



Afghan Women's Voices – Summary Report of Country-Wide Women's Consultations

March 2023

Quantitative findings from consultations with 118 Afghan women

Photo: UN Women/Sayed Habib Bidel

Purpose and methodology

Since the last round of United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and UN Women consultations, the de facto authorities (DFA) have introduced more restrictions – banning women from university and from working for national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs).¹

This summary report presents the views, priorities, and concerns of women across Afghanistan, 18 months after the Taliban takeover of the country. The report synthesizes 10 online and in-person consultations conducted in January 2023 by UNAMA, UN Women and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). A total 118 Afghan women leaders from diverse fields and positions took part in these consultations, across 21 provinces of Afghanistan. The aim of this report is to ensure that the priorities and recommendations of these women feed into and inform policy and strategic discussions at the global level, as well as programming in country.

This is the second report issued that synthesizes the priorities and recommendations of Afghan women from consultations undertaken by UN Women, UNAMA and IOM. The aim of the consultations is to bring in the voices of a diverse cross-section of Afghan women on policy and programming challenges facing Afghanistan, to ensure that their perspectives inform decision-making.

Consultations are undertaken in person or online and all inputs are anonymized to protect the identity of the participants. While findings from consultations provide indicative trends and patterns, they are not fully representative of Afghanistan's diversity.

¹The first summary report of UN Women and UNAMA consultations is available [here](#).

Views and priorities of Afghan women

“An illiterate society is like a dead society” – Afghan woman, Mazar-i-Sharif

The immediate priority for the Afghan women consulted was the **full removal of the Taliban-issued bans on women attending educational institutions and working in national and international NGOs**, as a first step towards removing the barriers erected to prevent women from exercising their full political, economic, and social rights in Afghanistan. Restrictions on the right of Afghan women to education, to work and economic empowerment, and to meaningfully participate in decision-making in the private and public domain were analysed by the Afghan women consulted as producing a compounding effect that results in the continued systematic exclusion of women across all spheres of life.

Achieving advances under these circumstances is difficult, and the women consulted noted that DFA decisions and actions in one area of women’s rights could unintentionally weaken the foundations of others. The Afghan women therefore emphasized the need for more coordinated and concerted international action, calling for advocacy aimed towards removal of the university and NGO bans, while not losing sight of the ultimate goal: Full removal of all bans impacting women and girls.

Women’s right to education

The Afghan women consulted highlighted that the bans on women’s education have cemented economic, political, and social inequality across generations. They further highlighted that women’s previous educational attainment created a positive cascading effect across generations, with the correspondent risk that the current restrictions on education are having the reverse effect – inducing an entrenched loss of opportunity and hope. Women warned that reduced education levels, high illiteracy rates and lower economic potential for women and girls will lead to **long-term cycles of disempowerment and inequality**. The women consulted indicated that the prevalence of negative coping strategies – a pre-existing pattern in the Afghan context² – is increasing, and includes early, forced and child marriage. These developments are accompanied by a higher likelihood of domestic violence, sexual and gender-based violence, reproductive health issues, suicide, risky financial dependency on male relatives, forced displacement and potentially irregular migration.

Women’s economic opportunities

Beyond the broader economic fallout of Afghanistan losing, or at least misusing, 20 years’ worth of investment and demonstrated results in women’s empowerment and contribution to the national economy,³ the day-to-day situation for women and their families has become increasingly desperate. Some 81 per cent of women consulted stated that their household economic situation had deteriorated in the previous three months.

Reasons for this included financial loss due to restrictions on women (and resulting job loss, salary decreases, closure of women-owned businesses (WoBs), increased insecurity for women), as well as broader economic challenges (inflation, restricted bank transfers), and has also contributed to forced displacement. The situation was seen by Afghan women as even more desperate for women heads of household and families where women are breadwinners.

Those Afghan women consulted emphasized the importance of continuing support for women’s economic empowerment across the private and non-profit sectors to mitigate the negative impacts of Taliban decrees targeting women. Afghan women highlighted the importance of establishing **measures designed to counteract Taliban policies in programming** to minimize the harm done to gender equality. This could in turn mitigate some of the multilayered and devastating psychological and economic effects of decrees curtailing women’s rights.

