

December 2023



Situation of Afghan Women - Summary report of country - wide women's consultations

Photo: UN Women/Sayed Habib Bidel

Background

“Let our voices be heard, and let Afghanistan be saved from this darkness.”

This brief presents the perspectives of women across Afghanistan on their current situation and priorities. It reflects the latest in a series of quarterly consultations with Afghan women documenting their experiences and policy recommendation since the Taliban takeover in August 2021.¹ The de facto authorities (DFA) have enacted nearly 70 decrees and directives restricting women's basic rights and fundamental freedoms,² in effect, wholly excluding them from shaping their own futures and that of their country. Consultations with Afghan women help to understand their experiences, hopes and fears, and are aimed at amplifying their voices in national and international fora.

UN Women, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) conducted in-person and online consultations and telesurveys reaching 462 women across 33 of 34 provinces.³ Women reflected on the preceding three months (August to October 2023), detailing their experiences, priorities and recommendations for the United Nations, UN Member States and other international actors to improve women's rights in Afghanistan. This process consulted women heads of households; women who are internally displaced and from host communities; rural, peri-urban and urban women; employed and unemployed women; and women differing by age, marital status, ethnicity and educational background.

¹ UN Women, UNAMA and IOM consult Afghan women inside the country on a quarterly basis. Reports are available on consultations conducted in [July 2023](#), [April 2023](#), [January 2023](#) and [August/September 2022](#).

² United States Institute of Peace. 2023. [Tracking the Taliban's \(Mis\)Treatment of Women](#).

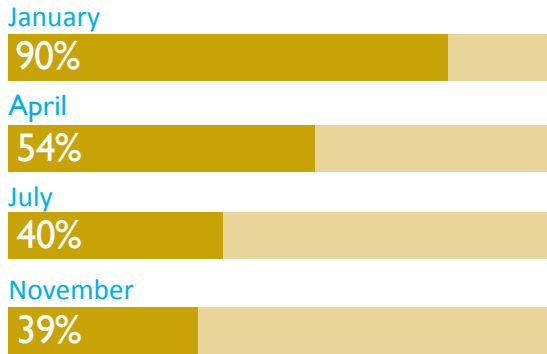
³ These were conducted with participants from all provinces, except Nuristan.

Summary of key findings

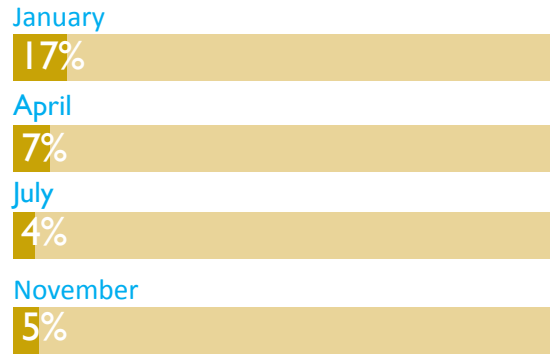
- Access to education and employment were seen as key to addressing wide-ranging issues, including the growing mental health crisis among women and girls as well as negative outcomes associated with poverty and girls leaving school, such as early and child marriage, child labour, domestic violence and illegal migration.
- Women emphasized that education levels and economic empowerment influence household and community-wide decision-making; they described education and employment as key in granting women perceived legitimacy and access to decision-making. Current restrictions targeting women and girls risk reinforcing pre-existing narratives that women do not have knowledge or power, leaving a generation of women without perceived qualifications and skills for leadership.
- Women's feeling of influence in the home, extended family and community has declined steadily in each quarter this year. In just 10 months, the share of women reporting "good" or "full" influence in the household decreased from 90 per cent in January to 39 per cent in November 2023. The share reporting this in the community dropped from 17 per cent to 5 per cent.
- Nearly half of women consulted (48 per cent) stated that enforcement of restrictions has become stricter over time – a decrease from 62 per cent in July. Yet a significant share of women (32 per cent) reported feeling that enforcement was becoming less strict, with more exceptions over time – an increase from 19 per cent in July.⁴ This tentatively indicates some normalization of DFA policies and restrictive gender norms may be occurring, where women have begun to adapt to constraints, as well as a potential relaxation around enforcement as a result.
- Consultations continued to show that women's mental health remained extremely poor, with 76 per cent of women scoring their mental health as "very bad" or "bad". Mental health conditions such as depression and insomnia were leaving women and girls experiencing physical issues such as tiredness, loss of appetite and headaches.
- Just over half of respondents (53 per cent) felt that women in their communities knew about the causes and impacts of climate change. They said that Afghan women were well placed to engage on this issue – for example, by establishing committees on disaster risk reduction and environmental management, convening discussions and leading public awareness campaigns.
- Recent and ongoing humanitarian emergencies – including the earthquakes in western Afghanistan on 8 October 2023 and the forcible returns of Afghan nationals from Pakistan, a majority of whom are women and children – have disproportionately affected women and further compounded ongoing crises for Afghan women and girls. Discriminatory DFA policies have continued to hinder gender-responsive humanitarian assistance, including through the ban on women workers at non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

