

Resolve of Afghan Women in the Face of Erasure: Three Years Since the Taliban Takeover

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Photo: UN Women/Sayed Habib Bidel

Introduction

Afghanistan is beset with overlapping crises linked to and compounded by deepening gender inequalities. At least 70 Taliban decrees, directives and practices target the lives, bodies and choices of women and girls (Box 1). Data, including the perspectives of Afghan women, clearly show that the lives of women and girls are deteriorating. This is directly due to conditions within households as well as constraints on access to public spaces, employment, reproductive rights and maternal health, education, mental health and more.¹ The mounting women's rights crisis challenges progress on all sustainable development goals and indicators. Despite this dire situation, Afghan women show an unwavering and even growing resolve, from the simple act of leaving their homes to continuing to run businesses and organize communities to meet essential needs and pursue equality.

Against this backdrop are persistent global pressures and shrinking funding for international development and humanitarian needs. Waves of political upheavals across the world have seized attention and resources, including the invasion of Ukraine and the war on Gaza, among other concerns. Efforts to mobilize support for women in Afghanistan must be careful and targeted, not least because the situation fundamentally challenges the efficacy and relevance of the global gender equality and women's rights architecture and the multilateral system, all at a time when authoritarianism and autocracies are rising, and the backlash against gender equality transcends borders.²

¹ UN Women. 2024. [Gender Country Profile: Afghanistan](#). Kabul: UN Women. Also see: Without Borders. 2023. Persistent Barriers to Access Healthcare; OCHA (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs). 2023. Humanitarian Needs Overview 202; Nader, Z., and Zan Times reporters. 2023. "[Despair Is Settling In: Female Suicides on Rise in Taliban's Afghanistan](#)." The Guardian, 28 August.

² SDC (Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation) and Swisspeace. 2022. [Gender and Rising Authoritarianism: Implications for Women's Political Empowerment and Participation](#). SDC Topic Paper. Bern: SDC; Khan, A., et al. 2023 [Where Next for Feminist Foreign Policy on Countering Anti-Gender Backlash?](#) ODI, 1 November. See also: Human Rights Council. 2018. [Report of the Working Group on the Issue of Discrimination Against Women in Law and in Practice](#). A/HRC/38/46; Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls. n.d. "[Gender Equality and Gender Backlash](#)." Also see Zulver, J. 2019. "[Learning from High-Risk Feminism: Emergent Lessons about Women's Agency in Conflict Contexts](#)." *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 13(3): 21-43.

Box I:

Decrees eradicating women's visibility, choices and rights

Without male chaperons (mahram), women and girls can no longer travel or move around their communities, and have been banned from using amenities such as women's bath houses³, visiting parks⁴, accessing education⁵ (banned March 2022), attending university⁶ (December 2022), and working for international and national non-government organizations⁷ (NGOs) (December 2022) or the United Nations⁸ (April 2023). Beauty salons were banned in July 2023,⁹ with 60,000 women losing employment and the de facto authorities (DFA) entering a new phase of interference in the private sector that was previously not their primary concern. In some provinces (e.g., Nangahar), bans on singing, dancing and clapping during weddings have come into effect¹⁰ (January 2024). Women are under growing pressure not to consume media or practice journalism¹¹ (February 2024). Afghan women and international human rights advocates increasingly refer to the situation of women and girls in Afghanistan as "gender apartheid".¹²

This policy paper marks three years since the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan.¹³ It aims to alert the international community to what diminished attention to the women's rights crisis and limited investments in women's resilience mean for gender equality and the status of women and girls, and men and boys – as well as Afghanistan's development more broadly.

The policy paper elaborates trends and proposes actions¹⁴ relevant to four pathways for principled action outlined in the 2024 Afghanistan Gender Country Profile. It is intended to guide international actors with an array

of formal mandates and responsibilities in consistently aligning all policies and actions with women's human rights (Box 2).

Four principles and actions under each pathway are:

Principle: *Strengthen women-led civil society organizations, including through long-term, flexible funding to registered and unregistered entities.*

Action: Hold space open for women, rethink risk and fund creatively.

Principle: *Commit to channelling at least 30 per cent of all funding for Afghanistan to initiatives that directly target gender equality and women's rights and avoid supporting any gender-blind interventions.*

Action: Keep gender equality and women's rights high on the agenda.

Principle: *Avoid normalizing discriminatory practices. Take measures to prevent actions that could unintentionally support or normalize the Taliban's discriminatory policies, norms and values.*

Action: Involve women in all decision-making forums that concern the future of Afghanistan.

Principle: *Embed human rights, especially women's rights, as a cross-cutting theme across all humanitarian action and basic human needs interventions, from design to implementation and monitoring of all programming.*

Action: Double down on intersectional feminist political analysis.

