 25 April 2023; Nehan, N. 2023. ["Women are begging on the streets of Kabul."](#) Chatham House. The World Today. 28 July 2023; Akbar, S. and M. Verveer. 2023. ["How the world can help Afghan women now."](#) Foreign Policy. Argument. 14 August 2023; Rahmani, R. 2023. ["How to advance women's rights in Afghanistan."](#) Atlantic Council. Issue Brief. 29 June 2023.

242. Donnelly, P. 2023. "You can't Ignore the Voices of Afghan Women"

KEY ISSUE: INTEGRATING THE WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY AGENDA

and security discussions, warning that any potential recognition of this group and its legitimacy to potentially play a role in Afghan public life can only occur under specific conditions, contingent on improving women's rights.²⁴³

Women inside Afghanistan have consistently argued in favour of advocacy by the international community and women's rights groups outside of Afghanistan.²⁴⁴

With civic space currently closed and women protesters being harassed, detained and tortured, advocacy of any sort by women currently inside Afghanistan gives rise to unacceptable security risks. Afghan women have also reported increased bureaucratic obstacles to their advancement, including the requirement from the *de facto* Ministry of Economy that women be removed from non-governmental and private leadership positions, boards of directors, and online portals for staff and beneficiaries. These barriers are more than bureaucratic impediments, they are rooted in the Taliban's clear determination to remove women from the public space.

Even against these odds, Afghan women continue to exert their agency and find pathways to continue their work to advance the cause of Afghanistan's women and girls, and their place in an equitable Afghan society that serves the well-being of all its members. Responding to the situation on the ground, strategies being employed by Afghan women in this regard include pivoting to humanitarian response and leveraging health and education exemptions to the ban on Afghan women working for NGOs.²⁴⁵ Pivoting, while it often reduces the visibility of women's rights and gender equality, is a key survival strategy for women-led and gender-focused organizations as it enables Afghan women to hold space in a context hostile to women's rights and gender equality.

243. This sentiment was voiced by 50 per cent of Afghan women consulted on the matter: UN Women, UNAMA, IOM. Situation of Afghan Women.

244. This was found in quarterly consultations with Afghan women undertaken by UN Women, IOM, and UNAMA in [October 2022](#), [January 2023](#), [April 2023](#), and [July 2023](#).

245. GiHA. "We are breathing."

Conflict and militarism

The prevalence of armed violence in Afghanistan has reduced significantly since the Taliban takeover in August 2021.²⁴⁶ Areas of the national territory which were previously inaccessible or dangerous to travel in are now in theory accessible for most Afghans.²⁴⁷ Despite ostensible improvements in security – from a traditional (physical) security perspective, particularly on Afghanistan's roads, Afghan women continue to report security and safety as one of their main concerns – pointing to the importance of unpacking nondimensional understandings of security that are limited to traditional security.²⁴⁸ Violence enacted against women by the DFA through oppressive policies and practices has continued to contribute to the creation of a gendered climate of fear and insecurity. Reprisals and assassinations also continue against people associated with the former government and security forces.²⁴⁹

While countrywide armed violence is at a low level, it remains an ongoing concern in several provinces (Badakhshan, Baghlan, and Panjshir), with armed groups attacks targeting political and security infrastructure and personnel, including the Afghanistan Freedom Front, the National Resistance Front, and the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP).²⁵⁰ There are indications that violent extremist groups such as the ISKP are exploiting the DFA suppression of women's rights, freedoms, and agency. One tactic reportedly uses claims that women are under threat to gain local support and reach women with access to technology who are confined to the home.²⁵¹ Recruitment tactics reportedly target young men at university by playing into the challenges of meeting

246. Data from the [Uppsala Conflict Data Program](#) shows that in 2022, for the first time since 2004, conflict in Afghanistan did not reach the threshold to qualify as war.

247. Armed violence countrywide is low but ongoing in a number of provinces – Badakhshan, Baghlan, Panjshir, with armed groups conducting attacks targeting political and security infrastructure and personnel, including the Afghanistan Freedom Front, the National Resistance Front, and Islamic State Khorasan Province: International Crisis Group. [Crisis Watch: Afghanistan](#). Accessed 4 December 2023.

248. Gossman, P. 2023. "No End to Taliban Revenge Killings in Afghanistan." HRW. Dispatches. 22 August; Royan, Y. 2023. Suffering unveiled: Afghan women's struggles under the Taliban. Women's Rights Network.

249. UN Women, UNAMA, IOM. Situation of Afghan women.

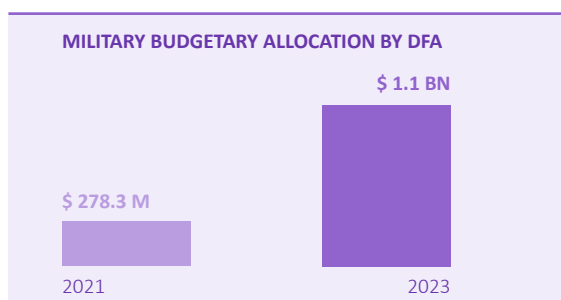
250. International Crisis Group. [Crisis Watch: Afghanistan](#).

251. Van der Kroft, L., Merkova, S. & Mosadiq, H. 2023. The Role of Gender in Taliban and IS-K Recruitment. October. London: Royal United Services Institute.

KEY ISSUE: INTEGRATING THE WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY AGENDA

gendered pressures to fulfil the role of provider, a point of particular poignancy among many Afghan men in the current economic climate.²⁵²

The DFA continues to prioritize budgetary allocation to militarization, reinforcing patriarchal values and shifting resources away from social spending in areas (such as education and health) that are especially important to girls and women.²⁵³ Military spending has increased since 2021, with the most recent *de facto* government budget allocating USD 1.1 billion to the *de facto* Ministry of Defense, the *de facto* Ministry of Interior Affairs, the *de facto* Directorate of Intelligence, and their subsidiaries – an increase from USD 278.3 million in 2021.²⁵⁴ This represents almost half of all DFA revenues, and reflects an aim to boost defence force numbers, from 150,000 to 200,000, and build anti-aircraft capacity.²⁵⁵



Source: Seerat, R. 2023. "Analyzing the Taliban budget for 2023-24"

During the period 2010–2021, military spending was already high, exceeding one third of total government spending, whereas spending on social protection accounted for less than 4 per cent of the total national budget.²⁵⁶ This budgetary choice has short- and long-term implications, both in terms of consolidating control and enforcement capacity for decrees targeting women and shifting spending

away from life-saving services for Afghan people in the midst of overlapping humanitarian and economic crises. Militarization entrenches gender roles and strengthens gender hierarchies, further impeding Afghan women's empowerment.