⁴Data collected is not statistically representative, with changes in regional representation over time. Numbers should be read as indicative of trends.

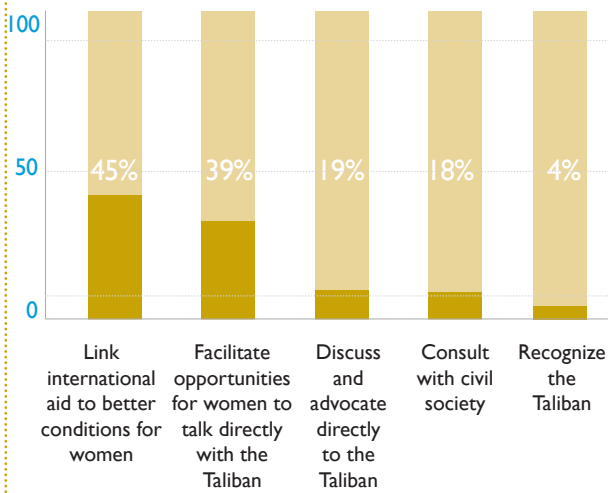
Women reporting “good” or “full” influence in the household.



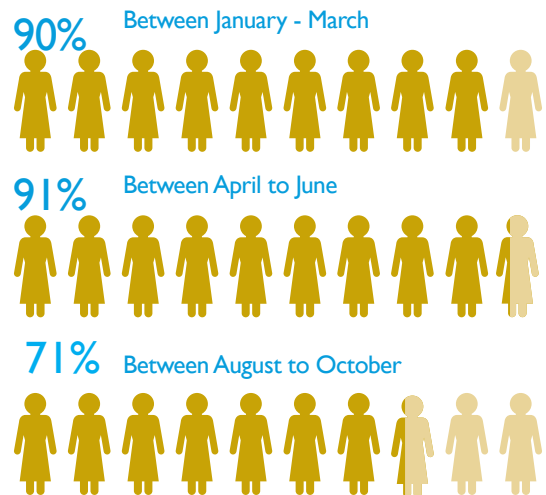
Women reporting “good” or “full” influence in the community.



Women recommending different strategies for international engagement with the Taliban to improve conditions for women.⁵



Women reporting worsening feelings of anxiety, isolation and depression.



⁵Note women were able to choose more than one answer to this question.

Findings

“We hope that our message will resonate with the world, and that we will not be left alone to fight for our rights.”

The restrictions with the greatest effects on the lives of women consulted and their family members have been the ban on girls’ education beyond grade six (34 per cent); constraints on women’s work, especially at national and international NGOs and the United Nations (20 per cent), and when women government workers were asked to stay home (12 per cent); and bans on women’s freedom of movement (21 per cent). Women continued to request the international community to make a reversal of restrictions on women’s and girls’ education (secondary and university) the top priority, followed closely by improvements in income opportunities and the economy.

In line with the deep despair over the loss of opportunities, autonomy and agency conveyed each quarter by women surveyed by the United Nations, recent Gallup polling showed that in July 2023, only 11 per cent of Afghan women said they were satisfied with the freedom they have to choose what they do with their lives.⁶ This represented a drop from 29 per cent in 2022 and was a new record low for any population ever polled by Gallup.



Education and employment

Access to education and employment were seen as key to addressing the growing mental health crisis among women and girls as well as negative outcomes associated with poverty and girls leaving school, such as early and child marriage, child labour, domestic violence and illegal migration. Women consulted described how poverty results in food insecurity⁷ and constrains access to health services and medicine as well as to transportation, particularly where *mahram* requirements double transportation costs.⁸ In rural areas, pervasive poverty may mean an entire community has no private vehicles to access essential services. Even before the Taliban takeover, many communities suffered from poor infrastructure and remote health services.

