



Situation of Afghan women – Summary report of country-wide women’s consultations

June 2023

Photo: UN Women/Sayed Habib Bidel

Background

This brief presents the perspectives of women across Afghanistan on their situation and priorities in the wake of the latest rollbacks on women’s rights and gender equality. It offers women’s recommendations to the international community on key issues, including the 4 April 2023 ban¹ on Afghan women working for the United Nations, an extension of the 24 December 2022 ban stopping Afghan women from working in national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs).²

To develop this brief, UN Women Afghanistan, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) undertook consultations reaching 407 Afghan women. This process collected data from 181 participants between 18 and 26 April 2023 in Kabul, Kandahar, Herat, Baghlan, Bamyán, Balkh, Nangarhar, Kunar and Laghman.³ Between 20 April and 12 May, 226 one-on-one telesurveys took place with women in 20 provinces⁴ covering urban and rural areas.⁵ Women consulted included a mixture of heads of households, internally displaced persons, rural and urban residents, and employed and unemployed women. Participants were diverse in terms of age, marital status, ethnicity and educational background. One consultation with men was part of a pilot to understand their views on gender equality and women’s rights.⁶

¹ On 4 April 2023, the United Nations was notified by the de facto authorities that, with immediate effect, no Afghan woman is permitted to work for the United Nations in Afghanistan, and that this measure will be actively enforced, with the security of national women staff no longer guaranteed. This decision extends the directive previously announced on 24 December 2022 banning Afghan women from working for national and international NGOs. To date, the de facto authorities have assured the United Nations that the ban does not apply to Afghan women working there on health or education, nor does it apply to international women working for the United Nations.