Key findings

- **Afghan women have been consistently excluded from high-level national and international forums related to the future of their country**, leaving their perspectives, experiences and needs out of agreements and policies. Peace, security and humanitarian issues have been decoupled from women's rights, leading to the deprioritization of the WPS agenda by the international community, a phenomenon which predates the Taliban takeover in August 2021.
- **Despite high levels of exclusion, Afghan women have directly addressed the UNSC**, and continue to vocally call on the international community to: 1) place women's rights at the centre of their engagement with the Taliban, 2) facilitate direct talks between the Taliban and Afghan women, and 3) warn that recognition of the Taliban can only occur under specific conditions, contingent on redressal of the women's rights situation in Afghanistan.
- Afghan women – from all walks of life – have clearly articulated that **any potential recognition of the Taliban must be contingent on improving women's rights**.
- Despite improvement in traditional security conditions – the absence of armed conflict – **Afghan women have consistently reported safety and security as key issues impacting their lives**.
- **Military spending has increased under DFA rule**, accounting for almost half its revenues and indicating a consolidation of control and enforcement capacity for decrees targeting women, as well as **withholding spending from life-saving services for Afghan people in the midst of overlapping humanitarian and economic crises**.

252. Ibid

253. Elveren, Y. A. 2022. [The impact of militarization on gender inequality](#). UN Women. Peace and Security Section. Research Paper. May 2022. New York: UN Women.

254. Seerat, R. 2023. ["Analyzing the Taliban budget for 2023-24: Prioritizing military spending over citizen welfare"](#). Zan Times. 11 May; Stockholm International Peace and Research Institute. [Military Expenditure Database](#). Accessed 21 September 2023.

255. Yawar, M. Y. 2023. ["Taliban aim to boost Afghan security forces, anti-aircraft capacity – army chief."](#) Reuters. Asia Pacific. 12 April.

256. Carlitz, R. 2022. [Comparing military and human security spending: key findings and methodological notes](#). UN Women. Peace and Security Section. Research Paper. May 2022. New York: UN Women.

KEY ISSUE: INTEGRATING THE WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY AGENDA

Recommendations

- 1. PRIORITIZE Afghan women's inclusion and meaningful participation in all meetings** related to the current and future situation of Afghanistan, across all topics under discussion, to ensure that their perspectives and advice influences decision-making in international forums on Afghanistan.
- 2. ENSURE the structure provision of gender-responsive funding** and programming targeting enabling measures for women's meaningful participation.
- 3. COMMIT to "principled engagement"** in any interactions on Afghanistan to measure the costs and benefits of engagement with the DFA and mitigate any harm to women and girls stemming from the normalization of relations.
- 4. PROVIDE flexible, long-term funding to women's organizations and women human rights defenders**, including core funding to unregistered or unbanked organizations, to enable them to continue their work and adapt to changing contextual dynamics.

KEY ISSUE: ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES RELATED TO CLIMATE CHANGE, MIGRATION AND DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

VI. Addressing the challenges and opportunities related to climate change, migration and digital transformation

Climate disasters

Afghanistan has been ranked as the 8th most vulnerable State to climate change and least prepared to adapt to its impacts, in a 2021 University of Notre Dame index assessing these attributes of States worldwide.²⁵⁷ However, Afghanistan is also a State that is already today highly vulnerable to natural hazards and frequently suffers devastating disaster events – **in 2023, for example, Afghanistan entered its third year of (record-level) drought, while simultaneously facing increasingly frequent flooding and earthquakes.**²⁵⁸

The rapid advancement of climate change is further exacerbating the impact of these events, making shocks more frequent and increasing their intensity. Given the present situation in Afghanistan, there is only limited capacity available to respond to these challenges, with this lack of preparedness underpinned by inadequate resource allocation and poor governance on disaster risk reduction (DRR) and emergency response. Women and girls tend to have greater exposure and vulnerability than men and boys to the impacts of disasters and less resilience in terms of preparedness and coping capacity.²⁵⁹

In Afghanistan, restrictive gender norms, limitations imposed on access to education and health care, insufficient access to information, resources, livelihood opportunities and humanitarian assistance and limited participation and avenues to impact decision-making (including on disaster risk reduction and management)

create a complex situation for the country's women. While Afghan women are disproportionately impacted by the shocks that occur, they are, compared to Afghan men, disproportionately excluded in (non-household/community-level) endeavours to mitigate or respond to their impact.

The disproportionately high number of female victims of disasters in Afghanistan, in comparison to the number of male victims, could be indicators of this dynamic. Some 70 per cent of the victims of the magnitude 7.5 Hindu Kush earthquake, which struck on 26 October 2015, for example, were women and young girls.²⁶⁰ A similar trend has also been observed more recently, following the series of earthquakes which occurred in the Western region between 7 and 15 October 2023²⁶¹ – reports show that, due to restrictions on their rights, women had limited access to information, low levels of preparedness, and faced barriers to obtaining humanitarian assistance, leaving them at acute risk of displacement and loss of economic opportunities.²⁶² This highlights the “man-made” nature of so-called “natural” disasters and shows how improving the rights of women has important dividends for the effectiveness of humanitarian response.



Source: Hamidazada et al. 2019. "Vulnerability Factors of Afghan Rural Women to Disasters".

Women often enter disaster periods with lower nutrition levels, lower levels of food security and lower levels of household resources, while simultaneously having specific needs, such as those related to maternal and menstrual health.²⁶³ Lower access to information also makes Afghan women less prepared to suffer disaster compared to men, due to lower literacy levels and device ownership. Prevailing gender norms

257. Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative. 2021. [ND-GAIN Country Index](#). Vulnerability and Readiness.

258. OCHA. Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023; due to its geographical position, Afghanistan is frequently struck by small earthquakes, which cause injury and loss of human life, displacement, and material damage, and periodically suffers major earthquakes which bring mass devastation to large swathes of population and land – such as the magnitude 6.5 earthquake which struck Badakhshan Province in March 2023 and the series of magnitude 6.3 earthquakes that struck Herat Province in October 2023.

