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Summary report of country-wide women's consultations

Photo: UN Women/Sayed Habib Bidel

Background

This brief presents the perspectives of women across Afghanistan on their current situation and priorities. Since the Taliban (referred to as the de facto authorities) takeover in August 2021, they have introduced more than 50 decrees that directly curtail the rights and dignity of women.¹ It is clear that the Taliban's vision for Afghanistan founded on the structural denial of women's rights and well-being.

UN Women, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) have initiated quarterly consultations with women. These are aligned with the United Nations Security Council's women, peace and security agenda and the international commitment to put women at the centre of decision-making in crisis contexts and with UNAMA's mandate – Security Council Resolution 2679 (2023), renewed by Security Council Resolution 2678 (2023).² In Afghanistan, where women have been systematically removed from public life, the consultations maintain one of the few openings for women to voice their perspectives and exercise leadership and agency.

Methodology

For the quarterly consultation in July 2023, UN Women, IOM and UNAMA convened online and in-person (where safe to do so) group consultations and conducted individual telesurveys, together reaching **592 Afghan women** across **22 of 34 provinces**.³ Afghan women reflected on the period from April to June 2023, detailing their priorities, views of international engagement, and recommendations to improve the realization of women's rights and well-being. This process consulted women heads of households; women who are internally displaced and come from host communities; rural, peri-urban and urban women; employed and unemployed women; and women differing by age, marital status, ethnicity and educational attainment.

¹ For a timeline of decrees since August 2021, see the [Feminist Majority Foundation](#).

² UN Women, UNAMA and IOM consult Afghan women inside the country on a quarterly basis ahead of Security Council meetings. Reports on previous consultations include [April 2023](#), [January 2023](#) and [August/September 2022](#).

³ Namely, Kabul, Kandahar, Balkh, Bamyan, Herat, Badakhshan, Nangarhar, Baghlan, Nimroz, Badghis, Farah, Helmand, Ghor, Kapisa, Laghman, Ghazni, Jowzjan, Khost, Paktia, Paktika, Samangan and Sar-e-Pul.

Key Priorities

Women were **twice** as likely to want the international community to engage more on gender equality and women's rights issues, than on economic development or humanitarian assistance.

Gender Equality and Women's Rights Issues



Economic Development



Humanitarian Assistance



Mental Health

Sixty-nine per cent of the women consulted reported that **feelings of anxiety, isolation, and depression have significantly worsened** between April-June, a higher level compared to data gathered from January-March 2023.

57% Between January - March



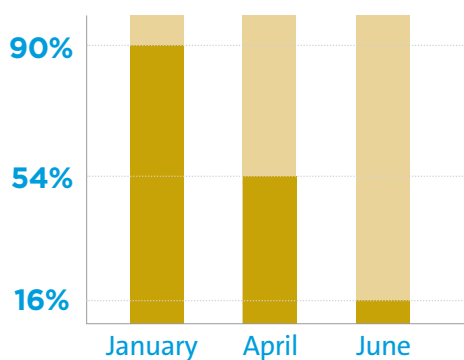
69% Between April - June



Influence

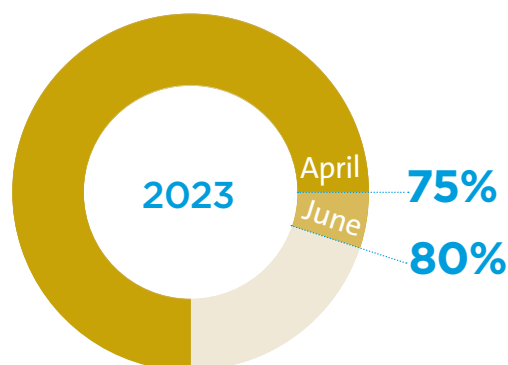
Influence on decision-making at the household level **has fallen dramatically** over the first half of 2023.

Women having 'good' or 'full' influence



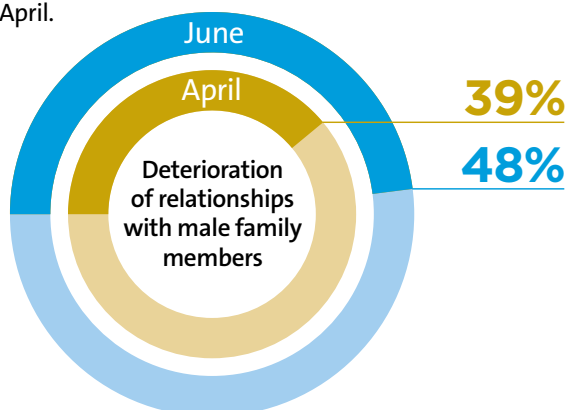
Livelihoods

In June 2023, 80 per cent of **women noted their ability to undertake income-generating activities had decreased**, a further increase from 75 per cent in April.