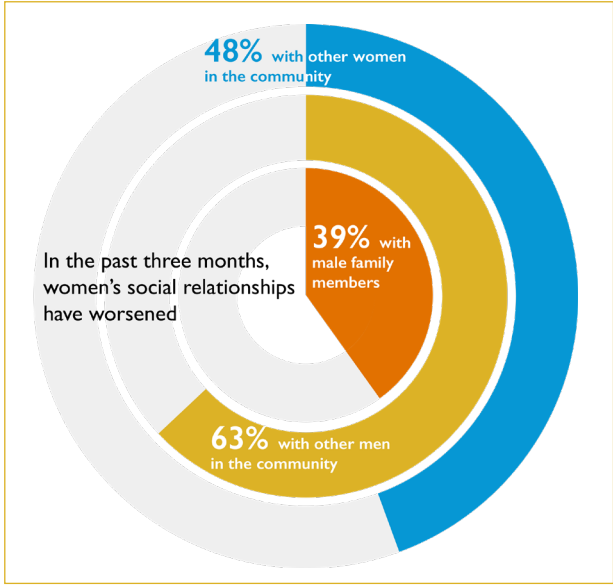
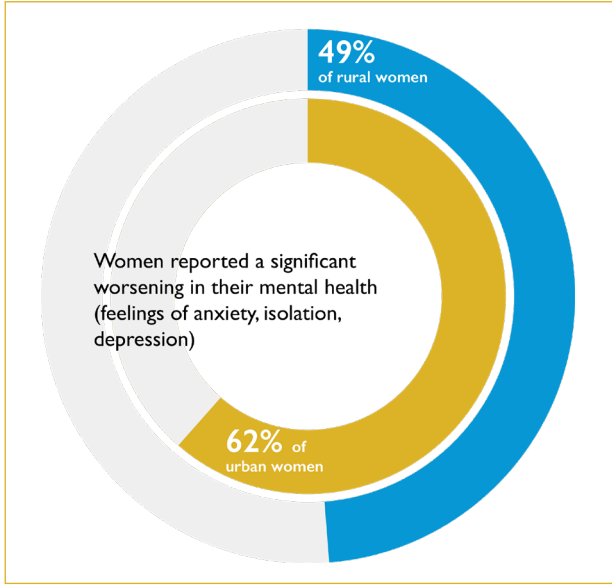
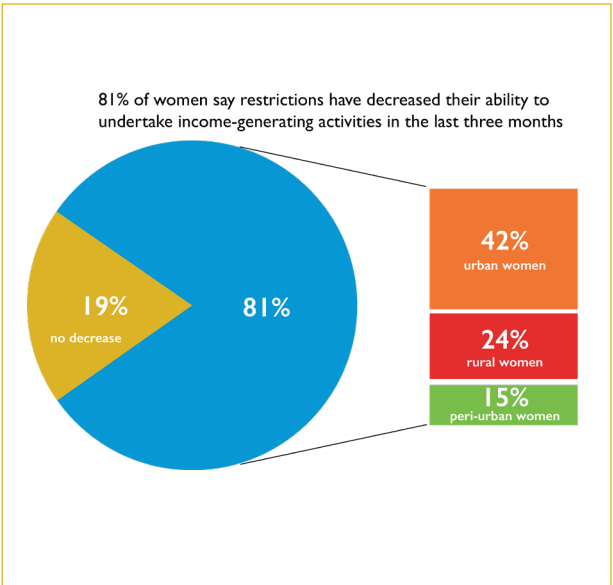
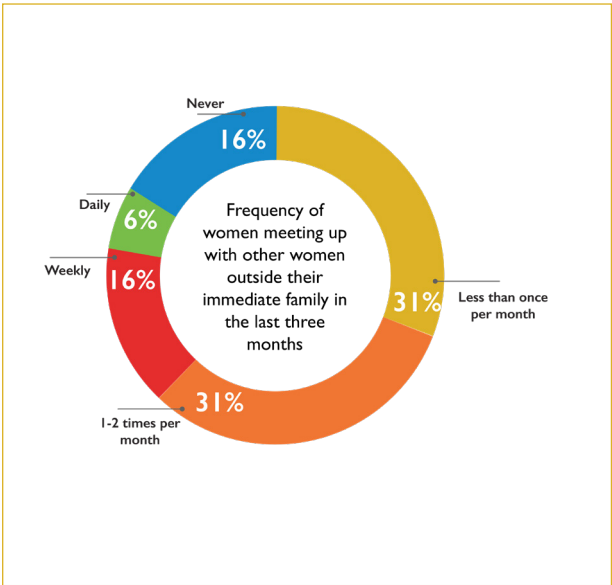
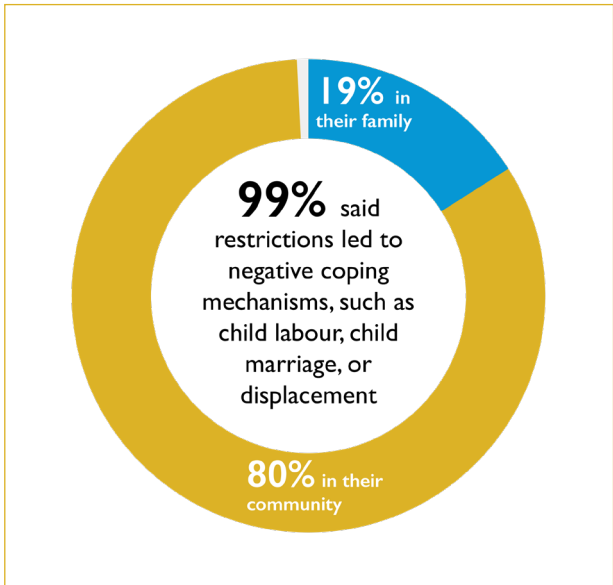
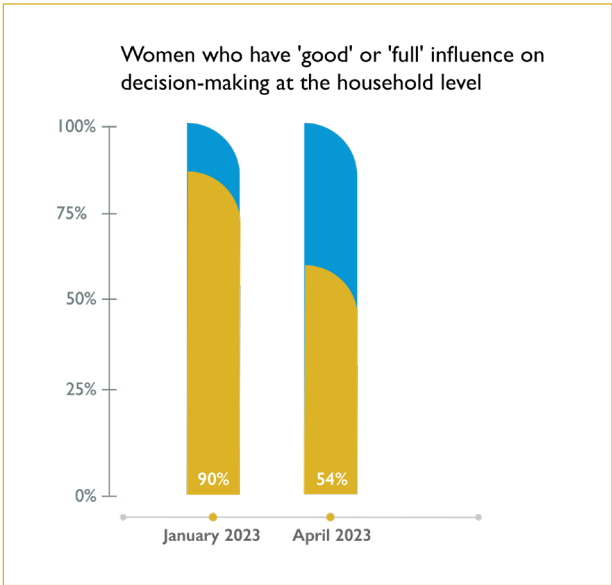
² For analysis of the immediate impact of the ban on women working for NGOs, see: UN Women, 2023, [Out of Jobs, Into Poverty – The Impact of the Ban on Afghan Women Working in NGOs](#).