259. Erman, A., et al. 2021. [Gender Dimensions of Disaster Risk and Resilience](#). Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery, The World Bank. Washington, DC: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, The World Bank.

260. Hamidazada, M., Cruz, A. M. and M. Yokomatsu. 2019. "Vulnerability Factors of Afghan Rural Women to Disasters." *International Journal of Disaster Risk Science* 10, pp. 573–590.

261. Estimates showed that women and girls comprised 54 per cent of individuals who lost their lives; 58 per cent of injured persons; and 61 per cent of missing persons: IOM. 2023. Multi-sectoral rapid assessment. 12 November.

262. GiHA. 2023. Gender update #1: Earthquake in Herat Province. GiHA Working Group. October.

263. CARE. 2021. [Rapid Gender Analysis, Drought in Afghanistan: Balkh, Ghazni, Herat, and Kandahar Provinces – July 2021](#). CARE Evaluations. Rapid Gender Analysis.

KEY ISSUE: ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES RELATED TO CLIMATE CHANGE, MIGRATION AND DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

in Afghanistan also render women and girls more vulnerable during earthquakes and flash flooding, due to their confinement to the home and caregiving duties, which require them to evacuate children and elderly family members and secure survival supplies.

DRR strategies were developed under the GoIRA, including through the creation of management plans – such as the 2012 Disaster Management Action Plan, but they did not mainstream gender.²⁶⁴ The presence of this gap is consistent with the general exclusion of Afghan women from decision-making capacities and leadership roles (*see the sub-section "Political and decision-making representation"*) and the impact of sociocultural, as well as DFA-enforced, restrictions (*see the sub-section "Sociocultural gender norms"*).

In Afghanistan, women have largely been excluded from formal processes around DRR, by one account, due to a lack of female DRR staff²⁶⁵ – an obstacle that has only grown in size since the introduction of DFA restrictions on Afghan women working for NGOs and UN entities.

As primary caregivers within the home, Afghan women possess a deep understanding of their communities and their particular needs, making their input in DRR and humanitarian response a critical asset.

Recent climate disasters in Afghanistan have driven humanitarian needs – reducing access to water and increasing food insecurity and displacement. Sex-disaggregated data on these needs are limited. The proportion of households in Afghanistan experiencing barriers to accessing water increased to 67 per cent in 2023,²⁶⁶ up from 48 per cent in 2021.²⁶⁷ This increases the need for access to water points, particularly among households in rural areas, which is particularly challenging for women who face mobility restrictions and exposure to the risk of harassment and GBV. It

was reported in 2021 that only 68.2 per cent of rural households had access to basic drinking water, in comparison to 94.3 per cent in urban areas.²⁶⁸ For their part, the barriers faced by households in urban areas of Afghanistan often centre on the cost of purchasing water, including for latrines, which are commonplace in Afghanistan's urban centres. Women play key roles in resource management within their households, particularly water management, often with responsibility for fetching all of the water used by the household from water points and rationing its use during cooking.

IN RURAL AREAS, IT IS ESTIMATED THAT WOMEN CONSTITUTE...



11% of employees in the agriculture sector



59% of employees in the livestock sector

Source: Leao et al. 2018. *Jobs from Agriculture in Afghanistan*.

Drought in Afghanistan negatively impacts agriculture and contributes to food insecurity. **Approximately 70 per cent of Afghans live and work in rural areas, with 54 per cent of the rural workforce involved in agriculture.**²⁶⁹ Of the employed female workers, the majority are employed in agriculture (11 per cent) and livestock (59 per cent).²⁷⁰ This leaves rural areas more vulnerable to climate-induced food insecurity and poverty, which impacts women and girls first, as negative coping strategies tend to be heavily gendered.

Afghan women and girls often take on the role of “societal shock absorbers” in times of crisis, whereby their unpaid care burden increases; their comparative food intake within the family decreases; girls are more likely to be pulled out of school and sold into marriage; and the risk of domestic violence to both women and girls increases.²⁷¹ For their part, Afghan men and boys

264. Hamidazada, Cruz and Yokomatsu. 2019. “Vulnerability Factors.”

265. Ibid.

266. REACH. 2023. Whole of Afghanistan Assessment.

267. OCHA. 2023. *Afghanistan: Revised Humanitarian Response Plan (June- Dec 2023)*. Humanitarian Programme Cycle 2023.

268. Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. 2021. *Afghanistan Voluntary National Review: Sustainable Development Goals*.

269. Leao, I., Ahmed, M. and A. Kar. 2018. *Jobs from Agriculture in Afghanistan*. World Bank Group. International Development in Focus. Washington, DC: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, The World Bank.

270. Leao, I., Kar, A. & Ahmed, M. 2017. *For rural Afghan women, agriculture holds the potential for better jobs*.

271. Sawas, A. and I. Bose. 2021. *Invisible Women: A gender analysis of climate-induced migration in South Asia*. Action Aid.

KEY ISSUE: ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES RELATED TO CLIMATE CHANGE, MIGRATION AND DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

face pressure to provide for their family, increasing the likelihood that they will resort to (regular or irregular) migration in search of employment opportunities. Mounting pressure on Afghanistan's men to fulfil the role of provider is a key factor in the increase in mental health issues observed among men in the country (see the sub-section "Mental health").

Earthquakes in the Western region and forcible returns from Pakistan

In late 2023, there have been two acute humanitarian crises in Afghanistan, further compounding the women's rights crisis facing Afghan women and girls.

In November, Pakistan began the forcible return of around 1.7 million undocumented Afghan nationals, a majority of whom are women and children;²⁷² and between 7 and 15 October, four powerful (6.3 magnitude) earthquakes struck Herat Province, western Afghanistan, leaving thousands in need of humanitarian assistance and further reducing their already-limited resilience immediately before winter.

Afghan women are disproportionately affected by disasters due to a complex combination of restrictive gender norms, limits imposed on access to education and health care, insufficient access to resources and livelihood opportunities, and limited avenues to impact decision-making. Taken together, these increase women and girls' exposure and vulnerability to the impacts of disasters and decrease their resilience in terms of preparedness and coping capacity.

Migration and displacement

Climate disasters and climate stressors are the latest in a long chain of displacement drivers in Afghanistan – which include armed conflict, insecurity, persecution, and poverty, fuelling record levels of displacement and migration within and outside of the national territory.

