

AFGHANISTAN CRISIS UPDATE

WOMEN AND GIRLS IN DISPLACEMENT

The August 2021 fall of Afghanistan’s government to Taliban rule has further limited the ability of women and girls to exercise their fundamental rights in their own country. The longstanding conflict in Afghanistan as well as recent events and the restriction of women’s rights have forced many women and their families to flee their homes, seeking safety either within Afghanistan or in neighbouring countries. The analysis of 2021 data provided in this factsheet demonstrates that refugees, internally displaced people and other populations affected by the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan are increasing in number; but their prospects, whether in returning home or finding refuge elsewhere, are not always bright. This factsheet examines the needs, fears and barriers encountered by Afghan women and girls who are internally displaced or who have fled abroad.

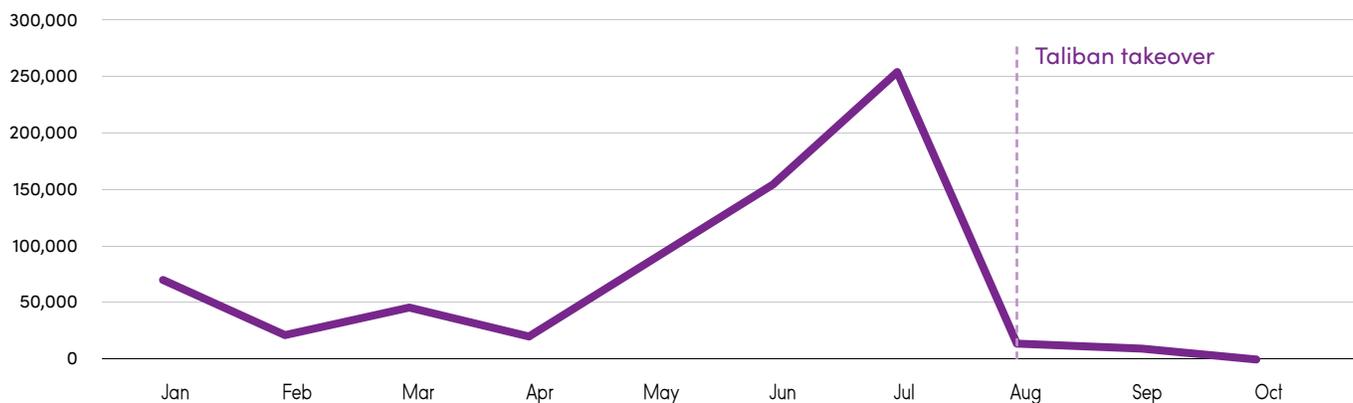
The factsheet is the first in a series that will examine the changing situation in Afghanistan as additional data become available. It was produced by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), using data from UNHCR, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and other sources as indicated. Given the rapidly shifting situation in the country, estimates are likely to change over time. Trends or events taking place after 2021 will be reflected in future factsheets of this series.

Women are fleeing their homes, and taking their families with them

The total number of displaced Afghan people increased substantially in 2021, both within the country and beyond its borders. A major peak of conflict-induced newly internally displaced population numbers was registered in July, prior to the Taliban takeover (figure 1). While some moved in groups, mostly as families, the crisis also left many families in need of reunification.

FIGURE 1

Number of conflict-induced newly internally displaced people in Afghanistan, January - October 2021 (total)



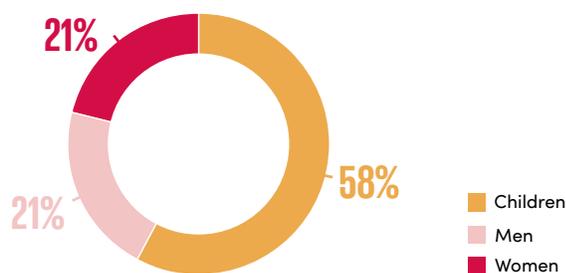
Source: UN OCHA records, available from: www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/afghanistan/idps. Last reported displacement up to 19 October 2021.

Data for 2021 indicate that women make up roughly 21 per cent of internally displaced people, as do men. Children make up the remaining 58 per cent (figure 2). A look at the family composition of those that fled to other countries, however, reveals gender differences (figure 3). Neighboring countries such as Pakistan, Iran and, to a much lesser degree other Refugee Response Plan Countries such as Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, are key destination countries for Afghans seeking international protection. Prior to 2021, there were more than 2 million¹ Afghan refugees registered in those countries, of which more than 64 per cent were in Pakistan and 35 per cent were in Iran. With the 2021 crisis, however, it is expected that the number of Afghans in need of international protection has increased in these and other countries. During 2021, women and girls made up an estimated 46 per cent of the almost 80 thousand² Afghans in need of international protection reported in these countries (figure 3).