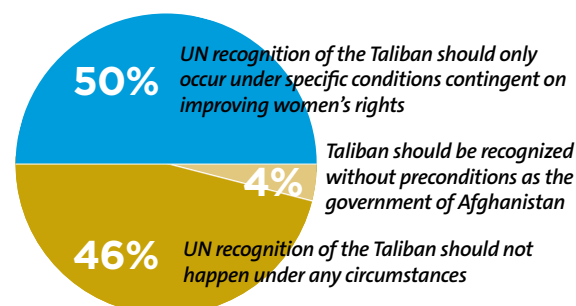
Social Dynamics

Relationships with male family members continue to deteriorate, with women consulted noting that these relationships **have worsened** in June compared to April.



International Recognition

Almost all women consulted thought that **UN recognition of the Taliban should not happen under any circumstances** or that it should only occur under specific conditions contingent on improving women's rights.



What has changed for Afghan women between August 2022 to July 2023

After one year of consulting diverse Afghan women, the main observations on what has and has not changed were as follows:

- Access to **education has remained the top priority** since August 2022. Although highlighted as critical to the lives of women and girls, improvements to women's rights and economic conditions have been seen as secondary. Women have consistently emphasized the importance of educational outcomes for gender equality and Afghanistan's long-term development.
- In **August 2022**, improving **women's safety and security** – particularly for those working in sectors such as tertiary education, media, business and human rights – was the **second most pressing priority**. Since then, working women have been targeted directly and indirectly through decrees by the de facto authorities,⁴ and have faced intimidation and harassment. This has reduced women's employment across all sectors. In 2023, mental health concerns superseded physical safety concerns as a second-ranking priority. Women's mental health has continued to deteriorate significantly. This issue has consistently grown as a concern in each round of consultation.
- As the **economic and humanitarian situations continue to worsen**, women have increasingly focused on basic survival, though they have equally pointed out that short-term assistance will not resolve the underlying issues facing their country. The focus of consultations has shifted from women requesting international actors to set up different modalities for meaningful political engagement with the de facto authorities to women desperately seeking international support for **immediate action to survive the crisis**, such as cash transfers, as well as **long-term solutions**, such as income-generating opportunities.
- In the past six months, since January 2023, women's **influence on decision-making has shrunk dramatically** across all levels – the household, extended family, community, provincial and national. Household decision-making has contracted the most; women attributed this decline to increasing poverty, women's lower financial contributions and exacerbated patriarchal gender norms. They continued to demand a place in public decision-making.
- In the past year, women have consistently called for international pressure on the de facto authorities through sanctions and direct and indirect advocacy. Women have also urged international entities to **include Afghan women in negotiations with the Taliban**, particularly on women's rights. They have repeatedly asked the international community to facilitate spaces for them to meet directly with the de facto authorities to raise their concerns.
- **Women continued to warn against recognizing the de facto authorities** since the Taliban have repeatedly reneged on promises to uphold women's rights. They called on the international community to judge the Taliban based on their actions, not their promises.

Findings

"People's taunts make women not go out of the house."

Afghan women consulted overwhelmingly reiterated the financial and mental hardships they are experiencing due to the Taliban's ever-increasing restrictions on their freedoms, the economic crisis, and ensuing poverty. Women headed households and young women were consistently highlighted as being in the most vulnerable situations and the worst impacted by current restrictions targeting women and girls. Women consulted frequently describe their lives as that of prisoners living in darkness, confined to the home without hope of a future.



Enforcement of restrictions and social policing

For most women (62 per cent), Taliban decrees were enforced with increasing severity and without exceptions, leading to a further retreat into the private sphere. Enforcement is particularly harsh in the Eastern Region,⁵ where 91 per cent of women said enforcement is "very strict (enforced without exceptions)"; 89 per cent noted an increase in severity over time.

⁴ Examples of decrees directly impacting the right of women to work include: the ban on women working for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (December 2022) and its extension to the United Nations (April 2023); the ban on beauty salons (July 2023); and the requirement for women health workers to bring a mahram (male family member) to their place of work (January 2023).

⁵ The Eastern Region comprises the following provinces: Kunar, Laghman and Nangahar.