The consultations underlined the role of national and international NGOs, women’s civil society organizations (CSOs), and WoBs as multipliers for women’s economic empowerment. Before the restrictions on women working in NGOs, these entities employed and empowered tens of thousands of women as staff members and reached tens of millions

²The REACH Whole of Afghanistan Assessment 2022 found that Female Heads of Households (FHHs) were more likely to use high-risk negative coping strategies, with 29 per cent of FHHs having at least one child engaged in child labour (up from 19 per cent in 2021): REACH. 2022. [Whole of Afghanistan Assessment 2022: Key Findings Presentation - Inter-Cluster Coordination Team](#). See also, Save the Children. 2023. [“Ban on Female Aid Workers Could Push Afghan Children Back into Work.”](#) News, 7 January 2023.

³In November 2021, the United Nations Development Programme projected the cumulative loss of output, from reducing the number of women in employment by only 50 per cent (a level which, at the time of writing, has likely already been exceeded), to reach US\$1.5 billion between 2022 and 2024: UNDP (United Nations Development Programme). 2021. [Afghanistan: Socio-Economic Outlook 2021-2022](#). See also the *Gender Alert* issued by UN Women Afghanistan in January 2023: UN Women. 2023. [Gender Alert No. 3: Out of jobs, into poverty – the impact of the ban on Afghan women working in NGOs](#). 13 January 2023.

of Afghans with assistance, including programming providing women with skills, training, and support in becoming independent economic actors.⁴ Health, education and employment in UN organizations are some of the last remaining sectors where women still have some freedom to operate. WoBs, and the private sector in general, are also in a comparatively advantageous position to employ, upskill, and provide targeted services to women.

The Afghan women consulted emphasized **economic empowerment as a critical step** toward improving their position in the public and private domain. Women's financial contribution to household income – similar to their role as economic actors in the public sphere – improves their bargaining position and consequently gives them greater influence in decision-making.

Women who contribute financially at home are less reliant on men within their families and thus their vulnerability to potential abuse decreases. These women also simultaneously improve the overall economic situation of the household, which increases households' resilience (and thereby reduces the need for negative coping mechanism), addresses drivers of displacement, and is linked to reduced gender power imbalances and decreased rates of domestic violence.

Women's decision-making and influence

Those Afghan women consulted indicated feeling that they currently have almost no influence beyond the confines of their home – 93 per cent felt they had little or no influence at the district or provincial level, and 96 per cent indicated this sentiment in relation to the national level.⁵

Although most women still perceived their family members were allies – 90 per cent of women surveyed indicated feeling that they have a good level of influence on most topics at the household-level, they emphasized that **restrictive DFA policies have fostered a regressive shift in gender norms toward the subordination of women and dominance of men in all spheres of life**; including, for example, making the decision to migrate (internally or externally). Holding men accountable for the actions of the women in their family further promotes male decision-making and control. Women's influence over their lives and physical security is declining as economic opportunities for both men and women continue to dwindle.

A small number of women reported (intermittent) access to men with influence or decision-making capacity, indicating that there is some access to advocacy opportunities. According to the women consulted, local de facto governance actors differ in terms of the level of consultation and accessibility permitted, with some leaving little space for influence outside of their trusted (exclusively male) network. Those women who have successfully met with local DFA officials reported that despite being given an audience, their advocacy efforts mostly proved unsuccessful. Moreover, some of those women who participated in such meetings indicated facing negative social repercussions.

Access to services continues to pose challenges for women in Afghanistan. Those women consulted noted the pervasive barriers presently facing all Afghans in obtaining identity documents – ID cards (*e-tazkira*), passports, and birth certificates.⁶ Interpersonal relationships with DFA officials remain pivotal to securing access to timely service delivery, which further excludes women, who are largely unable to interact directly with DFA officials or rely on a *mahram* (male chaperone). Women reported additional obstacles in accessibility according to geographic location and level of rurality, as well as for women without a *mahram* – women heads of household, widows, or women living with male relatives and people living with disabilities.

Women's security and freedom of movement

A point of concern persistently raised by Afghan women in consultations undertaken since August 2021⁷ is the **emboldening effect** on Taliban and traditional and community leaders immediately following the introduction of new restrictions. After the December 2022 bans on women national and international NGO staff and women's university education, Taliban foot soldiers were observed to more readily intimidate and arbitrarily question women. Similarly, women reported increased harassment by de facto authorities against women seen as not complying with the latest bans. This iterative erosion of women's security acts as an additional coercive measure confining women to the home.