Currently, an estimated 3.2 million Afghans are internally displaced, and more than 1.6 million Afghans have fled Afghanistan since 2021, bringing the total number of Afghans in neighbouring States to 8.2 million.²⁷³

The dynamics around displacement further deteriorated during 2023, with a large influx of forced Afghan returnees from Pakistan reentering Afghanistan following the issuing by the Government of Pakistan of an order to deport all undocumented foreign nationals from its national territory. The situation is particularly critical for the 47 per cent of Afghan returnees who are women and girls, who now return to heightened barriers to accessing life-saving information and humanitarian assistance, and a situation where rights restrictions put them at higher risk of being excluded from livelihood opportunities.²⁷⁴

In the Afghan context, displacement is compounding existing vulnerabilities and exacerbating the impact of inequality, particularly affecting women, who are more likely than men to be displaced with dependents,²⁷⁵ and tend to face greater obstacles when forced to start their lives over (often without valuable resources, assets and networks). Whereas male heads of households are more likely to become displaced for economic reasons, often (re)migrating alone, and due to social pressures to provide for their families, their wives tend to be left behind to manage the household, facing significant obstacles. This tendency leaves those displaced persons (and often their families) who

272. As of 14 November 2023, 250,000 Afghans had been deported.

273. UNHCR. [Afghanistan Humanitarian Crisis](#). Accessed 16 September 2023.

274. GiHA. Gender update #1.

275. UNHCR, UN Women. 2022. [Afghanistan Crisis Update: Women and Girls in Displacement](#). Afghanistan Factsheet. March 2022.

KEY ISSUE: ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES RELATED TO CLIMATE CHANGE, MIGRATION AND DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

remain in the same location reliant on humanitarian aid, which, in turn, due to current restrictions on women's movement and a lack of women aid workers, as well as the often gendered nature of aid distribution in Afghanistan, leaves women increasingly unable to register for or access distribution sites.

Afghan women and women-headed households are more likely to be displaced – they have historically low rates of home and land ownership and comprise most of those Afghans who are living in informal settlements.²⁷⁶ Lower education levels, limited employment opportunities, and mobility restrictions cause particular gendered challenges to accessing sufficient income, financial support, food and other resources. This results in average income for displaced and returnee women being disproportionately lower than for displaced men.²⁷⁷ As a result of their particular vulnerability, displaced women are more likely than men to remain in precarious and protracted displacement contexts.²⁷⁸ Under these challenging circumstances, the risk of GBV faced by women and girls increases (*see the sub-section "Gender-based violence"*).

As the Afghan legal system remains weak – with no legal framework comprehensively detailed nor enforced and weak judicial systems – and local DFA authorities can in practice often exercise authority unrestrained by central guidance, the risk of land grabs (already a frequent occurrence under the GoIRA) has increased. Reports suggest that eviction from informal settlements is also increasing, with evictions documented in January 2023 across 10 Afghan provinces.²⁷⁹

In Afghanistan, women are twice as likely as men to be displaced due to eviction.²⁸⁰

Women are less likely to have documentation and more likely to be illiterate, while prevailing sociocultural norms and restrictions on their freedoms make it particularly difficult for them to build financial resilience and effectively advocate for themselves.²⁸¹

276. GiHA. 2022. [Gender Alert: Gender-related impacts of evictions of internally-displaced persons and destructions of informal settlements – focus on Badghis](#). 20 December.

277. On average, 81 per cent of women-headed internally displaced person households indicated not being able to work and cover daily expenses, compared to 72 per cent of men-headed households: OCHA. Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023.

278. More than half (55 per cent) of displaced women-headed households have been displaced for between 1 and 5 years, compared to 9 per cent of men-headed households: UNHCR, UN Women. Afghanistan Crisis Update.

279. ACAPS. 2023. Continued risk of forced eviction due to complex land rights and tenure (in)security.

280. UNHCR, UN Women. Afghanistan Crisis Update.

281. Ibid

KEY ISSUE: ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES RELATED TO CLIMATE CHANGE, MIGRATION AND DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Key findings

- **So-called “natural” disasters have a significant “man-made” element whereby existing social inequities and vulnerabilities among marginalized groups**, such as women, mean disasters impact them specifically and disproportionately. Namely, restrictive gender norms, limitations on access to education and health care, insufficient access to information, resources, humanitarian assistance and livelihood opportunities, as well as limited avenues to impact decision-making (including on disaster risk reduction and management) create a complex situation for Afghanistan’s women, whereby they are disproportionately impacted by the shocks that occur, but not adequately involved in the mitigation, preparation and response measures of, for, and to such shocks.
- **The use of negative coping strategies to deal with prevailing food insecurity is heavily gendered. Afghan women often take on the role of “societal shock absorbers” in times of crisis**, with their unpaid care burden increasing, their food intake decreasing, and it becoming more likely that girls will be pulled out of school and sold into marriage, while the risk of GBV increases.
- **As a long-term high priority issue for the DFA, interventions around climate change, including through policy and capacity-development, may provide space for principled and careful international engagement**, including in bringing in Afghan women into discussions and potential policy processes to address climate change, especially around water.

- Afghan women and women-headed households are more likely than Afghan men to be displaced. In the Afghan context, **displacement is compounding existing vulnerabilities and exacerbating the impact of inequality**, particularly among women, who are more likely than men to be displaced with dependents, typically have a lower income than displaced men, and face greater obstacles when forced to start their life anew. Current restrictions in Afghanistan on women’s rights are also working to decrease women’s access to life-saving information, humanitarian assistance, resources and livelihood opportunities.

Recommendations

1. **SUPPORT Afghan women and youth organizations operating in the fields of climate change, environmental protection, and disaster risk reduction and management** by building their capacity, knowledge and expertise to increase their involvement and opportunities to influence decision-making in a rapidly growing sector.
2. **INVEST in gender-responsive climate-resilient programming** by examining gender-based inequities including in land and asset ownership and building economic resilience among women.
3. **RECOGNIZE the various key roles played by women in resource management** at the household and community level, and their deep understanding of community needs, and continue to advocate with the DFA for their inclusion in early warning systems, DRR and humanitarian response.