The creation of job opportunities was seen as a means of empowerment, building the independence of women and increasing their engagement in the community. They viewed employment as a way to raise educated children, contribute to the family’s well-being and influence decision-making in the household and beyond. Across consultations from January to September 2023, women attributed their decreasing influence on household decision-making in part to lower financial contributions⁹ Globally, income generation and the ability to control earnings has been found to directly influence women’s bargaining power within the home.¹⁰

Women noted that income-generating opportunities for women were currently limited to socially acceptable, home-based activities such as tailoring, carpet-weaving, handicrafts, jewellery, agriculture, and livestock and – for some – online work. These types of activities – especially home-based ones – were often disconnected from markets, particularly in areas where a *mahram* was required for travel and in places where women’s only markets have been shut down. Women urged international actors to expand support for women’s economic empowerment and livelihoods programmes, given the knock-on effects, including potential improvements in health outcomes and women’s influence.

Islamic education centres – or madrassas¹¹ – are the principal opportunity for schooling in some areas for girls after sixth grade. Madrassas almost exclusively teach religious classes, omitting curricula on language, math and science.

⁶ Gallup. 2023. “Freedom Fades, Suffering Remains for Women in Afghanistan.” 10 November.

⁷ Women are also more likely to adopt strategies to manage food insecurity that leave them with less access to sufficient, nutritious foods, including by prioritizing the feeding of their children and male relatives over themselves. See: CARE. 2022. [The Impact of the Food Crisis on Women and Girls in Afghanistan – November 2022](#). Crisis and emergency food insecurity levels were expected to affect around 15.3 million Afghans (36 per cent) in October 2023. See: Integrated Food Security Classification Phase. 2023. [Afghanistan: Acute Food Insecurity Situation for April 2023 and Projection for May – October 2023](#).

⁸ The *mahram* requirement means that both women and their mahram must pay for transport, doubling the cost. Some reports have suggested that in Kabul, shared taxis may even require unaccompanied women to cover the cost of all seats. See: MSF. 2022. [Persistent Barriers to Access Healthcare in Afghanistan: The Ripple Effects of a Protracted Crisis and a Staggering Economic Situation](#).

⁹ UN Women, UNAMA and IOM. 2023. [Summary Report of Country-wide Women’s Consultations – September 2023](#). Kabul: UN Women.

¹⁰ World Bank. 2021. *Women, Business and the Law 2021*. Washington, DC: World Bank. E. Field, R. Pande, N. Rigol and others. 2016. *On Her Account: Can Strengthening Women’s Financial Control Boost Female Labor Supply?* Working paper. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School.

¹¹ Numerous Islamic education centres exist, of which madrassas are only one form, despite often being used to refer to all types of Islamic education. Different Islamic education centres include: madrassas, which offer comprehensive Islamic education across three levels; *darul uloom*, which extends madrassa schooling to grades 13 to 14 and offers Islamic education across five levels; *darul huffaz*, which focuses on memorization, pronunciation and Quranic reading and accent; *jihadi madrassa*, formally introduced by the DFA in 2022, which moves away from modern sciences and uses, old, outdated textbooks; and mosque-based education, a form of informal education using early Islamic teaching at the primary level in local mosques.

Women said that most girls were dissatisfied with this limited religious curriculum and wished to continue to learn a greater diversity of subjects. Boys also preferred to remain in the standard public and private schools still available to them to benefit from a modern curriculum rather than going to madrassas. Yet poverty levels in some areas were so high that no children could attend school or home-based learning and instead were forced to engage in agricultural work. Alternative learning pathways for girls are a vital lifeline, yet are ultimately unsustainable as girls would not receive credentials and the ban on women attending universities remained in place.



Mental health and social relationships

Consistent across consultations since August 2022, women's mental health has remained poor; 76 per cent of women interviewed scored their mental health as "very bad" or "bad". Women described experiencing loneliness, social withdrawal and low self-confidence, as well as anxiety, stress and aggression. These feelings manifested in mental health conditions such as depression and insomnia, and left women and girls experiencing physical issues such as tiredness, loss of appetite and headaches. Women continue to report further deterioration of their mental health in the preceding three months which, considering the low baseline, is particularly staggering.¹² Women complained about feeling hopelessness and pessimism on a daily basis.