The policy paper draws on extensive data gathered from consultations with Afghan women since August 2022. A quarterly consultation cycle was spearheaded by UN Women, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). The policy paper also reflects trends analysis and projections for women and girls based on other publicly available data.¹⁵

³ The Guardian, "[Taliban stop Afghan women from using bathhouses in northern provinces](#)," 7 January 2022.

⁴ NBC News, "[Taliban ban women from parks and gyms in Afghanistan](#)," 10 November 2022.

⁵ CNN News, "[Taliban ban women from parks and gyms in Afghanistan](#)" 24 March 2022.

⁶ Al Jazeera, "[Taliban says women banned from universities in Afghanistan](#)," 20 December 2022.

⁷ Voice of America, "[Taliban hold firm to ban on Afghan female aid workers](#)," 30 December 2022.

⁸ Al Jazeera, "[UN says its female staff banned from working in Afghanistan](#)," 4 April 2023.

⁹ Al Jazeera, "[Beauty salons in Afghanistan are closing – on Taliban orders](#)," 26 July 2023.

¹⁰ Khaama Press, "[Dance and music banned: at least 10 detained in northeastern Afghanistan](#)," 6 February 2024.

¹¹ Multiple decrees on women in the media are outlined: United States Institute for Peace. [Tracking the Taliban's \(Mis\)Treatment of Women](#).

Accessed on 11 August 2024; Gehrig, M. 2022. [Media restrictions and the implications for gender equality in Afghanistan](#). Kabul: UN Women.

¹² ACAPS. 2024. [Second Update on Taliban Decrees and Directives Relevant to the Humanitarian Response](#). 25 July; UN Women. 2024. Gender Country Profile: Afghanistan. Kabul: UN Women; UN Women. 2023. [Expert Group Meeting Report on International Strategies and Tools to Address the Situation of Women and Girls in Afghanistan](#). July.

¹³ World Bank. 2024. [Afghanistan Development Update](#). April; UN Women. 2024. Gender Country Profile: Afghanistan. Kabul: UN Women; UN Women, IOM (International Organization for Migration) and UNAMA (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan). 2024. [Summary Report of Countrywide Consultations with Women](#). April; CARE and UN Women. 2023. [Afghanistan: Rapid Gender Analysis](#). Gender in Humanitarian Action, November; UNAMA (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan). 2024. [De Facto Authorities' Moral Oversight in Afghanistan: Impacts on Human Rights](#). July; Amnesty International. 2024. "[Afghanistan](#)."

¹⁴ UN Women. 2024. [Gender Country Profile: Afghanistan](#). Kabul: UN Women.

¹⁵ Reports on previous consultations include those in February and April in 2024; March, June, September and December in 2023; and August in 2022. These consultations reached 3,419 Afghan women across all 34 provinces. The average number of respondents per consultation was 488. A smaller sample of men has been engaged since February 2024 to better understand their perspectives and how the many restrictions on gender equality affect them. UN Women, UNAMA and IOM consult Afghan women inside the country on a quarterly basis ahead of Security Council meetings.

Box 2:

Mandates and responsibilities

The full, equal and meaningful participation of Afghan women in discussions about the future of the country is internationally mandated. This mandate includes the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the full suite of United Nations Security Council resolutions on women, peace and security comprising the women, peace and security agenda,¹⁶ the latest United Nations System-Wide Acceleration Plan on Gender Equality¹⁷ and the Secretary-General's New Agenda for Peace.¹⁸

In Afghanistan, women's participation is clearly articulated in the UNAMA mandate,¹⁹ Security Council resolution 2721²⁰ and key United Nations policy documents, including the 2023 Independent Assessment by the Special Coordinator for Afghanistan appointed by the Secretary-General.²¹

Donor States and international organizations have committed to the latest System-Wide Acceleration Plan on Gender Equality²² and the New Agenda for Peace²³ as well as the Grand Bargain.²⁴ International development and humanitarian strategies reiterate localization commitments and objectives. The Global Compact on Refugees²⁵ and the Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies²⁶ provide other powerful frameworks for action.

Trends since 2021

Three years of edicts, statements and decrees by the DFA have targeted the rights, lives and bodies of women and girls, closing spaces for them in their own households and communities, and at the national level.²⁷ Not one decree on women and girls has been reversed. Civic space has shrunk for all civil society actors. Women-led and women-focused civil society organizations and activists have faced an aggressive campaign by the DFA that has led to banning women NGO workers, removing women in leadership positions, including as board members of NGOs, and forcing NGOs to replace the word "women" with "men" in project documents, among other consequences. These developments significantly reduce the operational and staff capacity of women's civil society organizations, compelling many to cease operations and others to fight hard to remain operational. Stifling restrictions impose dire economic and development costs. It has been projected that the Afghan economy will lose USD 9.6 billion, equivalent to two thirds of today's gross domestic product, by 2066 if the suspension of women's access to higher education remains in place.²⁸ Projections estimate correlations between the bans on women's and girls' education and an increase, by 2026, in early childbearing among Afghan girls by 45 per cent and risk of maternal mortality by at least 50 per cent.²⁹