KEY ISSUE: ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES RELATED TO CLIMATE CHANGE, MIGRATION AND DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Digitalization

Digital gender gaps are wide in Afghanistan and are reinforced by differential rates of literacy, mobile telephone/electronic device ownership and Internet access.

Women's literacy rates are lower in rural areas of Afghanistan (16 per cent), compared with urban areas (40 per cent) – both of which are significantly below the national male literacy rate (55 per cent).²⁸² Low literacy impacts access to information, and thus knowledge, and limits autonomy in completing administrative procedures and accessing digital services.

Women and men in Afghanistan have differing degrees of access to mobile telephones/electronic devices, which in turn impacts their access to livelihoods, education, resilience strategies, humanitarian aid and social support. Where a device is shared within a household, the owner is generally a man. This has implications for women's access to and privacy when using the device.²⁸³ Digital and online income-generating opportunities thus remain largely unavailable to those women independently of male family members. In some areas, the DFA forbids vendors from selling SIM cards to women.²⁸⁴ Mobile telephone usage in Afghanistan is higher among young people and in urban areas; **40 per cent of Afghan mobile telephone users are aged between 15 and 24 years and reside in urban areas.**²⁸⁵

Similarly, Internet access among women and rural Afghans is low, limiting their opportunities to undertake work and seek education online. In 2022, 25 per cent of Afghan men reported having access to the Internet, compared to 6 per cent of Afghan women; urban women were more likely (9 per cent) than rural women

(2 per cent) to have access.²⁸⁶ Some 33.2 per cent of Afghans in urban areas indicate using the Internet to access news and information, almost triple the (11.4 per cent) rate recorded in rural areas.²⁸⁷ Digital media from the diaspora specifically targeted towards Afghan women are active,²⁸⁸ as well as radio programming operating inside Afghanistan.

DIGITAL GENDER GAP IN INTERNET ACCESS (2022)



25% of Afghan men had Internet access



compared to **6%** of women

AFGHAN WOMEN'S INTERNET ACCESS (2022)



9% of women in urban areas



2% of women in rural areas

Source: Nusratty and Crabtree. 2023. "Digital Freedom Out of Reach for Most Afghan Women"

Digital infrastructure and 4G network coverage are still low and limited to the east of Afghanistan, leaving Internet penetration low and access scarce, slow and expensive.²⁸⁹ Nevertheless, mobile telephone usage has been increasing and cellular 3G Internet connection has become more widespread. In 2018, 90 per cent of Afghanistan's population was covered by the 3G network, with 6.5 million 3G subscribers (double the number recorded in 2010) and over 33 million mobile telephone subscribers.²⁹⁰ Gender differences in this form of access remain – in 2022, 25 per cent of Afghan men had access to the Internet, compared to 6 per cent of Afghan women.²⁹¹ As in the case of mobile telephone use, Internet use is highest in urban areas and among younger Afghans.²⁹²

282. OCHA. Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023; UNESCO. "UNESCO stands."

283. USAID. 2013. [Connecting to Opportunity: A Survey of Afghan Women's Access to Mobile Technology](#). May 2013. Washington, DC: USAID.

284. CARE, IRC, UN Women. 2022. Afghanistan: Inter-agency Rapid Gender Analysis.

285. Statista. [Number of mobile cellular subscriptions in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2019](#). Accessed 10 August 2021.

286. Nusratty, K. and S. Crabtree. 2023. ["Digital Freedom Out of Reach for Most Afghan Women."](#) Gallup Blog. Opinion. 8 March 2023.

287. TAF. Survey of the Afghan People.

288. One strong example of these includes Rukhshana media.

289. OECD. 2019. [Boosting private sector development and entrepreneurship in Afghanistan](#). Policy Insights. Paris: OECD.

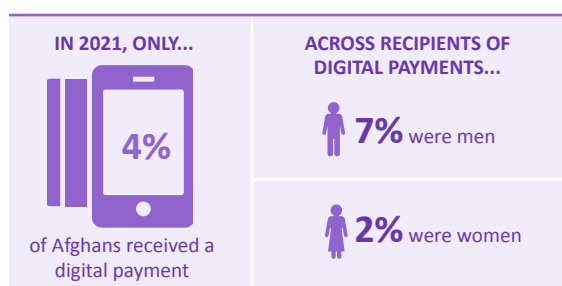
290. Ibid

291. Nusratty and Crabtree. "Digital Freedom."

292. AREU. 2020. The A to Z Guide to Assistance in Afghanistan.

KEY ISSUE: ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES RELATED TO CLIMATE CHANGE, MIGRATION AND DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Building on previous work on digitalization, the GoIRA had been implementing its 2018–2022 ICT Policy for Afghanistan, which emphasized the use of mobile platforms as a means of making digital solutions more inclusive, particularly in the fields of service-delivery and health care.²⁹³ This and previous digitalization policies struggled with implementation, as projects did not adequately respond to the limitations presented by the realities on the ground – cutting-edge solutions were sought where more simple solutions would likely have been more suitable.²⁹⁴ Efforts towards digitalization were identified by the OECD in 2019 as critical in tackling barriers in Afghanistan to business development, namely, complicated administrative procedures and poor delivery of public services.²⁹⁵



Digital payment technology – a key enabler for digital entrepreneurship – remains out of reach for most Afghans, particularly women. Even prior to the Taliban takeover, the number of Afghans receiving digital payments was low (and the figures for women were in fact decreasing): in 2021, only 4 per cent of Afghans received a digital payment – 7 per cent of men and 2 per cent of women.²⁹⁶ Lack of civil documentation, low rates of mobile telephone ownership, and low financial and digital literacy are among the main barriers to Afghans engaging in digital entrepreneurship, all of which are exacerbated by gender dynamics, leaving women disproportionately excluded from this realm. This puts women-run businesses at a disadvantage, particularly in remote areas, and reduces women’s

access to emergency cash transfers issued as digital payments.²⁹⁷

Despite these significant challenges on the ground, digital cash has the potential to help many female entrepreneurs. Cash modalities like digital vouchers could also help women who face pressure to hand over cash to their husbands or male relatives, since women recipients could be given a unique access code which only they can use. Similar localized and contact-free distribution systems could be imagined for unperishable aid distribution. Women who are unable to travel alone or access physical learning spaces could also be supported, via online training or digital repositories of financial literacy training and resources. Digital markets on mobile platforms, such as that provided by the Afghan startup HesabPay, could also be established, providing market access to female entrepreneurs who are unable to meet customers in person.

