



“We as women’s groups can find women in need when organisations can’t.”

Brief

January 2024

Summary

Since their takeover in 2021, the de facto authorities (DFA) have introduced several directives limiting women's access to education, employment, health services and public spaces. In December 2022, the ban prohibiting Afghan women from working for NGOs – later expanded to UN agencies in April 2023 – impeded access to aid and support for vulnerable women throughout the country. Although some NGOs and UN agencies navigated the decree through local exceptions and continued regular operations, 2023 saw the introduction of new bans further reducing support for projects aiming to reach women and girls.

In September 2023, the Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan was critically underfunded, with half of the amount received at the same time in [2022](#). Under these conditions, for example, [the World Food Programme](#) had to cut food assistance to two million people in need. Against this backdrop, engaging with women and men is critical to ensuring the humanitarian response is tailored to their respective needs and priorities. To strengthen accountability to women and girls in Afghanistan, in September 2023, Ground Truth Solutions and Salma Consulting completed our third round of data collection with support from UN Women and the Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group.

Read the full report [here](#).


Who we talked to

1,897 people through face to face quantitative surveys and 68 people in ten focus group discussions (FGDs) and fifteen in-depth interviews (IDIs).

Quantitative sample (n=1,897)

 880 (46%) women  1,017 (54%) men

 652 (34%) 18-34 years old

 544 (29%) 35-44 years old


 701 (37%) 45+ years old

 399 (17%) persons with disabilities

 1,578 (83%) persons without a disability

Status

 1,434 (77%) host community

 286 (16%) Internally displaced people (IDPs)

 56 (3%) refugees

 76 (4%) returnees

Aid recieved

 1,025 (54%) aid recipients

 872 (46%) non aid recipients

Location

 Balkh  Khost

 Jawzjan  Kunduz

 Kabul  Nangarhar

 Nuristan

Main findings

1

Women feel safer accessing distributions, since the adoption of approaches to mitigate safety concerns.

People we spoke with highlight good practices, including prioritising women in distributions centres and having closed, gender-specific spaces for women at other aid sites. Women tell us that their concerns about engaging with men at distribution sites have reduced since the start of 2023 as such contact has increasingly become socially normalised and seen as a necessity for many women as they face rising needs. However, women remain concerned at the lack of women aid workers in the response and in distributions in locations far from their homes.

3

Women favour broader coverage and longer-term support.

Across the board, aid is not meeting people's essential needs, especially during winter. Half of those we spoke to would prefer that humanitarian organisations reach more people, even if the individual quantities each household receives are smaller. This view was more prevalent among women, who would also prefer to receive smaller quantities of aid for a longer period. They believe this would allow them to manage resources more efficiently, reduce the need to share with extended family, and prevent food spoilage. Men, on the other hand, prefer larger quantities over shorter periods or as one-off support, enabling them to reduce visits to distribution sites.

2

Selecting aid recipients through community leaders is seen as opaque and unfair.

A lack of transparency in selection processes remains. Unclear selection criteria are exacerbating community tensions. There is a sense that this could improve with the help of women who may be able to identify the most vulnerable women in their own communities. People want more community members involved in selecting aid recipients, instead of aid providers relying solely on community leaders. That said, women still want aid organisations to seek permission from male community representatives, to reduce risks. They ask that permission is granted from community leaders and their husbands before any engagement begins, to reduce protection concerns and increase their comfort in speaking openly.

4

Women rely on organic social networks to access and circulate information on aid.

Women have limited access to information from formal sources. They are traditionally dependent on social networks, which they consider trusted, safe, and appropriate, and prefer to receive information face-to-face from local organisation staff, community or religious leaders, and family.

5

Community-based women's groups offer valuable and grassroots entry points into communities, providing organisations safe and acceptable opportunities to engage with and understand the needs and priorities of women.

Women we interviewed say not enough opportunities exist to engage with humanitarian organisations on their priorities for aid, and over a quarter of them (29%) say they would like to participate in aid-related discussions via women's groups. Qualitative discussions with women's groups demonstrated their potential in supporting aid providers as interlocutors, conducting vulnerability assessments, facilitating information sessions, and establishing community-based feedback mechanisms. In the context of the ban and difficulties for women staff to be present in the field, these groups present an opportunity to continue engaging with women and girls including in the context of assessment and monitoring. They can also support in finding the most vulnerable women in the communities, for instance, women-headed households who are often harder to identify, women within male-headed households who are not targeted, women living with disabilities, and other vulnerable women.