³ Due to restrictions on female United Nations staff reporting to their offices and security concerns around women gathering, all consultations were held virtually. Several women contacted declined participation due to their fear of retaliation by the de facto authorities and/or immediate family members.

⁴ Namely, Ghor, Badakhshan, Kabul, Paktia, Paktika, Nimroz, Khost, Kandahar, Ghazni, Bamyán, Herat, Daikundi, Farah, Helmand, Nangarhar, Badghis, Wardak, Sar-e-Pul, Balkh and Baghlan.

⁵ UN Women, UNAMA and IOM consult Afghan women inside the country on a quarterly basis, ahead of United Nations Security Council meetings. Reports on previous consultations can be found [here](#) (January 2023) and [here](#) (August/September 2022).

⁶ A group of six Afghan men convened for an online consultation in Kandahar.



Findings

The ban on Afghan women working for NGOs and the United Nations

Afghan women noted the direct link between the ban on Afghan women working for NGOs and its extension to the United Nations, and an increase in poverty in their communities. A group of Afghan men mirrored this observation, while also noting that the policies of the de facto authorities on women's rights increased community vulnerability. Almost all women (99 per cent) stated that restrictions on education and employment had led to negative coping mechanisms in their communities or families, such as child labour, child marriage or displacement.⁷ Some respondents noted the link to more people begging in their communities. This raises concerns given that the de facto authorities have criminalized women begging.⁸

Some 85 per cent of Afghan women noted that their ability to undertake income-generating activities had decreased in the last three months. Almost half (41 per cent) were currently either “not really” or “not at all” able to perform such activities, including those based at home, such as tailoring and poultry farming. Women agreed, across almost all provinces, that their unemployment has had alarming consequences, exacerbating their situation in households, including by diminishing their influence in decision-making, worsening relationships with male family members and increasing the likelihood of domestic violence. While consultations and telesurveys did not include questions about gender-based violence, many women brought this up independently as a consequence of restrictions impacting their daily lives.

Afghan women shared that women in their communities who were previously employed outside the home are now seeking alternative income-generating activities at home and pursuing vocational training.⁹ This was described as a difficult shift for many women given the current mobility restrictions (such as the *mahram* guidance¹⁰) and the lack of available support and resources as well as skills to kickstart economic activities. Women heads of household were faring better than other women, with 68 per cent (compared to 48 per cent of women who reported not being heads of household) currently able to undertake home-based activities.

Overall, restrictions by the de facto authorities on women's and girls' rights, particularly on their access to education and employment, have led to an economic and social catastrophe, according to 99 per cent of Afghan women. These are felt most immediately by women and girls but also drive pervasive poverty and spiralling mental health issues that have spurred a downward trajectory for all Afghans.



Women's influence in decision-making

In parallel to the decline in women's opportunities for income generation, their influence on decision-making in households has worsened drastically in the past three months. Only 54 per cent of Afghan women stated they had “good” or “full” influence in their household, compared to 90 per cent in January.¹¹ There is a dramatic difference between rural women (40 per cent) and urban women (58 per cent), with some 43 per cent of rural women stating they have “almost no influence” or “no influence” in the household compared to 14 per cent of urban women. Less restrictive gender norms in urban settings and higher education and income levels among urban women provide them with greater influence in household decision-making.

Not all Afghan women face limited decision-making in their households. A small number emphasized that their male family members listen to and support them. Yet this is largely confined to the home. Outside the home, male family members abide by the policies of the de facto authorities that disempower women and girls, often out of fear of consequences for not following directives. Women stressed the need to engage with Afghan men to expand women's influence in households and push back against regressive social attitudes that gain traction with each ban, restriction, edict or behaviour targeting women.

Afghan women's influence on decision-making has decreased rapidly as the de facto authorities' scope of influence widens, reflecting an institutionalized denial of access to public and political life that has been in place since August

⁷ Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, 2023, [Afghanistan: Acute Food Insecurity Situation for April 2023 and Projection for May – October 2023](#), accessed on 24 May 2023.