In response to the ban on Afghan women working for NGOs and UN agencies in Afghanistan, many humanitarian actors are leaning heavily on digital mechanisms to conduct assessments, deliver assistance and evaluate assistance provision.

Although such measures are constructive in the interim, their use simultaneously deepens existing socioeconomic gaps in aid access across Afghanistan, excluding a significant portion of the community who live in remote areas or do not have the ability to communicate remotely with humanitarian actors.

293. Ministry of Communications and Information Technology of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. 2018. [ICT Policy for Afghanistan: A digital agenda for development and social change 2018-2022](#).

294. OECD. Boosting private sector.

295. Ibid

296. The World Bank. The Global Findex Database 2021.

297. Cash transfers are consistently requested by recipients as the main form of aid. Digital payments in emergency cash transfers are being piloted as a way to reach remote areas and reduce waiting times: UNCDF (United Nations Capital Development Fund), UNDP. 2023. [Interoperability of Financial Services Providers: Afghanistan](#).

KEY ISSUE: ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES RELATED TO CLIMATE CHANGE, MIGRATION AND DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Key findings

- **Significant gender differences remain in mobile telephone/electronic device, Internet and digital payment technology access**, limiting digital and online income-generating and educational opportunities. Without addressing these inequities, ongoing digitalization efforts will not proportionately benefit Afghanistan's women and girls.
- **The continuation of the current dynamic will limit women's contribution to the data collection and analysis processes within needs assessments**, monitoring, feedback and complaints mechanisms and evaluations, leading to women's needs and voices becoming simply invisible to aid workers and other benefactors. Consequently, this would create substantial challenges for humanitarian organizations to design programmes that can respond to the needs of Afghanistan's women and girls.

Recommendations

1. **LINK women's access to mobile telephones/electronic devices, Internet and digital payment technologies to livelihoods and education interventions**, to maximize opportunities for online and home-based work and education in the short term, and cultivate equality in the opportunities for recovery and development open to Afghan men and women in the long-term.
2. **SUPPORT design and programming on product development**, which works to reduce existing barriers for women, including lower levels of digital and financial capabilities and electronic device ownership.
3. **EMBED digital security in all programming**, across all sectors.
4. **PROVIDE women-led businesses with digital infrastructure** to ensure they can leverage digital platforms to strengthen their entrepreneurial activities.
5. **ENSURE data representation of women in humanitarian actions** within sampling frameworks, in all instances of data collection undertaken by those implementing projects in Afghanistan. Should this prove to not be possible due to contextual challenges, a clear disclaimer on data bias and underrepresentation should be flagged before the respective findings section. This should include an alert indicating that all findings and recommendations are applicable to male interviewees only; extrapolating these results to female interviewees would be statistically and ethically unacceptable.

SUPPORT FOR GENDER EQUALITY BY EU AND INTERNATIONAL ACTORS

The current situation in Afghanistan provides a particular set of unprecedented challenges and opportunities – and an imperative – for delivering interventions on women’s rights and gender equality. The absence of an internationally recognized government and a deeply restrictive, hostile environment to women’s rights and leadership has resulted in systematic and institutionalized gender discrimination that poses significant barriers to progress across all intervention areas.

The situation demands gender-informed and transformative approaches to ensure interventions do not exacerbate the pre-existing sources of social inequalities and do not normalize the absence of women in leadership roles and in public decision-making. This includes operating carefully in line with the “for women, by women” principle, which ensures that Afghan girls and women are involved in all aspects of interventions on basic needs and humanitarian aid. Navigating the complexities and DFA resistance surrounding gender equality requires a sustained, joint international effort working as a bulwark against the further erosion of women’s rights and deterioration of their outcomes.

Through existing support for gender equality, international actors contribute not only to immediate relief but also to the long-term resilience and empowerment of Afghan women and girls. The Profile notes that this can be best achieved through support that adheres to the four principles set out below.

These principles seek to operationalize the international community’s commitment to pre-existing gender equality and human rights standards and commitments:

1. **COMMIT to strengthening WCSOs, including through long-term, flexible funding** to registered and unregistered entities.
2. **ENSURE that at least 30 per cent of all funding to Afghanistan is supporting initiatives that directly target gender equality and women’s rights** – and that no gender-blind interventions are supported.
3. **ENSURE actions undertaken do not inadvertently contribute to or exacerbate normalization of discriminatory DFA policies, norms and values** – including strengthening of DFA structures that could inadvertently repress women and girls, in addition to other segments of the population – through programming that implements measures to mitigate security as well as reputational and ethical risks.
4. **EMBED human rights, especially women’s rights, as a cross-cutting theme across all humanitarian action and basic human needs interventions**, from the design to implementation and monitoring of all programming. Human rights are foundational and supportive to sustainably resolving the multiple crises underway in the country.

SUPPORT FOR GENDER EQUALITY BY EU AND INTERNATIONAL ACTORS

Donor support for gender equality in Afghanistan

The **European Union** supports gender equality and women's empowerment through mainstreaming a gender-transformative, rights-based and intersectional approach in its development assistance,²⁹⁸ promoting engagement at international, regional and country level and by focusing on the six thematic priority areas of engagement.

At country level (Afghanistan), gender equality and women's empowerment is supported through targeted donor support for international and UN actors and national NGOs. The EU is providing multi-year support for country-wide programming, such as for example the EU-UN Spotlight Initiative to eliminate violence against women and girls, which ended in 2023. Since 2021, the EU no longer provides development assistance but delivers basic needs and livelihoods assistance following a principled "for women, by women" approach.

The EU targets women's empowerment and support for livelihoods and employment creation through community-based networks, savings groups, MSMEs and women-led businesses. Gender equality support extends to interventions targeting ending violence against women and girls, ensuring the UN and international system has access to gender expertise, research and data, protection from child labour and child marriage, as well as access to education and safe learning for girls and boys in public schools, and health and medical education, training and services. Intervention support also covers household food security programmes for vulnerable populations in rural and underserved areas, through sustainable food production, climate-smart agriculture and resilient infrastructure, and sustainable management of watershed and natural resources.

Notable donor support for gender equality covers intervention areas such as health, GBV, livelihoods and economic empowerment, climate change, food security, women, peace and security, women's civil society, education, and research and monitoring.