Although most of those entering Pakistan and Iran were recorded as nuclear groups of women and men with children and other dependents (figure 4), more than 4,000 people fled without a partner to Pakistan and Iran in 2021 alone³. Data show that, overall, women are more likely than men to seek asylum with children and other dependents (figure 5). An estimated 68 per cent of non-partnered women who fled to Pakistan and Iran did so with children or other dependents, compared to 7 per cent of non-partnered men. Data also show that non-partnered women on average take more dependents than non-partnered men when seeking asylum. Non-partnered women fleeing to Pakistan with dependents had on average 4.2 children or other dependents each, compared to 3.1 for men. Similarly, in Iran, these figures stood at 3.8 for women and 3.1 for men. This evidences the additional burden placed on non-partnered women, to find shelter, safety and resources not only for themselves but also for their families.

FIGURE 2

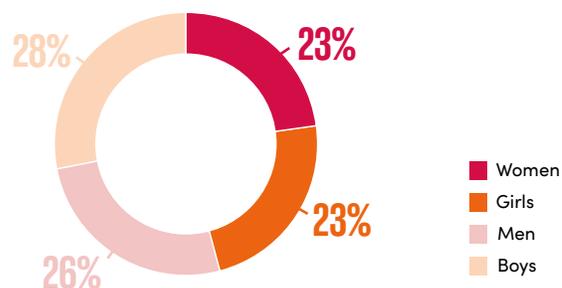
Conflict induced newly internally displaced people in Afghanistan, by sex, January–October 2021 (percentage)



Source: UN OCHA records, available from: www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/afghanistan/idps. Last reported displacement up to 19 October 2021. Sex-disaggregation for children was not available at the time of the analysis.

FIGURE 3

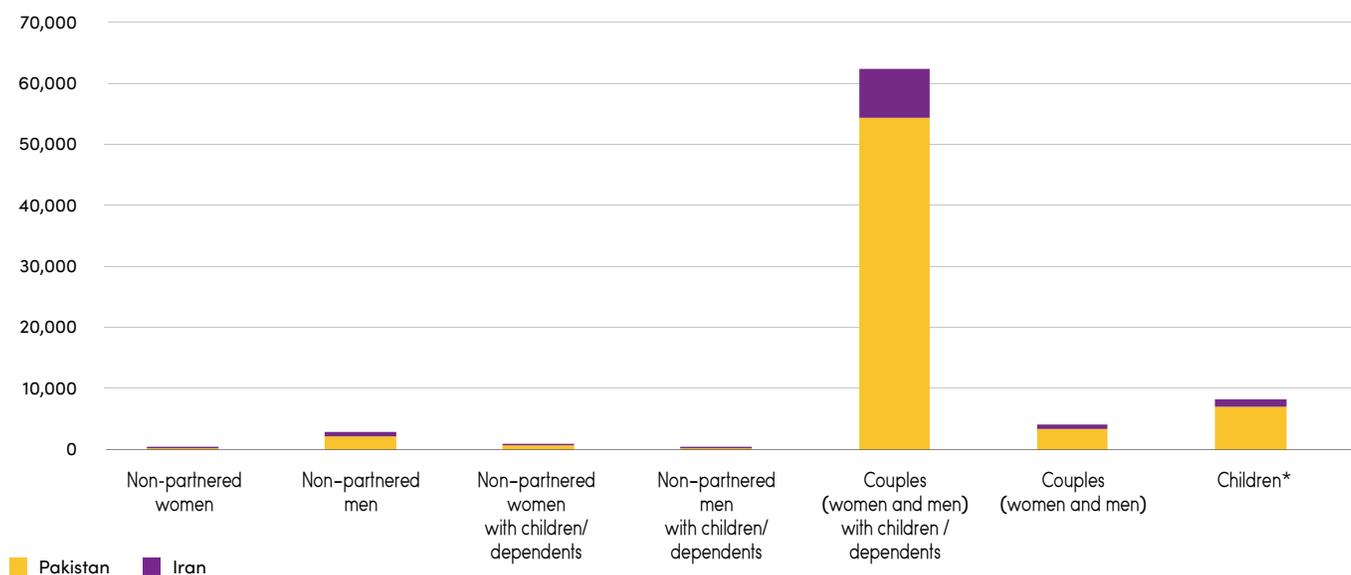
Proportion of newly recorded Afghans in need of international protection in Refugee Response Plan countries, by sex, 2021 (percentage)



Source: UNHCR records. Data as of 11 December 2021. Note: The 2022 Refugee Response Plan for Afghanistan focuses on populations in Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