Afghan women's invisibility is consistent with the former Taliban era (1996 to 2001). One notable feature is the return of the de facto Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. It swiftly replaced the Ministry of Women's Affairs upon the Taliban's takeover in August 2021.³⁰ Conditioned by fear and rigid notions of militarized masculinity, the DFA have imprinted the responsibility of informal, though no less effective, policing on male family members, neighbours and community members. This spread of negative gender norms has become part of the survival strategies of boys and men. It can be particularly complicated for women from minority

Four trends and areas for action

I. Strengthen women-led civil society organizations

¹⁶ United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs. "Gender, Women, Peace and Security"; UN Women. "What We Do."

¹⁷ United Nations. 2024. "System-wide Equality Acceleration Plan Ensures Gender Responsiveness, Inclusion 'Are Ingrained in All Our Endeavours'." [Deputy Secretary-General Tells Delegates](#). 8 April.

¹⁸ United Nations. 2024. [New Agenda for Peace](#).

¹⁹ For more information, see: "UNAMA Mandate". The mandate was renewed by [Security Council resolution 2678](#).

²⁰ See the full text of [Security Council resolution 2721](#).

²¹ Security Council. 2023. [Letter Dated 8 November 2023 from the Secretary-General Addressed to the President of the Security Council](#). S/2023/856.

²² United Nations. 2024. "System-wide Equality Acceleration Plan Ensures Gender Responsiveness, Inclusion 'Are Ingrained in All Our Endeavours'." [Deputy Secretary-General Tells Delegates](#). 8 April.

²³ United Nations. 2024. [New Agenda for Peace](#).

²⁴ See more information about the [Grand Bargain](#) on the website of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee.

²⁵ See more information on the [Global Compact for Refugees](#) on the website of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

²⁶ See more information on the [Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies](#).

²⁷ See ACAPS. 2024. [Second Update on Taliban Decrees and Directives Relevant to the Humanitarian Response](#). 25 July; Afghanistan Analysts Network. 2023. "Decrees, Orders and Instructions of Taliban Supreme Leader Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada." 15 July.

²⁸ UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). 2023. "Costs of Continued Suspension of Women's Access to Higher Education and Work in Afghanistan." Also see: UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund). 2022. "Depriving Girls of Secondary Education Translates to a Loss of at Least US\$500 Million for Afghan Economy in Last 12 Months." Press release, 14 August; Save the Children. 2023. "Afghanistan: Eighteen Months After Ban, Classroom Doors Must Open for Secondary School Girls." News, 16 March; Human Rights Watch. 2023. "Schools Are Failing Boys Too: The Taliban's Impact on Boys' Education in Afghanistan." December.

²⁹ UN Women. 2024. [Projections for Afghan women and girls: 'We hope we will not be left alone to fight for our rights.'](#)

³⁰ UNAMA (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan). 2024. [De Facto Authorities' Moral Oversight in Afghanistan: Impacts on Human Rights](#). July. Also see: Samim, S. 2022. [Policing Public Morality: Debates On Promoting Virtue and Preventing Vice in the Taliban's Second Emirate](#). Afghanistan Analysts Network, 15 June.

ethnic groups, such as the Hazara and others, who must navigate group survival, safety and cohesion, often at the cost of their rights as women.³¹ Male supremacy outside the household has resulted in changes within the home, creating a perception among men and boys that women and girls have neither the capacity nor need for social, political or economic opportunities, and reinforcing a belief that women and girls should remain at home in a position of servitude.³²

In parallel, spaces for women in the community have shrunk across the country. Social relationships are deteriorating – across two rounds of surveys, in October 2023 and April 2024, 18 per cent of women had not met once with women outside their household. In January 2024, women pointed to extremely low levels of social trust: Almost all (96 per cent) reported that “most people cannot be trusted”, including their neighbours, expressing anxiety that anybody could be an informant.

What needs to change?

Well-documented barriers to quality funding for feminist movements and women’s rights and gender equality initiatives and organizations persist globally.³³ In the 20 years before the 2021 takeover, these patterns were prevalent in Afghanistan.³⁴ The shift from development to humanitarian funding over the past three years has deeply impacted longer-term, inherently incremental work to shift and transform restrictive gender norms that have only become more harmful. Short funding cycles, a hallmark of humanitarian aid, make it impossible for organizations to address the structural drivers of gender inequalities.

Holding open space for women is crucial for the survival of civil society and is the first principle of the Gender Country Profile.³⁵ This takes various forms but is predicated on long-term, flexible support for women-led civil society organizations, many of which may now be less formal and less recognizably an “NGO”. Unregistered organizations are particularly vital to sustain and preserve

visible and invisible forms of, and spaces for, women’s influence and leadership across all sectors. Activities may be subtle and less obviously about gender equality but provide ways for women to earn income, convene safely and connect socially.