First they [aid organisations] need to get local leaders' permission, because women are not allowed to take part in meetings. Participating in discussions might create problems for women. If they talk to the local leader, her husband and other family members, it will ease the process.

– woman in Nangarhar, Shura member

6

Households continue to resort to negative coping mechanisms such as early marriage and child labour when they have exhausted other options.

Marrying daughters earlier than planned has become a protection mechanism for many households, who believe girls have better livelihood outcomes by marrying into richer families. For example, one displaced woman in Kabul shared that most of her neighbours married their daughters earlier because they felt the situation in informal settlements was not safe or appropriate for girls and they saw marriage as a way for their daughters to leave these settlements. The reduction in humanitarian assistance also led to increase poverty levels. When families experience a decrease in external aid, they face heightened economic vulnerability and struggle to provide for their household. In such circumstances, families see child marriage as a way to alleviate their financial burdens and secure additional resources for their resilience. Certain groups are at a higher risk of resorting to such mechanisms than others. People who have been displaced are more likely to adopt these mechanisms than members of host communities. People with disabilities are at a higher risk of using these mechanisms than those without, and rural residents are twice as likely as those in urban areas.

Our local leaders can create problems for women because they are corrupt. They ask for a portion of the aid. They tell women they will receive aid if they give some to them.

– women's group representative in Balkh

7

People need longer-term aid interventions focused on resilience and livelihoods.

Both men and women in all locations value food, non-food items, and cash distributions, but say they need long-term interventions, such as those that promote livelihoods. Urban women feel far less able to plan for the future than urban men and rural women, and request job opportunities – likely because opportunities for women’s employment are greater in urban locations, especially in office locations and vocational trades. In rural locations, literacy improves resilience for men, but not for women. This makes sense, as men can use these skills to obtain jobs and higher income, which is not the case for women. Women with lower literacy skills may have stronger positive coping mechanisms than rural men with similarly low literacy, as their lack of access to education in the past may have led them to find other ways to navigate poverty, besides pursuing work or education. For example, women in rural areas can engage in agriculture, grow food in their kitchen gardens, and are more skilled at storing and preserving food.

Interview and focus group participants said they want to stop relying on short-term aid and suggested shifting the focus to vocational training, agriculture, and job creation for both men and women. Some gave specific examples of the support they needed, including livestock, seeds, and farming equipment. Others requested vocational training in tailoring and carpentry. Some asked for cash-for-work schemes. Women in particular were interested in finding income opportunities to allow them to support the men in their households in meeting their family’s needs. It was emphasized that any job opportunities for women needed to be offered with the permission of community leaders and women’s husbands or fathers.

We received food items twice. It would be better to receive smaller amounts of food over longer periods. Receiving a lot of aid at once is unhelpful, and most items will be wasted. Even if we receive a lot of aid at one time, my brothers will sell the items for their own pocket money.

– woman in Kunduz, who received aid multiple times

We are comfortable speaking to people in our community and in our family. If I have a problem I will speak to my neighbours or my brother. We know each other and will help each other.

– displaced woman in Kabul

Recommendations

For implementing organisations and coordination groups

- Ensure greater transparency on how aid agencies select the most vulnerable households, and their processes to verify vulnerability, including through community members.

Many organisations currently use multiple vulnerability assessment practices to identify the most vulnerable households. Most people, however, are only aware of selections made by local authorities or community leaders. Organisations need to proactively highlight ways in which they measure vulnerability and how they identify the most vulnerable, considering challenges around biased selection. This should also include the transparent prioritisation of women-headed households and widows. Engaging in additional platforms with the general community can support greater transparency and better decision-making.

- Map – and remain responsive to – the ways that women organically share and internalise information, rather than asking women to use mechanisms designed by aid organisations.

Women rely on and prefer face-to-face information, sourced through familiar networks. These are spaces where they feel most comfortable and face fewer risks. Aid actors should focus on engaging in these organic spaces, rather than asking women to adapt to spaces and mechanisms which are unfamiliar, poorly accessible, and can potentially cause safeguarding concerns.