In general, restrictions targeting women and girls have reduced the scope of critical positive coping strategies and informal support systems for mental health. Women referred to the increasing number of family members and friends migrating to seek better livelihood opportunities as contributing to social fragmentation through the loss of close family relationships and social connections. Social relationships have also diminished through bans on women visiting parks, gyms and beauty salons. Women acknowledged that with everyone suffering from mental health issues, seeing family and friends can be emotionally demanding, and drains emotional reserves instead of replenishing them.

Arguments have reportedly increased within families due to confinement and financial stress, with some women making links to a decline in mutual respect between spouses and an anecdotal increase in domestic violence – an issue raised by participants without prompting.¹³ Some women suggested that male family members were influenced by DFA policies and practices and, as a result, exhibited more misogynistic behaviour. The DFA has codified social norms making men responsible for the behaviour of female family members,¹⁴ further emboldening men to control women in the household and entrenching conservative social ideologies. By holding men responsible for women's adherence to decrees, the DFA has also encroached on men's individual authority and autonomy within the household. The recent Gallup polling reflected the impacts of restrictions on women's place in society more broadly, showing that only 17 per cent of Afghan women and 36 per cent of men believed that women were treated with respect.¹⁵

Women's confinement at home and deteriorating social relationships have further limited their ability to obtain information and, in turn, severely reduced their access to services, including humanitarian assistance. Women have long had less access to information than men – with lower literacy levels,¹⁶ mobile phone ownership and access to the internet. The informal social contact critical for women to gain information has largely eroded through restrictions enforcing their isolation and reliance on male family members.¹⁷ This is particularly concerning in the current humanitarian crisis and for women in contexts of displacement and extreme need, including due to events such as the earthquakes in western Afghanistan and forcible returns in border areas [see box below]. Access to information enables women to access to humanitarian assistance and make informed choices about their lives and livelihoods thus promoting fundamental rights.

¹² Women reporting on their mental health changed across consultations in April, July, and November 2023 as follows: those reporting their mental health has gotten "significantly worse" (57 per cent, 69 per cent and 47 per cent, respectively); "a bit worse" (33 per cent, 22 per cent and 24 per cent, respectively); "stayed the same, no change" (8 per cent, 7 per cent and 18 per cent, respectively); "improved a bit" (2 per cent, 2 per cent and 9 per cent, respectively); and "significantly improved" (0 per cent, 0 per cent and 2 per cent, respectively).

¹³ This point has been made repeatedly across quarterly consultations.

¹⁴ The hijab decree in particular made a woman's *mahram* responsible for policing her clothing. See: K. Clark and S. Rahimi. 2022. "We Need to Breathe Too": Women Across Afghanistan Navigate the Taliban's Hijab Ruling. Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network.

¹⁵ Gallup. 2023. "Freedom Fades, Suffering Remains for Women in Afghanistan." 10 November.

¹⁶ Women's literacy rates are lower in rural areas (16 per cent) than urban ones (40 per cent), and below the national male literacy rate (55 per cent) in both. See: Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. 2023. Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. 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.

¹⁷ A recent study showed that women feel less informed than men about the humanitarian assistance available to them (37 per cent are not informed, compared with 28 per cent of men). See: Ground Truth Solutions and Salma Consulting. 2023. Against the Odds: Strengthening Accountability to Women and Girls in Afghanistan.



Influence and participation

“While men may make history, it is important to recognize that women play a crucial role in society, including addressing various challenges and obstacles.”

Women’s self-reported feeling of influence in the home, extended family and community dropped steadily in each quarter in 2023. In just 10 months, women reporting “good” or “full” influence in the household decreased from 90 per cent in January 2023 to 39 per cent in November; in the community, it dropped from 17 to 5 per cent. Some respondents said that the degree of influence women have differed across households. In some areas, other hierarchies were at play, such as age, which gave older women space to exert some influence in decision-making in certain contexts. Nevertheless, despite some nuance around age, most women felt that they were rarely allowed to participate in decision-making. When disagreements or conflicts arose, decisions were made in favour of men.