How to: Hold space for women, rethink risk and fund creatively

1. Provide quality, flexible and multi-year funding directly to women-led and gender focused organizations by:
 - Adjusting reporting criteria and formats to increase access to funding, including by issuing funding calls in Dari and Pashto;
 - Broadening support mechanisms to include unregistered organizations operating in Afghanistan; and
 - Prioritizing core funding, based on flexible monitoring and iterative programming to response to rapid and unexpected shifts in the operating environment.
2. Increase risk appetite and focus on more active risk sharing by:³⁶
 - Cultivating respectful and safe partnerships with women’s civil society organizations to ensure they are at the centre of collective efforts;
 - Analysing risk from multiple perspectives, examining who is “holding” risk and how risks may be cascading (typically downwards from more powerful actors such as international NGOs, the United Nations and donors to national or local organizations); and
 - Working with international NGOs with a long-term presence and proven track records of genuine partnership-oriented localization as one pathway but not the default option.

³¹ Akbari, F., and J. True. 2024. “[Bargaining with Patriarchy in Peacemaking: The Failure of Women, Peace, and Security in Afghanistan](#).” *Global Studies Quarterly*.

³² In the February 2024 survey, UN Women, IOM and UNAMA found that mothers had notably less influence on boys (6 per cent) than fathers (24 per cent)

³³ OECD-DAC (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development–Development Assistance Committee) Network on Gender Equality. 2017. *Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations: A Review of Donor Support*. Policy paper, Number 8, October; OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). 2021. *Development for Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment: A 2021 Snapshot*; OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). 2023. *Development for Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment: A 2023 Snapshot*. 1 March; Arutyunova, A., and C. Clark. 2013. *Watering the Leaves, Starving the Roots: The Status of Financing for Women’s Rights Organizing and Gender Equality*. Association for Women in Development; GNWP (Global Network of Women Peacebuilders). 2020. [Financing for Women’s Organizations: The Billion-Dollar Question](#). GNWP. Also see: CARE. 2021. *Time for a Better Bargain: How the Aid System Shortchanges Women and Girls in Crisis*; Association for Women in Development. 2020. [Where Is the Money for Feminist Organising? New Analysis Finds That the Answer Is Alarming](#).

³⁴ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. 2021. [Support for Gender Equality: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan](#). February. More broadly, see: Dharmapuri, S., 2011. “[Just Add Women and Stir?](#)” *Parameters* 56-70.

³⁵ Robinette, K. 2023. *Evidence Digest: Why Partnering with Local Women’s Organizations for GBViE Programming Is Crucial*. London: GBV AoR Helpdesk; Esplen, E. 2013. [Leaders for Change: Why Support Women’s Rights Organisations?](#) *Womankind Worldwide*; O’Connell, H. 2012. *What Added Value Do Organizations That Are Led and Managed by Women and Girls Bring to the Work Addressing the Rights, Needs and Priorities of Women and Girls*. London: Comic Relief; Fletcher-Wood, E., and R. Mutandwa. 2019. [Funding a Localised Women-Led Approach to Protection from Gender-Based Violence](#). London: ActionAid; Peace Direct, Adeso, Alliance for Peacebuilding, et al. 2021. *Time to Decolonise Aid – Insights and Lessons from a Global Consultation*.

³⁶ Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross). 2022. *Risk Sharing in Practice*. June; USAID (United States Agency for International Development). 2019. *NGOs and Risk: Managing Uncertainty in Local-International Partnerships*. Global report.

2. Commit to channelling at least 30 per cent of all funding for Afghanistan to initiatives that directly target gender equality and women’s rights