⁸ ACAPS Analysis Hub, 2022, [Spotlight on Social Impact: July-October 2022](#). According to one interview reported by the [Afghanistan Analysts Network](#), the de facto authorities have “an utter contempt for the poor; believing poverty to be retribution for bad behaviour” (CITE)

⁹ A November 2022 study showed that female labour force participation is double relative to historical trends at 45 per cent: 13 percent of women are unemployed and looking for work, and 32 percent are employed (most are self-employed workers on farms, including in tending livestock, or engage in small-scale economic activities from home, e.g., as seamstresses or mending or sewing clothes). See the World Bank, 2022, [Afghanistan Welfare Monitoring Survey, Round 2, Washington, DC](#): World Bank.

¹⁰ On 26 December 2021, the de facto authorities issued [guidance](#) prohibiting women from travelling more than 78 kilometres without a mahram (male chaperone).

¹¹ UN Women, 2023, [Afghan Women's Voices – Summary Report of Countrywide Women's Consultations](#).

2021. A large share of women felt they had “no influence” or “almost no influence” in their wider family (38 per cent). Most women felt this way in their communities (74 per cent), and at the provincial (81 per cent) and national levels (89 per cent). Most women (81 per cent) had not engaged at any point with the de facto authorities in the last three months on issues important to them. As a result, the exclusively male de facto authorities continue to ignore women’s needs and perspectives in decision-making.

Social relationships

Interpersonal relations between Afghan women and men are fracturing. Among women consulted, 63 per cent reported worsening relationships with men in their community in the past three months. Alarming, 39 per cent indicated the same with male family members. Relationships with male family members worsened more for urban women (42 per cent) than for rural women (32 per cent), indicating a more significant shift in social norms and economic circumstances for urban women. Some women, when asked about changing relationships with men in their communities, stated that domestic violence has risen due to policies by the de facto authorities that confine women to their homes, reduce availability of protection and health services and increase financial strain in households.

Afghan women’s relationships with other women, who would normally provide a critical support network, have also worsened. Almost half of respondents (48 per cent) felt that their relationships with other women in their community had deteriorated in the past three months. Some 15 per cent had not met once with other women outside their immediate family over the past three months, and 31 per cent met other women less than once per month. These numbers point to the increasing social isolation of women. Findings were particularly dire in the eastern region (Nangarhar, Laghman and Kunar) and south-eastern region (Paktia, Paktika, Khost and Ghazni), where 88 per cent and 96 per cent of women, respectively, noted that relationships with other women worsened in the past three months.¹² In the eastern region, 61 per cent of women described meeting other women less than once per month. In the south-eastern region, 58 per cent indicated they had not met once with other women in the past three months. With all institutionalized support structures removed and a growing social rupture between women and men, the loss of mutual support among women is another blow to the few remaining positive coping strategies for women in Afghanistan.

Impact on women’s mental health

Afghan women depict a deep mental health crisis with no end in sight. Mental health support is unavailable to women and informal community support no longer exists as restrictions on movement and an atmosphere of insecurity and mistrust have eroded social relationships.¹³ More than two thirds of Afghan women reported not feeling physically safe,¹⁴ demonstrating that the end of conflict in Afghanistan has not translated into security for women. Some 90 per cent stated that their mental health, in terms of the frequency of feelings of anxiety, isolation and depression, was “very bad” or “bad”.¹⁵ Data collected for the [Bishnaw](#) platform in March 2023 revealed that 48 per cent of Afghan women surveyed (2,112 women inside the country) reported knowing someone who has suffered from depression or anxiety.¹⁶ Women consulted emphasized a pervasive sense of disappointment and hopelessness due to their lack of opportunities, particularly given secondary school and university closures.

Mental health differences between rural and urban women were notable. In the past three months, feelings of anxiety, isolation and depression were more likely to have grown significantly worse for urban women (62 per cent) than rural women (49 per cent). Urban women were also more likely to think the situation for women and girls will continue to deteriorate (59 per cent, compared to 43 per cent of rural women). This points to urban women feeling a greater loss of opportunities and freedoms than rural women. Due to customs and norms in rural areas, the latter may have become accustomed to fewer opportunities and more restrictive gender norms even before the Taliban takeover.