Harassment, intimidation, and violence on the street by both Taliban and ordinary men is reportedly an increasingly common reality for women who are seen as defying decrees. This social policing is reinforced by the DFA putting pressure on the male population to enforce their rules, including in the private sphere. For example, by restricting taxi drivers from transporting women who do not follow the DFA's hijab requirements. Holding men responsible for enforcement of decrees deepens male empowerment fostered by the May 2022 decree holding male family members responsible for women's violations of the hijab decree.⁶ Under this climate of increasingly pervasive and systematized patriarchal norms, coupled with fear of punishment, women consulted unanimously agreed that they have no option but to follow the rules. In other words, the cost of non-compliance for Afghan women and girls is increasing each consultation round.



Women's economic empowerment

"As a woman, I want to live in such a society where I have the freedom to say what I want to say, to stand on my own feet, and to empower myself so that I can serve other people."

Restrictions by the de facto authorities have left women with limited income-generating opportunities. Mobility restrictions, including mahram requirements, as well as harassment and safety concerns have closed opportunities for employment even in sectors where women are still permitted to work. Although all Afghan women have experienced these barriers, some variation was evident across rural and urban women.

Rural women work mainly in agriculture and livestock as well as daily labour. These sectors have not been targeted by restrictions in the same way as those in which urban women tend to concentrate, such as the public sector, civil society and small and medium enterprises. With women banned from working in the public sector and NGOs, and prohibited from renewing business licences, those in urban areas have fewer formal employment options.

Women face increasingly insurmountable obstacles to operating businesses due to the broader ecosystem of decrees targeting them. Restrictions on freedom of movement mean that women cannot access many public or private spaces to sell goods. Women-only markets have closed in many areas. Safe workspaces are often inaccessible. Women lack financial capital, raw materials, basic equipment and reliable electricity, which undercut business continuity. In addition, the economic situation has severely curtailed demand for many common, socially acceptable income-generating activities for women, such as tailoring and embroidery, including through diminished access to global markets. On 26 July 2023, the de facto authorities introduced a ban on beauty salons, removing one of the last income channels for women as well as a safe space for social contact and community.

Women urged continued support for their livelihoods and lamented the lack of community-based initiatives for women's economic empowerment. Many previous initiatives have stopped due to harassment by the de facto authorities. Those that continued were often delivered by women at significant risk to their own security. Women emphasized that even without a formal ban, families and employers were reluctant to allow women to work due to fear of the potential consequences. Some women who continued conducting training to develop livelihood skills, such as to work as beauticians or in the arts, had gone into hiding due to harassment and threats from the de facto authorities. Some courses – both online and in person – still existed to learn English, tailoring and handicrafts, and marketing and sales skills, and to support psychological well-being. While these small-scale initiatives are important for women – and household survival – they ultimately do not transform structural discrimination or sustainably lift women or their families out of poverty.

Direct and indirect restrictions on women's employment leave families at high risk, particularly women-headed households. Most women had lost their jobs or been forced to end their vocational training and education due to decrees or social pressures. Inflation has increased the cost of food, leaving many women unable to meet basic household needs. The resulting stress has led to extreme coping mechanisms in families and communities, including child labour, the sale of children, begging, and forced, early and child marriages, including to soldiers of the de facto authorities, who are reportedly more likely to have paid work and can afford to buy one or more wives.⁷ The early marriage of girls comes with long-term negative

⁶ United Nations. 2022. [Afghanistan: Taliban orders women to stay home; cover up in public](#). 7 May.

⁷ Negative coping mechanisms are outlined in recent quantitative and qualitative research, including: AREU, 2022, [Vulnerability in Afghanistan Before and During the Shift in Power](#); and CARE, 2022, [The Impact of the Food Crisis on Women and Girls in Afghanistan – November 2022](#).

sexual and reproductive health outcomes, an increased risk of domestic violence, and reduced potential for future education and earning potential.⁸ This risks entrenching deep and intergenerational gender inequality in addition to putting the brakes on Afghanistan's long-term development.

A loss of women's employment has been linked to decreased decision-making influence in homes. The share of women reporting "good" or "full" influence at home, with relatives, in the community, and at provincial and national levels declined on average by 6 percentage points in the period from April to June 2023, compared to the period from January to March 2023.⁹ Women repeatedly stressed the impact that their loss of income has on family relationships, including by increasing gender-based violence in homes and within their communities.

Women's economic empowerment has played a key role in supporting their families and communities. Despite household financial pressures and restrictions on their freedoms, 77 per cent of respondents stated that they assisted persons outside their household whenever they had an income. Nineteen per cent supported more than five people when they had an income. Assistance often entailed providing food or financial aid, counselling, gifting garments and handicrafts, and training other women on livelihood skills. Opportunities to provide support are currently curtailed by economic hardship and restrictions on women's movement and employment.