Trends since 2021

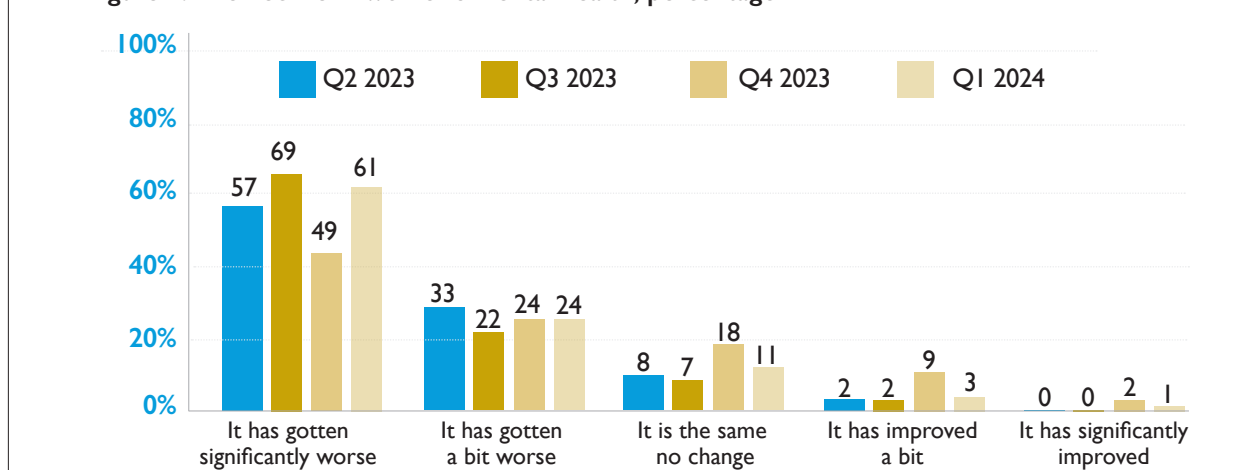
Since 2021, Afghan women have consistently navigated decree after decree aimed at systematically eroding their visibility and resilience, finding inroads in a context where hostility to women’s leadership and rights continues to worsen.³⁷ As rights deteriorate and obstacles increase, and despite clear data outlining an ongoing and massive decline, financial and political backing to Afghan women’s fight has not adapted and grown accordingly.

In April 2024, only 2 per cent of women consulted indicated that they had “good” or “full” influence on community decision-making bodies, compared with 18 per cent of men.³⁸ This figure for women has fallen dramatically from 17 per cent in January 2023, when women highlighted how they were often excluded from public meetings and unable to directly engage with local authorities, and were forced to rely on male family and community members to advocate on their behalf. In the 2024 consultations, women described being denied entry to buildings of the DFA and the refusal of officials to meet with them. Women (and men) from marginalized groups – such as the Hazaras who have been targets of violence – are even more excluded from access to decision-makers.³⁹

Women increasingly link their lack of rights, educational prospects and jobs to diminishing household influence.⁴⁰ By April 2024, women’s self-reported “good” or “full” influence on household decision-making had drastically dropped to 38 per cent, down from 90 per cent in January 2023. Familial relationships are deteriorating – in April 2024, 42 per cent of women indicated that relationships with male family members have declined, compared to 22 per cent of men.⁴¹ Women described how economic strain was escalating tensions in households, with a conservative shift in male family members’ attitudes to women’s freedoms in line with restrictive policies by the DFA. Women’s reliance on men to share their views and make decisions on their behalf risks normalizing their erasure from decision-making on many levels.

The loss of women’s influence in public and private decision-making has translated into an alarming mental health crisis. In April 2024, most women reported that their mental health (feelings of anxiety, isolation, depression) was “very bad” (40 per cent) or “bad” (28 per cent). Only 10 per cent indicated that their mental health was “good” or “very good”, compared with 29 per cent of men. This finding followed a pattern of steady mental health decline across surveys (Figure 1). In March 2023, 48 per cent of respondents to the Bishnaw survey reported knowing at least one woman or girl who had suffered from anxiety or depression since August 2021. Worryingly, 8 per cent of respondents said they knew a woman or girl who had attempted suicide.⁴²

Figure 1: The decline in women’s mental health, percentage



³⁷UN Women, IOM (International Organization for Migration) and UNAMA (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan). 2024. [Summary Report of Countrywide Consultations with Women](#); OHCHR (Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights). 2023. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Afghanistan and the Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls. Country reports, 15 June. A/HRC/53/21. UNAMA (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan). 2022. [Human Rights in Afghanistan: 15 August 2021–15 June 2022](#). Kabul: UNAMA.

³⁸UN Women, IOM (International Organization for Migration) and UNAMA (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan). 2024. [Summary Report of Countrywide Consultations with Women](#).

³⁹In the Central Highlands Region, a group of participants (76 per cent Hazara and 24 per cent Tajik) reported particularly low engagement with the DFA in April 2024; 98 per cent of respondents said they had not once engaged with the DFA on issues important to them between January and March 2024. UN Women, IOM (International Organization for Migration) and UNAMA (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan). 2024. [Summary Report of Countrywide Consultations with Women](#).

⁴⁰UN Women, IOM (International Organization for Migration) and UNAMA (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan). 2024. [Summary Report of Countrywide Consultations with Women](#).

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²DROPS. 2023. Bishnaw March 2023 Survey: [Impact of Taliban Restrictions on Afghan Women’s Economic Conditions and Mental Health](#).

What needs to change?

Despite women’s deteriorating situation, international financial and political support is dwindling. It is needed more than ever before. The responsibility to keep gender equality on the agenda rests not with Afghan women alone; it is a collective responsibility, with international actors playing key roles in funding, policy and political decision-making.