Restrictions by the de facto authorities and acute gender discrimination impede mental health coping strategies. Ongoing barriers to freedom of movement and access to public spaces – schools, universities, parks, gyms and public baths – limit exercise, leisure and social contact. A lack of communications tools, such as mobile phones and Internet access, blocks avenues for coping as well as opportunities for continued education through clandestine and online learning.¹⁷

¹² These findings should be considered indicative and should be further explored through larger samples.

¹³ For more on current mental health challenges in Afghanistan, see: IOM (International Organization for Migration), 2022, [Mental Health Research Brief: Displacement Trends and Challenges in Afghanistan Since August 2021](#).

¹⁴ Among women consulted, 68 per cent felt their physical security was either “very bad” or “bad”.

¹⁵ The questions used a scale from 1 (“very bad”) to 5 (“very good”).

¹⁶ See the [Bishnaw survey](#), 31 March 2023.

¹⁷ 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. See K. Nusratty and S. Crabtree, 2023, “[Digital Freedom Out of Reach for Most Afghan Women](#),” Gallup Blog, 8 March.

↑ Women's priorities vis-à-vis the United Nations

Afghan women consulted continued to strongly voice their request that the international community put Afghan women at the forefront in any engagement with the de facto authorities. Two thirds of respondents felt that the most effective way to engage on women's rights is for the international community to facilitate opportunities for Afghan women to meet directly with the de facto authorities (64 per cent). Afghan women have made this request since August 2022, stipulating that engagement should take place at both the central and subnational levels.¹⁸

Nearly two thirds of respondents favoured negotiations for either a full reversal of the ban on women working for NGOs and its extension to the United Nations (53 per cent) or negotiations on exemptions to the ban (17 per cent). Just under one quarter (23 per cent) of respondents urged the international community to suspend its interventions, including humanitarian assistance, either partially or fully. This recommendation occurred even among women receiving humanitarian assistance; 21 per cent of internally displaced women agreed that the international community should *fully* suspend work, including humanitarian assistance.

Women in some regions called strongly for the full suspension of work by the international community, namely, 79 per cent of women in the south-eastern region (Khost, Ghazni, Paktia and Paktika) and 36 per cent of women in the southern region (Kandahar, Helmand and Nimroz). In stark contrast, in both the eastern region (Laghman, Kunar and Nangarhar) and western region (Farah, Herat and Badghis), no women stated that the international community should fully suspend its work. Women in both regions prioritized increased engagement around reversing the ban (90 per cent and 68 per cent, respectively) or negotiating exemptions (10 per cent and 23 per cent, respectively).

Afghan women have a deep desire for themselves and their daughters to reach their full potential and contribute to Afghan society over the long term. Women without income were more concerned about the ban on education than bans on work and restrictions on mobility.¹⁹ Some 66 per cent of women, across all provinces, articulated that rights-related concerns were still the most pressing priority. Specific human rights priorities included: education (26 per cent), women's rights (26 per cent) and economic opportunities for women (15 per cent). Overwhelmingly, Afghan women lamented the loss of – and expressed their desperate wish for – opportunities in their lives.

Recommendations

Afghan women made a plea to the international community to avoid abandoning them and to make women's rights the key marker – or red line – for all decision-making on engagement in Afghanistan.

Women's specific recommendations included:

- Negotiate directly with the de facto authorities, alongside Afghan women, to reverse the ban on women working for NGOs and its extension to the United Nations.
- Continue to pressure the de facto authorities, including through targeted economic sanctions.
- Direct funding towards women-led organizations and entities working on women's rights.
- Alongside advocating for the full reversal of the ban on women working for NGOs and its extension to the United Nations, provide as many opportunities as possible for Afghan women and girls to engage in home-based and online income-generating, vocational and educational initiatives, and obtain online psychosocial support.
- Increase opportunities for women and girls to relocate or resettle outside Afghanistan, including through scholarship and resettlement programmes.²⁰

¹⁸ This has been the recurring message among Afghan women in quarterly consultations since August 2022.

¹⁹ This was the case for some 36 per cent of "no income" respondents to the [Bishnav survey](#) in March 2023. Similar patterns held across low- and middle-income respondents.

²⁰ This recommendation reflects the level of despair and hopelessness of the women consulted. Women saw relocation as a last alternative but equally felt it was not a solution to the protracted issues facing Afghanistan.