FIGURE 4

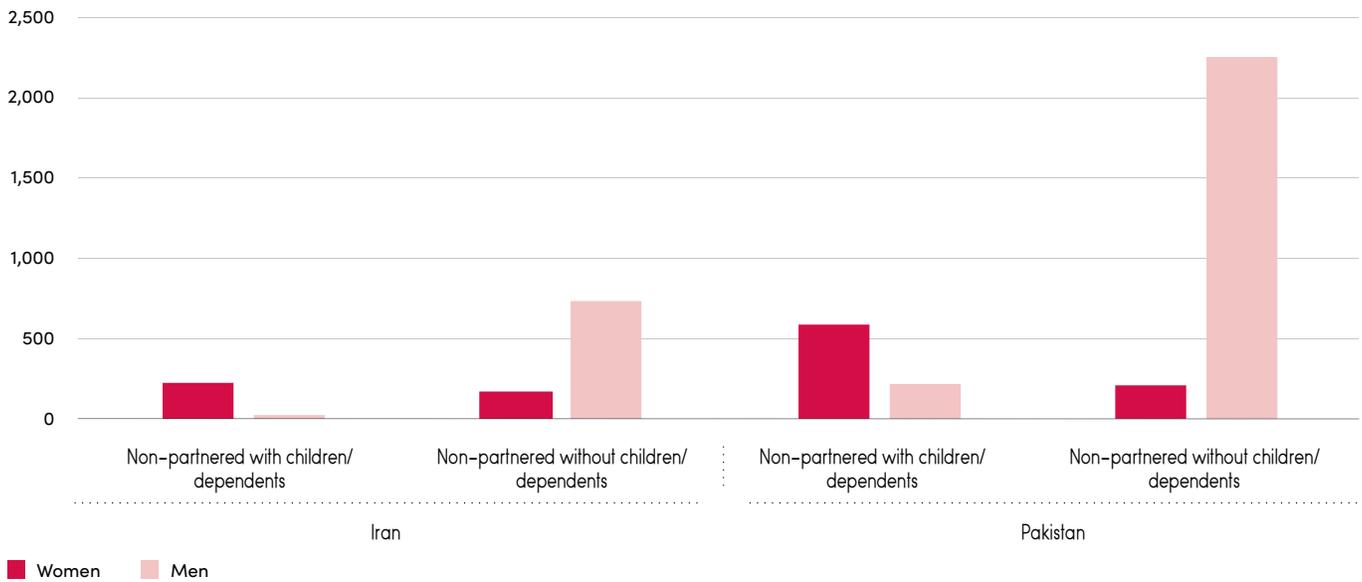
Reported number of newly recorded Afghans in need of international protection in Pakistan and Iran (active, hold, closed and inactive cases), 2021 (total)



Source: UNHCR records. Data as of 11 December 2021. Note: The total number of Afghans in need of international protection is likely to be much higher. *The “Children” category refers to groups with a child as a focal point. In 56 of the 74 nuclear groups headed by children (designated as “children”) an adult may have been part of the group, but a child was identified as the head of the nuclear group. This, for instance, may include groups where an adult woman was present but a teenage boy approached UNHCR as the group’s head.

FIGURE 5

Reported number of non-partnered Afghan adults in need of international protection in Pakistan and Iran (active, hold, closed and inactive cases), by sex, 2021 (total)



INFOGRAPHIC 1



Among non-partnered Afghans in need of international protection in Pakistan and Iran

68% women vs **7%** men

fled with children or other dependents



INFOGRAPHIC 2



When Afghans flee with children or other dependents

4.1 Average number of dependents women bring vs **3.1** Average number of dependents men bring

Non-partnered Afghan women in need of international protection have to take care of more children/dependents than men



Source: UN Women calculations based on UNHCR records. Data as of 11 December 2021. Note: non-partnered women refers to nuclear groups fleeing without an adult man. Non-partnered men refers to those without an adult woman. These aggregates look at group composition rather than formal partnership status. Average number of dependents has been calculated among people with dependents only. Calculations based on refugees and asylum seekers in Iran and Pakistan only.