From a funding perspective, gender-blind and “lite” programmes and projects should not be supported (Box 3). Given the increase in autocratic and authoritarian contexts and gender backlash globally – especially in high-risk, complex settings such as Afghanistan, Myanmar and Sudan – a new generation of gender advisers is required who are politically savvy and knowledgeable about risks and programming areas that are highly relevant to gender but not consistently treated that way. These issues include climate change, food security, infrastructure and illicit economies. Accountability is also needed to ensure that the integration of gender does not rest on one individual. All staff, across all functions have a responsibility to integrate gender in their work, from the strategic-level to the day-to-day operations.

How to: Keep gender equality and women’s rights high on the agenda

1. Integrate feminist analysis and embed gender equality outcomes that underpin and guide process and programme design by:⁴³
 - Applying the Gender Equality Marker (GEM) to frame interventions and assist in directly targeting gender equality as a principal objective under the United Nations GEM Policy and the scheme of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development;⁴⁴ and
 - Implementing gender-responsive budgeting and planning to achieve a minimum 30 per cent of funding for gender equality as the starting point or “floor” (and not an end point or “ceiling”).
2. Invest in the integration and accountability for gender mainstreaming across all projects and personnel, including investing in an independent certified gender adviser course – including women from conflict-affected contexts – to generate a pool of capable, agile advisers equipped to advance global gender equality and the women, peace and security agenda in increasingly challenging contexts.
3. Support coalition-building among women’s civil society organizations by:

- Embedding conflict sensitivity in approaches to avoid externally driving network creation or unity-building, which has proven unsustainable and at times divisive;
 - Funding initiatives aimed at strengthening the resilience of the women’s movement; and
 - Identifying entry points to support the reopening of women-led organizations and networks that have ceased operations and are actively seeking to re-open.
4. Develop coherent, principled and consistent political support for women’s civil society organizations and women’s rights defenders to bolster their actions and security, in addition to providing long-term, flexible funding.

Box3:

Spotting gender-insensitive and “lite” programming

This type of programming lacks “do no harm” analysis and builds on gender-blind conflict sensitivity assessments with no focus on gendered risks. There might be a “gender paragraph” rather than a coherent examination of gender and patriarchal power as factors across public and private domains, from the individual to the institutional level. Women are solely framed as victims or beneficiaries in need of protection, instead of asking about other roles they might have.

Such programmes offer limited or no safeguarding (protection against sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment), and often make statements about women’s participation with no clear approach or budget to achieve it. Enabling measures might lack contextualization; for example, are mahram costs covered? The lack of gender expertise is also apparent in poor quality, gender-blind approaches to monitoring and evaluation. Examples include counting numbers of women in events or showing results disaggregated by sex but not gender.

3. Avoid normalizing discriminatory practices

Trends since 2021

From 2005 to 2020, 80 per cent of peace negotiations on Afghanistan had no Afghan women.⁴⁵ The negotiations for the Doha agreement in 2020 left out Afghan women and did not contain a single reference to or safeguard for women’s rights. This legacy of decades of women’s

⁴³Derbyshire, H., et al. 2018. [Politically Informed, Gender Aware Programming: Five Lessons from Practice](#). Briefing note. Birmingham, United Kingdom: Developmental Leadership Programme; Lwamba, E., et al. 2022. “Strengthening Women’s Empowerment and Gender Equality in Fragile Contexts Towards Peaceful and Inclusive Societies: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis.” *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 18(1).

⁴⁴See more information on the [Gender Equality Marker](#); UNSDG (United Nations Sustainable Development Group). 2019. [UNCT Gender Equality Marker Guidance Note](#).

⁴⁵Oxfam. 2021. [“Leading the Way”: Women Driving Peace and Security in Afghanistan, the Occupied Palestinian Territory and Yemen](#). Oxfam Briefing Paper, January.

exclusion from key discussions and agreements – Bonn, Doha, Sochi and more – has created a pathway that continues today. Despite commitments and lessons from the past, women continue to be largely excluded today from political discussions in Afghanistan.

The DFA have continuously expressed a desire to discuss topics with the international community where they feel they can demonstrate progress. Human rights and women’s rights – including access to education for girls – are not on this list. Various Member States are willing to engage with the DFA, often bilaterally with little attention to international standards, including on women’s rights.⁴⁶

What needs to change?

Member States have individually and collectively made commitments and developed policies to implement the women, peace and security agenda, including through international tools for Afghanistan.⁴⁷ Applying these is paramount as women’s influence at all levels of decision-making continues to decline. At future United Nations-convened Doha talks – and other inter-Member State forums – discussion of the DFA’s “acceptable” topics of economics, counternarcotics, and climate and security must comprehensively examine how the ongoing women’s rights crisis exacerbates regression on each issue. There is a high risk of gender equality objectives getting “lost” or being deemed “too hard” unless diligent attention to feminist principles is prioritized.

Both Afghan women and men surveyed in April 2024 stated that the international community should establish formal mechanisms to guarantee women’s inclusion in international decision-making forums discussing the future of Afghanistan.⁴⁸ To avoid normalizing the absence of women in public and political decision-making, Afghan women must be able to represent themselves.