Norway's gender equality support includes supporting the protection and expansion of civic space, women-led organizations, and women human rights defenders, and documenting and monitoring human rights violations.

Gender equality support by **Sweden** covers all intervention areas including health, GBV, livelihoods and economic empowerment, climate change, food security, women, peace and security and education. The support also includes targeted support for women professionals, women's civil society organizations, women in media, dialogue platforms for women leaders, and monitoring, research and advocacy around women's rights.

The focus of gender equality support by **Japan** is on women's economic empowerment, supporting livelihoods, and improving reproductive health care and maternal and child health, as well as improving the educational environment for girls. **Canada** is supporting monitoring and documentation of the rights of women and girls. **Germany** supports interventions targeting Women, Peace and Security as well as GBV. **Finland** is supporting sexual and reproductive health services. Additionally, donors supporting the work of UN Women across areas of gender equality interventions include **Austria, Canada, EU, Denmark, Germany, Iceland, Finland, Norway, Switzerland, Sweden and USAID.**

The lack of State architecture and institutions providing a framework for gender equality programming places importance on coordination mechanisms to increase cooperation and understanding across UN actors, international NGOs, national actors and donors. The Afghanistan Coordination Group (ACG) was established in May 2022 to improve coordination and coherence and identify synergies among key international partners to enhance efficiency and aid effectiveness. The ACG is supported by sectoral-level Strategic Thematic Working Groups (STWGs) that

298. Objective of the Gender Action Plan III: The European Commission and the High Representative reconfirm that by 2025 85% of all new external actions will contribute to the gender equality objective.

SUPPORT FOR GENDER EQUALITY BY EU AND INTERNATIONAL ACTORS

conduct technical-level coordination between the ACG partners to improve the quality and coherence of aid and policy dialogue and coordinate existing and planned programmatic activities to ensure complementarity and avoid duplication. In particular, the Gender and Human Rights STWG aims to enhance system-wide coherence on gender equality and women's empowerment interventions.

The following other coordination mechanisms are active across areas of intervention: UN Gender Theme Group; Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group (GiHA); Women's Access and Female Staff Participation Working Group; Strategic Thematic Working Group on Gender and Human Rights; and Afghan Women's Advisory Group.

Gender equality interventions across the United Nations

United Nations Country Team interventions targeting gender equality in 2023 fall within its **2023–2025 UN Strategic Framework for Afghanistan**.²⁹⁹ The Strategic Framework aims to complement humanitarian efforts with interventions addressing basic human needs across three complementary and mutually reinforcing priorities: 1) sustained essential services; 2) economic opportunities and resilient livelihoods; and 3) social cohesion, inclusion, gender equality, human rights and rule of law. These priorities aim to address the large-scale and increasing human suffering in the medium and long term, by supporting Afghans, particularly women, girls and other vulnerable groups to: a) build resilience to shocks, b) sustain livelihoods, c) protect human rights and fundamental freedoms, d) strengthen social cohesion and build social capital, and e) preserve hard-won development gains achieved over the past two decades, including with regard to service-delivery.

Through the Strategic Framework targeted interventions between 2023–2025 where gender equality and women's empowerment are **"the principal objective"** are outlined further below. The UN is able to undertake extensive work on this topic in Afghanistan. Twenty-one per cent of these interventions target gender equality as **"the principal objective"**. Interventions across UN agencies also target gender equality and

women's empowerment as a **"significant objective"** between 2023–2025 – this makes up an additional 73 per cent of the budgeted interventions.

With a presence in Afghanistan spanning two decades, **UN Women** is the UN system lead on gender equality and women's empowerment. Grounded in its unique access and commitment to women-led/focused CSOs, UN Women has a distinctive added value in amplifying the voices of diverse Afghan women and preserving space for them in response to the systematic silencing and erasure of Afghan women and girls, and the dismantling of the gender equality infrastructure. UN Women's focus on gender equality and women's empowerment can be seen by its commitment to recruiting and retaining national and international women staff, to an unwavering emphasis on the principle of non-discrimination against women and a cautious approach that does not normalize the Taliban's vision on women's rights to meet basic needs.

A key area of intervention for UN Women is ending violence against women targeted through programming that promotes availability of quality essential services preventing and responds to violence against women, including strengthening capacity among partners and service-providers, strengthening referral pathways, and providing community-based prevention and response mechanisms. UN Women provides strategic and technical support on integrating gender-responsive humanitarian action through GiHA and by providing assistance and emergency support through women's organizations on the ground. These are complemented by a broader effort to preserve and rebuild the Afghan women's movement by providing flexible core institutional grants and capacity-building. Supporting these initiatives, UN Women researches and documents what is happening to Afghan women and girls on the ground, elevating their voices, priorities and recommendations to influence international audiences.

The Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF) serves as global pooled funding designed to accelerate action and support for women's participation, leadership and empowerment in humanitarian response and peace and security settings. In Afghanistan, WPHF projects support women's organizations to advance progress on gender equality and women's empowerment, reduce violence against women and girls, protect the safety, security and human rights of women and girls and ensure

299. The UN Strategic Framework for Afghanistan is available here: <https://afghanistan.un.org/en/238795-united-nations-strategic-framework-afghanistan>

SUPPORT FOR GENDER EQUALITY BY EU AND INTERNATIONAL ACTORS

the survival of Afghan women's organizations amid restrictions to operate. Since 2020, WPHF has been channelling urgently needed financing to women's rights organizations; supporting the socioeconomic recovery of Afghan women and girls displaced in Pakistan and Tajikistan; supporting women human rights defenders with protection grants and advocacy support; and promoting Afghan women peacebuilders to participate in peace processes and the implementation of peace agreements.

Sexual and reproductive health rights are a focus for **United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)**, whose programming aims to increase national institutional capacity to deliver comprehensive maternal health services (including through family health houses), SHRH services in humanitarian settings, and capacity-development among NGO partners to provide family planning services and products. UNFPA also provides life-saving health, psychosocial support and GBV services through service-delivery points and adolescent- and youth-integrated services on healthy lifestyles and child marriage.

Gender programming for the **United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)** spans across human rights, protection delivery and gender-sensitive community-based development in priority areas of refugee and IDP return across the country. Protection interventions include the provision of legal assistance and psychosocial support and cash-based assistance for the most vulnerable persons served. UNHCR gender programming also supports access to documentation including national IDs and birth registration, and fostering women's empowerment through livelihoods support including start-ups for small and medium enterprises and microfinance grants.