Women emphasized the positive impact that education and economic empowerment have in improving their position and influence on household and community-wide decision-making. This has long been the case at the provincial and national levels as well, with education being a key factor in granting women perceived legitimacy and thus access to decision-making roles.¹⁸ Restrictions on women’s education and employment reinforce the pre-existing narrative that women do not have knowledge or power and thus are not worth listening to or engaging with. A similar narrative that women do not hold adequate qualifications for public leadership roles was regularly used under the Government of the Republic of Afghanistan to discount and exclude women, including in the intra-Afghan talks that preceded the Taliban takeover.¹⁹ Current restrictions on education and employment risk reinforcing exclusionary patriarchal social norms and leaving a generation of women without important qualifications and skills for leadership.

Without the formal inclusion of women in public decision-making, they have been finding informal and creative ways to contribute to decision-making and conflict resolution. They have key skills, knowledge and qualities to take on leadership roles within their families, communities and at the provincial and national levels. Nevertheless, social norms exacerbated by restrictions on their rights have discouraged women from asserting themselves and exerting their agency, effectively erasing their voices from public and private fora. Women underlined how their own agency and autonomy directly contravened social norms that confined them to the home. Instead, men were expected to exert significant control over women’s lives. One respondent highlighted the impact of this by stating that “where there are men, women are unnecessary”.



Climate change

Just over half of respondents (53 per cent) stated that women in their communities knew about the causes and impacts of climate change. One third of respondents (35 per cent) said that women in their communities did not. Water shortages, drought and air pollution were the most common environmental issues, affecting access to food and water, livelihoods, and basic services such as schools and health clinics. Some respondents noted the impact of environmental pressures on social cohesion through increased resource scarcity and migration. These challenges and risks disproportionately affected women. Long-distance travel to fetch water increased the dangers of gender-based violence for women, girls and boys, while the transfer of other strenuous, traditionally masculine-coded domestic tasks onto women and girls may be deemed shameful and could lead to social friction and isolation.

Women described ways to include them in climate change and environmental issues. They were well placed to establish and sit on committees on disaster risk reduction and environmental management, for example, and to convene discussions and lead public awareness campaigns around reducing air pollution and promoting environmental protection and water conservation. Some women suggested that climate pressures provide opportunities for women and men to transcend entrenched gender roles, with women able to take on traditionally masculine roles around family and community protection.

¹⁸ S. Wakefield and B. Bauer. 2005. *Place at the Table: Afghan Women, Men and Decision-making Authority*. Kabul: AREU; A. Larson and N. Coburn. 2020. *Solidarity, Strength and Substance*. Kabul: AREU.

¹⁹ A. Nijat and J. Murtazashvili. 2015. *Women’s Leadership Roles in Afghanistan*. Washington: United States Institute of Peace; S. Wakefield. 2004. *Gender and Local Level Decision Making: Findings from a Case Study in Mazar-e Sharif*.



Displacement

Displacement and migration impact most communities across Afghanistan, particularly in light of recent earthquakes and forcible returns [see box below]. Women said that the main reasons for people to migrate included difficulties finding work for themselves or family members, poor access to services, drought and conflict. Some women indicated a wish to move abroad for work and educational opportunities, greater safety and more freedom, demonstrating how the women's rights crisis has deepened the protracted displacement crisis. The main obstacles holding them back were financial costs and the loss of a critical support system of family and friends.

Male family members often migrated alone or first to seek employment opportunities. Some women said that they felt more unsafe after male family members departed and found it more difficult to leave the home without a mahram. Women who did not wish to relocate noted the significance of access to facilities (such as markets, health services and schools) and transportation, opportunities for and proximity to employment, and proximity to families.

Women described gender as the biggest signifier of vulnerability in displacement, particularly for women heads of households and widows, and women with disabilities and who were illiterate. These women faced additional obstacles to mobility, accessing education and employment, and simply securing information to obtain key services and support. Home-based employment – currently, a key form of employment for women across Afghanistan – was particularly vulnerable to the impacts of displacement, namely through the loss of informal networks to find clients and buyers and difficulties in transporting materials and equipment.