Afghan women can and should be able to represent themselves in their diversity and their own capacities as leaders and experts on all topics, not just those related to gender equality and women’s rights.⁴⁹ In April 2024, only 19 per cent of women said that the international community would adequately represent their interests in discussions with the DFA. In the same consultations, when Afghan women were asked what the international community can do in engaging with the DFA, 52 per cent

indicated that priorities were imposing aid conditionality and facilitating opportunities for women to talk directly with the DFA (45 per cent).⁵⁰ This recommendation has been consistently put forward since August 2021, with specific requests that the United Nations and Member States create mechanisms to guarantee women’s participation through both direct and indirect modalities.

International actors continue to send mixed messages to the Taliban when they too have all-male delegations or women present only in administrative functions. This becomes a clear and powerful message absorbed by the DFA. As stated by Shaharзад Akbar, former Chairperson of the Afghanistan Human Rights Commission: “... we call on you to not normalize [the] Taliban’s erasure of women, we mean senior women in your teams should be leading your interactions with the Taliban, we mean Afg[han] women should be consulted every step, don’t exclude women.”⁵¹

How to: Involve women in all decision-making forums that concern the future of Afghanistan

1. Support Afghan women’s participation in decision-making at all levels, directly and indirectly, by:
 - Establishing clear and transparent criteria for participant selection, towards the diverse and representative involvement of Afghan women and civil society more broadly;
 - Developing participation models that include both direct and indirect modalities for Afghan women and civil society so their voices are meaningfully included; and
 - Supporting pathways for Afghan women to directly negotiate with the Taliban.
2. Form a strategic negotiating pact among Member States around women’s rights leadership by:
 - Holding joint preparation sessions with Afghan women to maximize limited opportunities to engage with the DFA on arguments for gender equality and human rights;
 - Committing to gender parity among all international representatives in meetings with the DFA; and

⁴⁶UN Women. 2024. “[Expert Group Meeting on International Strategies and Tools to Address the Situation of Women and Girls in Afghanistan](#).” Kabul: UNWomen.

⁴⁷This includes the Special Coordinator’s assessment published in December 2023 and Security Council [resolution 2721](#), where the international community stipulated that the inclusion of women’s rights and participation was critical in discussions with the DFA: “the need to ensure the full, equal, meaningful and safe participation of Afghan women in the process” (para. 3).

⁴⁸Responses by women and men were as follows: a 50 per cent quota for women representatives (59 per cent and 36 per cent, respectively); an Afghan women’s delegation at international decision-making forums on Afghanistan (49 per cent and 50 per cent, respectively); and a women’s advisory body to the international community (50 per cent and 50 per cent, respectively).

⁴⁹Examples of prominent Afghan women advocating for women’s inclusion are in footnote 38.

⁵⁰Women answered a multiple-choice question with the following options: link international aid to better conditions for women (52 per cent); facilitate so women can talk directly with the Taliban (45 per cent); consult with civil society (21 per cent); discuss and advocate directly to the Taliban (9 per cent); recognize the Taliban (4 per cent); other (4 per cent).

⁵¹Post on [X, 7 October 2021](#), by Shaharзад Akbar, former Chairperson of the Afghanistan Human Rights Commission; Barr, H. 2021. “[When Foreign Men Talk to the Taliban about Women’s Rights](#).” Ink Stick Media, 18 October.

- Regularly updating contextual analysis to take stock of how gender equality and the women’s rights situation are impacting political and contextual dynamics, and steering agile and responsive strategies to tackle these issues.

4. Embed human rights, especially women’s rights, as a cross-cutting theme across all humanitarian action and basic human needs interventions

Trends since 2021

A fundamental contribution to – and disruption of – international relations has come from the advancement of intersectional feminist political analysis.⁵² In Afghanistan, however, detailed feminist analysis built on regular gender data and statistics is not conducted widely or consistently. Further, over time, it is not implausible that men will be centralized in programming, in part due to the lack of initial catalytic feminist analysis and cogent gender equality advice, and in part because this is being normalized as part of “doing business” in Afghanistan.