Displacement

Over half (53 per cent) of the women consulted stated that they had moved at least once in their adult life, and 24 per cent had moved within the last three months. Forced, repeated, and protracted displacement remains a key concern across Afghanistan that heightens women's vulnerability due to the associated economic hardship and severance from social support networks. Reports indicate an increase in evictions in informal settlements, particularly in Kabul.¹⁰ Poor economic prospects are key drivers of displacement, along with security concerns and lack of access to drinkable water and services like education. Lack of water is a serious problem for most Afghans, especially in rural areas. Women often have the responsibility to fetch water, putting them at risk of harassment and gender-based violence – especially when their movement is restricted. Some women noted that they were unable to take on agricultural work because they did not have access to water while they were outside working.

Consultations indicate that displaced women may have higher levels of employment, particularly operating from inside the home, than women from host communities.¹¹ This could be symptomatic of displaced women's comparatively worse economic condition requiring them to seek employment and indicate fewer opportunities to access work outside the home potentially due to greater movement restrictions, given heightened security risks for displaced women and girls.

The strongest factors in making a location most liveable for women are economic opportunities, safe access to basic services, freedom of movement, including to gather and meet with other women. Many women noted that proximity to security checkpoints and military bases – which have reportedly been increasing in some residential areas – was a primary consideration in how happy they were with where they lived. In the difficult situations where households make the choice to move, women often have little say – 68 per cent of women consulted stated that they have little to no influence on decision making.

Mental health

Mental health among women continues to deteriorate. Sixty-nine per cent reported that feelings of anxiety, isolation and depression had grown significantly worse between April and June, an increase from 57 per cent in the preceding quarter. Rates were particularly high in the Eastern (93 per cent) and North-Eastern¹² (84 per cent) regions. Women spoke of psychological issues, including depression, insomnia, loss of hope and motivation, anxiety, fear, aggression, isolation and increasingly

⁸ UNICEF. 2023. "Child Marriage."

⁹ Between the period from January to March 2023 and the period from April to June 2023, the percentages shifted as follows, respectively: at home, 54 per cent to 40 per cent; among wider relatives, 25 per cent to 16 per cent; in the community, 7 per cent to 4 per cent; at a provincial level, 4 per cent to 2 per cent; and at a national level, 5 per cent to 2 per cent.

¹⁰ NRC. "Afghanistan: Taliban authorities violently evict displaced people from makeshift camps in Kabul", 11 July 2023.

¹¹ Note that due to the sample size this finding is not statistically representative.

¹² The North-Eastern region covers Badakshan and Baghlan.

isolationist behaviour, and suicidal ideation. Concerningly, women suffering from poor mental health are also more likely to be beaten inside the home. Little sympathy was extended towards them as they are less likely to be perceived as being “justified” in experiencing mental health issues.¹³

Although some women could consult a psychologist or find informal counselling, most relied on exercise and busying themselves with daily chores as coping strategies. Other strategies such as studying and social connections with family and friends were preferred yet inaccessible given the severe contraction of spaces for women to make social connections. Opportunities to study continued to shrink as community-based education by international organizations was banned and home-based schooling initiatives were regularly shut down by the de facto authorities. Women underlined their fears for the mental state of younger women, with some reporting suicidal ideation among their daughters.



Familial and social relationships between women and men

Women’s relationships with men in their families continue to deteriorate. Between April and June 2023, relationships with male family members worsened for 48 per cent of women, compared with 39 per cent between January and March 2023. Relationships worsened especially among women in the Central Highland¹⁴ (74 per cent) and Eastern (76 per cent) regions. Although many women felt that men in their households provided them with crucial psychological support, the toll of the current women’s rights crisis was fracturing family relationships.

Family conflict has increased with the deteriorating mental state of all household members, creating an ongoing atmosphere of tension and regular conflict in households. In line with past research, consultations found that women’s confinement at home contributed to growing intolerance to noise, irritability and anger expressed towards their children.¹⁵ Additionally, the strategy of the de facto authorities to hold male family members accountable for women’s actions has led some men to become the enforcers of decrees targeting women, creating additional friction at home.

Engagement between women and men in their community is increasingly rare. Almost two thirds of women (61 per cent) did not meet once with men outside their family between April and June 2023, an increase from 56 per cent between January and March 2023. In the Eastern Region, the share was as high as 94 per cent. Women in Helmand, for example, underlined that the social barrier to engaging with men outside the home extended to shopkeepers, as both parties feared negative repercussions from the de facto authorities. On the other hand, in the North-Eastern and Northern¹⁶ regions, women met with men outside their families at least weekly (28 and 23 per cent, respectively). Overall, the trend, despite variation across regions, pointed to decreasing interactions between women and individuals outside their households, a direct consequence of the Taliban’s increasing drive to restrict women’s lives to their homes.