Earthquakes in the Western region

Between 7 and 15 October, four powerful (6.3 magnitude) earthquakes struck Herat Province in western Afghanistan, resulting in wide-scale destruction, injury and loss of life. The earthquakes affected already vulnerable communities, leaving thousands in need of humanitarian assistance and further reducing their limited resilience immediately before winter. Women and girls were disproportionately affected, with estimates suggesting they comprised 54 per cent of individuals who lost their lives; 58 per cent of injured persons; and 61 per cent of missing persons.²⁰ This imbalance was largely due to the higher likelihood that women were inside their houses, due to both cultural norms and DFA restrictions limiting their freedom of movement and opportunities outside the home.²¹

Afghan women have been disproportionately affected by disasters more broadly due to a complex combination of restrictive gender norms, limits on access to education and health care, insufficient access to resources and livelihood opportunities, and limited avenues to influence decision-making. Taken together, these increase women's and girls' exposure and vulnerability to disasters and decrease their resilience in terms of preparedness and coping capacity. Globally, women and children are 14 times more likely to die in disasters than men.²²

The bans on Afghan women working for national and international NGOs and the United Nations hinder gender-responsive humanitarian action. Conservative social norms and DFA restrictions mean Afghan women are largely inaccessible to male NGO workers. Aid provided by male humanitarian workers only reaches male heads of households. Whenever women aid workers are not present, women, particularly those without a male family member, such as widows and women-headed households, are excluded from selection processes, needs assessments, distribution and feedback mechanisms. This leaves them without life-saving assistance.

²⁰ IOM. 2023. Multi-sectoral Rapid Assessment. 12 November.

²¹ For more, see: Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group. 2023. [Gender Update #2: Earthquake in Herat Province. Kabul](#): Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group.

²² Plan International. 2013. [The State of the World's Girls 2013: Adolescent Girls and Disasters](#).



Forcible returns from Pakistan

Forcible returns of undocumented Afghan nationals from Pakistan are expected to impact around 1.7 million Afghans, a majority of whom are women and children, further compounding the struggles of Afghan women and girls.²³ The Pakistani Government began returns on 1 November 2023. This took place despite a non-return advisory for Afghanistan maintained by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees since August 2021 due to the complex crisis and significant risk of persecution and human rights violations. This is a particular concern for the many women human rights defenders who fled after August 2021 and are now being forced back into danger. The ban on women working for NGOs and the United Nations will hinder the participation of women staff in the response and risks depriving women and children of life-saving support.

Many returnees have had to leave their belongings and assets behind and will be forced into situations of protracted displacement. Women and girls will face increasing mental health and protection risks in precarious and insecure environments with inadequate facilities and shelters, and disproportionate responsibilities for households and caregiving. This prospect reinforces the critical importance of assurances for women aid workers to operate and deliver gender-responsive assistance directly to women and girls in situations of displacement and need.



Enforcement of restrictions

Nearly half of women consulted (48 per cent) felt that enforcement of restrictions has become stricter over time, a decrease from 62 per cent in the last survey round. Yet a significant share (32 per cent) reported feeling that enforcement was becoming less strict, with more exceptions over time, an increase from 19 per cent.²⁴ Differences in regional representation among respondents across quarterly surveys could account for some shift. Yet it likely also reveals the evolving realization of the goal of DFA restrictions against women, namely, to target behavioural change and cultural shifts where initial implementation is strictly enforced, followed by a gradual easing of enforcement over time as more conservative norms are established and households and communities start their own self-policing or censoring. This perceived relaxing of enforcement may also signify that women have become accustomed to restrictions and perceive them as less onerous, pointing to the normalization of the situation. Discussions with women working at NGOs indicated that a small space appeared to be opening for them to engage and advocate with the DFA, pointing to their persistence and ability to work to advance women's rights and gender issues within a hostile system.

Perceptions around enforcement differed geographically. In the southern region, women's freedoms have long been governed by more conservative social norms, which may account for the perceptions of women there that the enforcement of restrictions has become less strict. This would also confirm indications of normalization. A majority of women (55 per cent) across the southern region believed that restrictions were enforced with exceptions.²⁵ On average nationally, a majority of women (60 per cent) saw restrictions as enforced without any exceptions.



Engagement with the DFA

Women continued to report limited engagement with DFA officials – at all levels – on issues important to them, noting barriers in accessing DFA offices and male accompaniment requirements (*mahram*). The absence of women in the DFA's structures has made it challenging for women to meet with the DFA, given strict implementation of

²³ As of 14 November 2023, 250,000 Afghans had been deported.

²⁴ The share of women stating that enforcement was "becoming less strict" increased from 19 per cent in July to 37 per cent in November; those stating that enforcement was "very strict" decreased by 4 percentage points; and those indicating that it was "somewhat strict but with exceptions" increased by 7 percentage points.