UNICEF works across programmes to ensure the integration of gender during programme delivery. In health, UNICEF plays a strategic role in ensuring the continuation of health service-delivery by supporting primary and secondary health care nationwide, including availability of female staff. UNICEF nutrition programming supports feeding centres across Afghanistan, as well as the provision of cash transfers to the families of pregnant and lactating women. In education, UNICEF has made significant investments supporting access to primary and secondary education, including community-based education classes for boys and girls nationwide, pathways to quality education

for out-of-school and disadvantaged children, and distribution of teaching and learning materials.

The World Food Programme (WFP) operates three different types of programmes focused on gender equality: 1) WFP's school feeding programme which facilitates girls' attendance of primary schools through provision of nutritious foods during the school day; 2) WFP supports women's economic empowerment through "food assistance for training" programmes, which combine vocational skill trainings with monthly cash transfers to provide women with food and nutrition security while learning new skills; and 3) WFP's social protection pilot which supports food security and nutrition outcomes, and health care access for pregnant and breastfeeding mothers and children under 2. WFP programming integrates a stable long-term cash transfer (18 months) with social behavioural change communication, and combines transfers with humanitarian assistance depending on vulnerability, emergencies and seasonality.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)'s gender equality interventions are focused on women's economic empowerment and increased social cohesion, specifically by enhancing women's economic agency through micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) and strengthening women's employability through technical, vocational and educational training (3 months) in Afghanistan and through cross-border educational opportunities. UNDP works to prevent the risk of GBV by integrating increased information, awareness, and psychosocial support across these programmes including mainstreaming GBV and PSEA risk mitigation and awareness among affected communities and beneficiaries.

The World Health Organization (WHO) Gender, Equity and Human Rights (GER) Unit and GBV programme implements gender-responsive approaches across health-related programming. The GER Unit runs gender mainstreaming workshops in central and regional offices to build the capacity of WHO staff and frontline health-care-providers, provides technical support to adapt WHO gender analysis and planning tools, leads WHO advocacy efforts for gender and health issues at national and provincial levels, and leads the implementation of health response to GBV, including by strengthening the knowledge and skills of frontline health-care-providers on health responses to GBV. The GER unit also leads the development of technical and normative guidance to mainstream and support

SUPPORT FOR GENDER EQUALITY BY EU AND INTERNATIONAL ACTORS

WHO's commitment to "leave no one behind" towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); particularly SDG 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages, and SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

International Organization for Migration (IOM) gender programming is focused on the provision of protection assistance for vulnerable returnees and internally displaced persons within Afghanistan through screening, case management and protection monitoring. IOM ensures its programming is gender-responsive and fully integrates women into all aspects of programming, policy development and advocacy efforts. IOM prioritizes the formation of diverse, gender-balanced teams to effectively respond to the needs of both men and women in a culturally appropriate manner. IOM specifically focuses on engaging and consulting with women during community action planning and community-based disaster risk reduction initiatives. Livelihoods programming places a strong emphasis on supporting women-owned businesses and businesses with a high female employment rate, contributing to staff retention and economic empowerment within the community.

Gender equality programming by the **United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)** includes the Community Resilience and Livelihoods Project, which focuses on: creating jobs for women by providing labour-intensive work in urban and rural areas; supporting vulnerable households by providing social grants, prioritizing and supporting female-headed households in urban and rural areas; and delivering capacity development to women on self-confidence, resilience, PSEAH and gender issues. The Emergency Healthcare Assistance project contributes to improving women and girls' access to basic health care services, including by providing an ambulance to the maternity hospital in Kabul. UNOPS further supports gender equity in drug treatment programmes, recovery and social reintegration through livelihood opportunities. Through the Awaaz Afghanistan humanitarian call centre, the inter-agency communication and accountability centre strengthens women's access to information on available assistance and referrals and complaint feedback response mechanisms.

Aligning with broader international efforts to enhance women's economic participation, the **United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR)** supports the pivotal role of women in economic development

through the advancement of Afghan MSMEs. UNITAR undertakes capacity-building initiatives to advance entrepreneurial skills and contribute to MSME resilience, competitiveness and long-term sustainability. This boosts the entrepreneurial ecosystem, encouraging the development of new ideas, products and services to contribute to a dynamic and inclusive private sector. Recognizing the leadership of young entrepreneurs, UNITAR also engages and empowers young Afghans, harnessing their energy and creativity to drive economic growth and social progress.

World Bank gender equality interventions cover a broad scope of programming. Programming supports the delivery of emergency foods security and basic health services to women and girls, including by ensuring availability of female health workers, especially in hard-to-access areas, collecting sex-disaggregated data, and improving health sector responses to GBV. The World Bank increases women's inclusion in community resilience and livelihoods through their participation in CDCs, inclusion in cash-for-work and training initiatives and participation in disaster risk management and leadership. Following mapping of all registered CSOs and NGOs, programming supports WCSOs with grants and trainings, and establishes of localized and community-based education centres. The World Bank also contributes to gender data through quantitative and qualitative research and providing insights from women and girls and sex-disaggregated data.

Other UN actors with interventions that have gender as a "significant objective" in their programming include the **United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)**; the **Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)**; the **United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS)**; the **United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)**; the **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural organization (UNESCO)**; the **International Labour Organization (ILO)**; the **United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)**; and the **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)**.

UN Women is the UN organization dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. A global champion for women and girls, UN Women was established to accelerate progress on meeting their needs worldwide.

UN Women supports UN Member States as they set global standards for achieving gender equality, and works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to ensure that the standards are effectively implemented and truly benefit women and girls worldwide. It works globally to make the vision of the Sustainable Development Goals a reality for women and girls and stands behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life, focusing on four strategic priorities: Women lead, participate in and benefit equally from governance systems; Women have income security, decent work and economic autonomy; All women and girls live a life free from all forms of violence; Women and girls contribute to and have greater influence in building sustainable peace and resilience, and benefit equally from the prevention of natural disasters and conflicts and humanitarian action. UN Women also coordinates and promotes the UN system's work in advancing gender equality.



**Funded by
the European Union**



UN Women Afghanistan
www.asiapacific.unwomen.org