Engagement and advocacy with the de facto authorities

“They have silenced women’s voices; history won’t forget this oppression by the Taliban.”

Some 81 per cent of women had not engaged at all with local de facto authorities on issues important to them between April and June 2023. This finding was consistent with engagement levels in the previous quarter. The degree of exclusion was similar among different women – including displaced and non-displaced, and rural and urban women – showing that the impact of restrictions has been comprehensive and disempowering. Some women described mainly unsuccessful efforts to resolve specific issues with the de facto authorities, including to reverse the closure of schools, obtain permission for health projects and request new business licenses. Women emphasized that some men in the community and male religious leaders were critical actors in supporting better outcomes – for example, by listening to women, assisting them in negotiations with the de facto authorities and adding male voices to calls for change.

¹³ IOM. 2023. [Mental Health: Displacement trends and challenges in Afghanistan since August 2021](#). Research Brief.

¹⁴ The Central Highland Region refers to Bamyan.

¹⁵ IOM. 2023. [Mental Health: Displacement trends and challenges in Afghanistan since August 2021](#). Research brief.

¹⁶ The Northern Region consists of Balkh, Faryab, Jawzjan, Samangan and Sar-e-Pul.

Women argued that actors outside the country were best placed to lead advocacy for women's rights that was grounded in the voices and realities of women inside Afghanistan. As security risks limited advocacy by women's rights organizations inside the country, they urged entities outside, including the international community and Afghans in exile, to unite to fight for Afghan women's rights. Women requested external organizations to coordinate with those inside the country on advocacy strategies and to conduct bespoke trainings on relevant topics, such as women's rights under sharia law. They saw the United Nations as the most important actor in leading women's rights advocacy with the de facto authorities.

More than half (52 per cent) of women stated that international engagement had only a limited positive impact, and a quarter (27 per cent) said there had been no impact at all. Sixty-three percent described international action in Afghanistan as mainly focused on humanitarian assistance. Although this was seen as the most impactful form of engagement, women notably urged more efforts on women's rights and gender equality. Only 17 per cent saw evidence of the latter; only 8 per cent found it impactful. The perception that the international community acts more systematically on issues besides women's rights as well as the limited impact of the minimal engagement that does take place both point to a lack of coherence in the international response to an unprecedented women's rights crisis. The extent and severity of this crisis demands significantly more from the international community. Specific suggestions are outlined below.

Recognition of the Taliban

Women reiterated that recognition of the de facto authorities should not happen under any circumstances (46 per cent) or warned that recognition should only occur under specific conditions contingent on improving women's rights (50 per cent). The latter could include restoring women's rights to education and employment and forming an inclusive government. Women urged the international community not to consider recognition under the current conditions for women and girls as these are akin to imprisonment. They expressed concern that recognition would only encourage the de facto authorities to continue becoming stricter in their policies and practices against women and girls. Instead of recognition of representatives of the de facto authorities at the United Nations, some women suggested that a female Afghan leader should be appointed to represent Afghan women there. Otherwise, half of the Afghan population would remain unrepresented.

Recommendations

Afghan women specifically urged the international community to:

Advocacy and engagement with the de facto authorities

- **Continue political and economic sanctions** against the Taliban, including by not granting exemptions to the travel ban.
- **Increase engagement with the Taliban** on gender equality and women's rights, including by engaging community and religious leaders in awareness and advocacy efforts.
- **Support social media campaigns** to shift social opinions and push back against the re-emergence and solidification of regressive gender norms.

Political participation

- **Advocate for women's political participation** in shura councils and local governance structures and create a women's platform for political participation.
- **Focus on women's legal and physical protection** to participate in politics as well as their empowerment at the household level to increase influence on decision-making.

Economic empowerment

- **Increase women's access to the Internet**, electricity and communications channels (phones, etc.).
- **Continue advocating for women's uninhibited right to work** while simultaneously creating jobs for them through online platforms, targeted both at building and using existing skills.
- **Support skills development** by providing online and radio courses and adult education, creating online libraries, providing Internet packages and devices, and supporting women and women-led organizations to train other women at home.
- **Support female entrepreneurs** by providing cash payments and raw materials, creating safe spaces for women to work and sell their products, and establishing online marketplaces for women to sell their goods.
- Identify alternative ways of ensuring that girls and women have **access to literacy and numeracy courses**.

Health and safety

- **Support initiatives that provide counselling and psychosocial services** in person and/or through online platforms and over the phone.
- **Support initiatives that provide international scholarships and safe migration options** for women and girls to study and work overseas.