- Identify and engage with existing women’s groups who can act as valuable interlocutors for aid agencies across the country, specifically in places where those agencies do not have exemptions for women staff.

Existing women’s groups remain a safe and accessible entry point into communities, especially when NGOs cannot travel with women staff. Engaging with women’s groups not only ensures a safe space to speak to and support women, but offers opportunities to build the capacity, skills, and resilience of women who are members of these groups.

In the first round the organisation came and distributed packages themselves. They searched and found deserving people. Everyone was happy. But problems began when the elders and Shura members got involved.

– man in Nangarhar

We have provided lots of assistance for organisations. We are women so we can visit women at home. We’ve made assessments and told organisations who needed aid. Aid agencies mostly focus on local leaders; they care less about women.

– women’s group lead in Nangarhar

- **Prioritise engagement with women, but first check what permission is needed.**

Women welcome opportunities to consult with aid agencies and provide feedback and recommendations, but they often only feel comfortable doing so if community leaders and husbands grant permission. Attempting to engage with women without permissions can increase social risks for women and make them more reluctant to engage openly.

- **Ensure women have clear information about upcoming distributions, with sufficient time to plan their trips and make necessary arrangements**

Women generally feel less informed than men about when and where aid distributions are taking place, making it harder for them to access assistance. Ensuring women have enough time to make necessary arrangements, such as organising a mahram or making childcare arrangements, is crucial.

- **Continue to prioritise and design accessible solutions for women at distribution sites, to address health concerns and reduce the potential for sexual exploitation and abuse.**

Women are often the most vulnerable people at distribution sites. They remain concerned about the lack of women aid workers and the distances they must travel. Distributions should continue to prioritise women (allow them to receive aid first), reducing the potential for safety risks, abuse, and travelling in the dark back to their communities. Commonly noted among men, but relevant to women, is that all distribution sites should include (gender-segregated) toilet facilities, shaded areas, drinking water, and protection from crowds in neighbouring communities who come to try and receive aid.





For donors and recovery actors

- Increase resilience activities, such as finding and supporting job opportunities, building skills, and providing resources for families to establish long-term sustainability. Safe and gender-appropriate livelihood activities are an opportunity to engage with women and build their resilience.

People continue to say that short-term aid (whether in-kind or cash) remains insufficient for them to cover their basic needs, and that once aid programmes end, they commonly resort to severe coping mechanisms. They want aid agencies to prioritise livelihood opportunities that align with contextually available resources, market opportunities, and are appropriate to gender, disability status, and literacy levels.

- Keep prioritising social and behaviour change interventions, to decrease the normality of marrying girls early and sending children for labour.

Sending children into child labour or marrying girls off earlier than expected has become a normalised practice that people do not consider severe or detrimental. As a result, the likelihood of such coping mechanisms increasing is significant. Efforts to change social behaviour are required to address these “norms” alerting families to the harm and potential abuse that children can suffer as a result of such practices.

We need to work to support our families, because aid organisations do not give us AFN 500,000–700,000. This money could resolve issues and give us stability. They only give us a package of lentils, flour, and cooking oil. This only resolves issues for a few days.

– man in Khost, who received a one-off aid distribution

“We are Pashtuns; we are ready to die for our daughters and sisters ... but we have economic problems; we need to feed all our children. That is why marriage is not always bad. We can fulfil our needs, and as we know, a girl must get married. It is her destiny. I think this is the only way left to fight hunger in our communities.”

– man in Khost, who received a one-off aid distribution

- Implement gender-responsive budgeting to allocate sufficient funds for programmes that aim to engage and support women. This ensures that financial resources are dedicated to addressing the specific needs and challenges women in Afghanistan face. dren for labour.
- Encourage collaboration among donors and funding agencies to pool resources and create flexible funding mechanism.

This allows for a more coordinated and efficient allocation of funds, enabling more people, including women, to access support for resilience and livelihood opportunities.

We are grateful to the thousands of people in Afghanistan who spoke to us and shared their views.

For more information about our work, please contact heba@groundtruthsolutions.org and lee@salmaconsulting.com, or visit groundtruthsolutions.org and salmaconsulting.com.

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Read the full report [here](#).