To demonstrate the difference feminist analysis can make, it has long argued for more nuanced conceptions of security that recognize a continuum of violence, and that do not foreground state security while marginalizing other forms and experiences of insecurity. In Afghanistan, reference is often made to improved security. But when a women’s rights lens is applied, a more complex picture emerges. Indeed, there is a marked difference between state security and human security. From January to April 2024, 64 per cent of women indicated feeling “not at all” safe leaving home by themselves, compared to 2 per cent of men.⁵³ For men, being in public with women is an increasing “liability”. Afghan men have indicated that their feeling of safety drops markedly when they are in public with a female family member, aligning with women’s comments that they are targeted by DFA authorities and community members for being out in public.⁵⁴ In January 2024, 70 per cent of women felt that their main safety concern was “harassment by DFA officials”. These concerns came at a time when officials in Kabul were arresting and detaining women and girls around the city for not wearing a “proper hijab”, a situation accompanied by allegations of ill-treatment in detention.⁵⁵

Women across the country have said that crime is a significant safety concern. In January 2024, they put it on the same level as “harassment by community members” (24 per cent). One participant emphasized the dual impact of discriminatory policies and crime. After she was robbed in the street, the de facto police rebuked her for being in public. While the risk of women being caught in a bombing or armed attack has decreased since August 2021, it has been replaced by targeted harassment, threats and violence by the DFA. Further, the consolidation of harmful social norms exacerbates risks of gender-based violence. Overall, women’s security has significantly deteriorated.

What needs to change?

International actors have ample ideas and suggestions for how to remedy the dearth of gender-responsive and feminist analysis. Intersectional feminist political analysis is an essential requirement for all the points in this policy paper; it should underpin international strategic planning, scenario development, engagement and programming. Situating women as agents of change with differentiated experiences, perspectives and needs is challenging but critical to rectify the lack of attention to gender as a form of power and patriarchy as an oppressive system.⁵⁶

Intersectional feminist political analysis should be core to the design of both small and large initiatives, and not just an “output”. It means being attentive to who makes “sense” of data and analysis – who interprets, communicates, shapes and frames it.⁵⁷ Men largely produce analysis on Afghanistan’s economic, climate and governance issues, dominating roles as authoritative knowledge holders. Shifting this pattern requires seeing women as experts and breaking down the common typecasting of women as victims of war, where they are often merged with children and the elderly as ever “vulnerable” or as “beneficiaries”.

How to: Double down on feminist intersectional political analysis

1. Be proactive in funding conditionalities and support by:
 - Stipulating in funding agreements with research agencies and think tanks that at least 50 per cent of

⁵²Koester, D. 2015. [Gender and Power](#). Concept Brief 4. Birmingham, United Kingdom: Developmental Leadership Programme; UN Women. 2012. [Policy Briefing Paper: Gender and Conflict Analysis](#). New York: UN Women; Browne, E. 2014. [Gender in Political Economy Analysis](#). GSDRC Helpdesk Research Report 1071. Birmingham, United Kingdom: GSDRC, University of Birmingham. See a related blog: Browne, E. 2014. “[Gender – The Power Relationship That Political Economy Analysis Forgot?](#)” Birmingham, United Kingdom: Developmental Leadership Programme. See also: Carter, B. 2022. [Analysing Intersecting Social Inequalities in Crisis Settings](#). K4D Helpdesk Report. Sussex, United Kingdom: Institute of Development Studies; CBM (Christian Blind Mission). 2019. [Disability and Gender Analysis Toolkit](#); Rohwerder, B. 2015. [Disability Inclusion: Topic Guide](#). Birmingham, United Kingdom: GSDRC, University of Birmingham.

⁵³ In January 2024, 57 per cent of women said they did “not at all” feel safe leaving home by themselves.

⁵⁴ In response to the question “Do you feel safe leaving home by yourself?”, men responded “totally” (75 per cent), “somewhat” (23 per cent) and “not at all” (2 per cent). In comparison, on the question “Do you feel safe leaving home with a female family member?”, men responded “totally” (31 per cent), “somewhat” (63 per cent) and “not at all” (6 per cent).

⁵⁵ UNAMA (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan) Human Rights Service. 2024. [De Facto Authorities’ Moral Oversight in Afghanistan: Impacts on Human Rights](#).

⁵⁶ Within the United Nations, this has long been mandated – typically referred to as gender-responsive conflict analysis. See United Nations. 2019. [Report of the Secretary-General on Women and Peace and Security](#). S/2019/800, para. 120 (c)-(e).

⁵⁷ Morley, K. 2010. [Getting to Grips with Unconscious Bias](#). Working Paper No. 3. Gender Worx.

articles funded must be authored or co-authored by women;

- Requesting that women co-present – especially Afghan women – in briefings; and
 - Insisting on more women analysts being involved in research beyond “women’s issues”.
2. Commission parallel feminist analysis to close gaps in “mainstream” analysis and recognize that Afghan women continue to exert leadership and expertise in multiple domains. Make action fully effective by:
 - Factoring in and providing funding for the time it takes to diversify sources of information, especially with DFA restrictions on open consultations with Afghan women and girls; and
 - Using timely feminist political analysis to inform programming, policy and political work.
 3. Pay attention to who is a “knowledge holder”, especially when “heads of households” are primary data sources, as this will lead to men being at the centre of data and women at the margins.
 4. Commit to Afghan women as peer reviewers, disrupting established networks to bring in different perspectives. This process should be appropriately resourced and contribute to positioning women as knowledge holders.