Unsurprisingly, **emigration, often unsafe and irregular, is increasingly seen as one of the few good options** for safeguarding the well-being of Afghan women and girls. Factors influencing migration decisions – which, as noted, are typically made by male family members – include lack of: women's rights; educational opportunities; access to services; and resources to deal with climate-related challenges, such as the extreme winter conditions being endured

⁴UN Women. 2023. [Gender Alert No. 3: Out of jobs, into poverty – the impact of the ban on Afghan women working in NGOs](#). 13 January 2023. OHCHR (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights). 2022. ["Afghanistan: Taliban's targeting of women and NGOs preventing delivery of life-saving assistance is deplorable, say UN experts."](#) Statements, 30 December 2022.

⁵It should be noted that the overall numbers are likely to be even higher. The Afghan women consulted have on average a higher level of education attainment and wealth than the average Afghan woman. Thus, they are already better placed – with resources, skills, and knowledge – to exert greater influence than the average Afghan woman.

in country at the time of writing. However, migration or displacement come with their own sets of risks for women and girls, not least the loss of a support network and increased risk of gender-based violence.

Conclusion

Given the Taliban's actions toward Afghan women since August 2021, some 66 per cent of women consulted indicated anticipating that the situation for women and girls would further deteriorate in the next three months. Existing restrictions are seen as part of the systematic erasure of women's rights and voices. **Although prohibitions are often characterized as 'temporary' by the DFA, these are understood by Afghan women to mean 'indefinite' – as not a single decree has been removed in its entirety.**

Those Afghan women consulted underline concerns that the ever-expanding loss of opportunity and confinement of women to the home continues to intensify already severe psychological and physical stress – seen in innumerable reports of depression, anxiety, and suicide.⁸

Against this backdrop, the Afghan women consulted put forward urgent recommendations for the international community. The United Nations system and United Nations Member States are urged to take the following respective actions:

United Nations

Normative recommendations

- ***Facilitate sustained dialogue engagement between Afghan women and the DFA*** that is strengthened by a coalition of community and religious leaders in support of women's right to political participation.
- ***Advocate directly with the Taliban***, placing the priorities and voices of Afghan women at the fore and including them in all negotiations with the DFA when safe to do so and set benchmarks for progress on women's rights to evaluate negotiation efforts.

Programming recommendations

- ***Place girls and women at the centre of humanitarian and basic human needs programming*** by actively involving them in participatory programme design and implementation, while ensuring adherence to the principle of Do No Harm.
- ***Continue to invest in Afghan women*** through direct funding for women-led CSOs to deliver flexible, responsive programming to meet evolving challenges, and commit to continue to pay employee salaries, limit erosion of institutional capacity, and adapt avenues for operation.
- ***Identify, build on, strengthen and scale up the existing wealth of skills and knowledge among Afghan women*** to mitigate the economic and psychological impact of restrictions, taking into account women's recommendations to maximize opportunities among the private and non-profit sectors.
- ***Identify existing initiatives and create opportunities for women to support women***, such as online platforms for consultation, knowledge-sharing and skill-sharing, and mentoring, to establish pathways for women's continued education and economic empowerment and increase awareness of their rights.
- ***Engage Afghan men*** and strengthen existing advocacy efforts by men in support for women's rights.

UN Member States

- ***Coordinate pressure on the DFA*** through the use of political, economic, and diplomatic sanctions against the Taliban.
- ***Negotiate directly with the DFA, alongside Afghan women***, for the full removal of restrictions on women's rights. This applies particularly to Muslim-majority Member States, which draw on Islamic principles to guide advocacy.

⁶Women noted that in Baghdis, for example, the DFA are reportedly not currently issuing birth certificates, and that in many provinces *e-tazkira* centre operations have been suspended. 2023.

⁷UN Women. 2023. [Priorities and recommendations of Afghan women inside Afghanistan. October 2022.](#)

⁸UN Women. 2023. [Gender Alert No.3: Out of jobs, into poverty – the impact of the ban on Afghan women working in NGOs. 13 January 2023.](#)

- **Engage directly with Afghan women as equal partners** to inform strategic, programming, and policy decisions, and to amplify Afghan women’s voices in national, regional, and international forums.
- **Increase online, regional, and international scholarship opportunities and exchange programmes** for Afghan women and girls to support their continued economic, social, and political empowerment.

Quantitative findings from consultations with 118 Afghan women