²⁵ In the southern region (namely, Kandahar, Nimroz, Zabul, Uruzgan and Helmand), compared to the national average, there was "very little enforcement" according to 6 per cent, compared to 2 per cent, respectively. Enforcement was "somewhat strict, but with some exceptions allowed" according to 48 per cent, compared to 33 per cent, respectively, and "very strict (without exceptions)" according to 48 per cent, compared to 60 per cent, respectively.

gender segregation in workplaces. Women highlighted the importance of focusing on a mixture of direct and indirect strategies to increase their political participation, including by reinstating women in the civil service and increasing legal protections and rights. Some women noted success in asking male family members to advocate for them. They also suggested that positive outcomes were more likely through requesting male tribal and religious leaders to speak on their behalf. In the more conservative southern region, in particular, women were more likely to look to local actors – such as male community leaders and community-based NGOs or civil society groups – than international actors to engage with the DFA on reversing or altering edicts. While women continued to advocate for their indirect participation – such as through male family members, male community and religious leaders, and the international community – ultimately, they requested a seat at the decision-making table, an ask long predating the Taliban takeover.

Recommendations to the international community

Women requested the international community to try to improve conditions for women through continued pressure on the DFA. They proposed **linking aid to better conditions for women** (45 per cent) and **facilitating opportunities for Afghan women to talk directly with the Taliban** (39 per cent), with many women requesting that both of these strategies be used in parallel.²⁶ Women's preference appeared to have shifted in the past 15 months towards the international use of economic and diplomatic pressure while simultaneously creating space for Afghan women to advocate for themselves, compared to an earlier emphasis on direct discussions and advocacy with the DFA by the international community.²⁷ Each consultation round has reinforced the request to create pathways for women's participation as women see this as one of their only avenues to take part in public decision-making.

Despite their preference to advocate directly for themselves, women said that given the DFA's current restrictions and practices, **the United Nations and international representatives who work at a local level** would, in practice, be best placed to directly engage the DFA on reversing restrictions and negotiating local exemptions. Since the previous consultation in July 2023, women have placed greater importance on international representatives working at the local level.²⁸ This could indicate a focus on seeking pragmatic, discrete solutions and exemptions as well as the limited influence of international actors at the central level, especially the Taliban's Kandahar-based leadership.

Women continued to urge the United Nations and **international representatives meeting the DFA to stress the necessity of including women** – as half the population – and to highlight the financial costs to the economy and long-term development of the country. Rights-based arguments, in the eyes of Afghan women, held little sway over the Taliban. They encouraged framing women's rights issues through efficiency arguments, such as how women's inclusion was key to prosperous and peaceful societies.

Women reiterated the importance of **engaging male family and community members and male religious and tribal leaders to support advocacy for women**, not only on discrete issues but also in reversing restrictions on women's rights more broadly. This could be complemented by public awareness campaigns on television and radio programmes.

Women continued to urge international actors to **support women's economic empowerment**, including to address poverty and associated negative mental health and other outcomes, and to increase women's influence and access to decision-making, from the household to the national level. They suggested establishing capacity-building and livelihoods courses as well as online and home-based employment opportunities. Support could also entail microfinance or the provision of materials, equipment and machines.

Preventative measures to **reduce the impact of climate disasters** were highlighted as a priority for international interventions on climate change. Recommendations included investments in disaster risk reduction infrastructure (retaining walls to mitigate the impact of floods), establishing sustainable water sources (tanks and wells) and providing clean heating sources (electric heaters and clean fuel). Women urged international actors to work closely with environmental protection institutes to create safety standards for housing construction and zoning in high-risk areas and to establish gender-inclusive early warning systems.

²⁶ Note women were able to choose more than one answer to this question.

²⁷ In comparison to a nationwide quantitative survey conducted by Bishnaw in August 2022, the share of women requesting the international community to link international aid to better conditions for women increased from 26 per cent to 35 per cent, and the share calling for facilitating options for women to talk directly with the Taliban increased from 26 per cent to 30 per cent. The share requesting the international community to discuss and advocate directly to the Taliban dropped from 24 per cent to 15 per cent, and to recognize the Taliban dropped from 11 per cent to 3 per cent. These questions were surveyed under different instruments and should be seen as indicative only. See: Bishnaw, 2022. "Afghan Women's Key Priorities." 31 August.

²⁸ The share of women choosing "international representatives working at the local level" increased from 8 per cent in July to 21 per cent in November; the share for the choice of "UN representatives" decreased by 47 per cent in July to 33 per cent in November.