Lack of safety is a precursor to many displacements

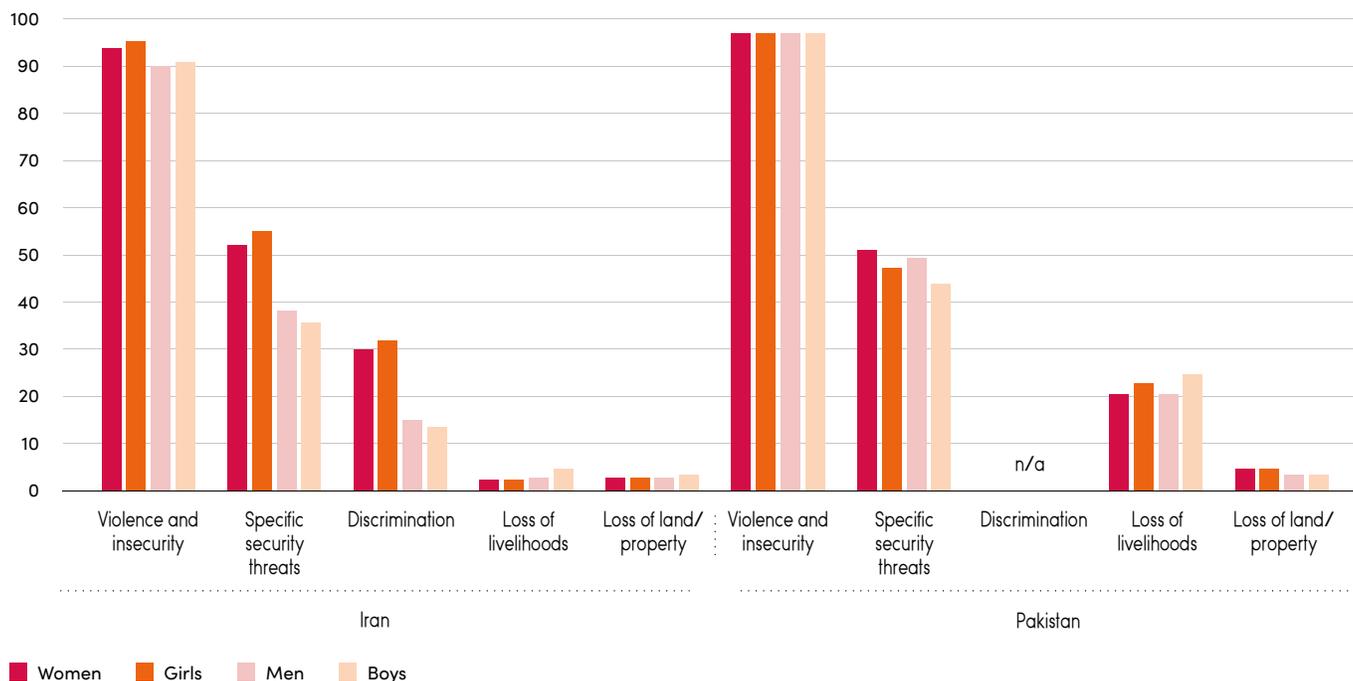
The protracted conflict in Afghanistan coupled with the recent Taliban takeover and the severe droughts the country has endured in recent years have worsened poverty and food insecurity, widened gender-based inequalities, and taken a toll on the safety of Afghan women and men. Almost all Afghans in need of international protection fleeing to Pakistan and Iran in 2021 cited violence and insecurity as a key reason for fleeing (figure 6). The second most cited reason was specific security threats, which was cited disproportionately by groups with more women and girls. In Iran, where the reasons for displacement included “discrimination” among the response options, more women and girls were also among the groups that fled because of this reason.

Recent news reports⁴ from Afghanistan have raised concerns over safety threats to women and girls, including reports of forced marriages, beating of women protesters and targeting of rights activists, female judges and police; and safety threats are compounded by restrictions on women and girls’ freedom of movement and education. Furthermore, women and girls may experience violence perpetrated by intimate partners. Even prior to the recent crisis, violence against women was pervasive in Afghanistan. In 2015, an estimated 51 per cent of women in the country had experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime⁵. In light of recent events, this figure is expected to have risen. The Afghanistan Protection Cluster⁶ estimates that as many as 90 per cent of Afghan women may have now experienced gender-based violence, the majority perpetrated by their intimate partner, although no official statistics exist in this regard⁷.

Despite the existential threats posed by conflict and the many gender-specific forms of persecution currently taking place in Afghanistan, many Afghan women and girls are not able to leave the country through regular channels. Restrictions on movement and the lack of documentation may pose challenges for women, especially at official border points. Unofficial border points are more remote, lack basic facilities, and often require travellers to employ smugglers, and those conditions put women and girls at further risk of violence.

FIGURE 6

Main reasons Afghans in need of international protection fled to Pakistan and Iran, by sex, 2021 (percentage)



Source: UNHCR records. To calculate these estimates in Iran, questions were asked to group focal points only, and responses given by focal points were then assigned to all members of each group. Data for Iran is sourced from questions asked to group focal points that approached UNHCR, and responses given by focal points were then assigned to all members of each group; the data for Pakistan was collected from key informant interviews. Note: Only the most cited reasons have been included in the figure. Other reasons mentioned by less than 1 per cent of respondents included family reunification, the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) and others. “Discrimination” as a reason for displacement was not given as a possible response in Pakistan, and thus no data are available.

Refugees and asylum seekers face numerous barriers to accessing support in displacement

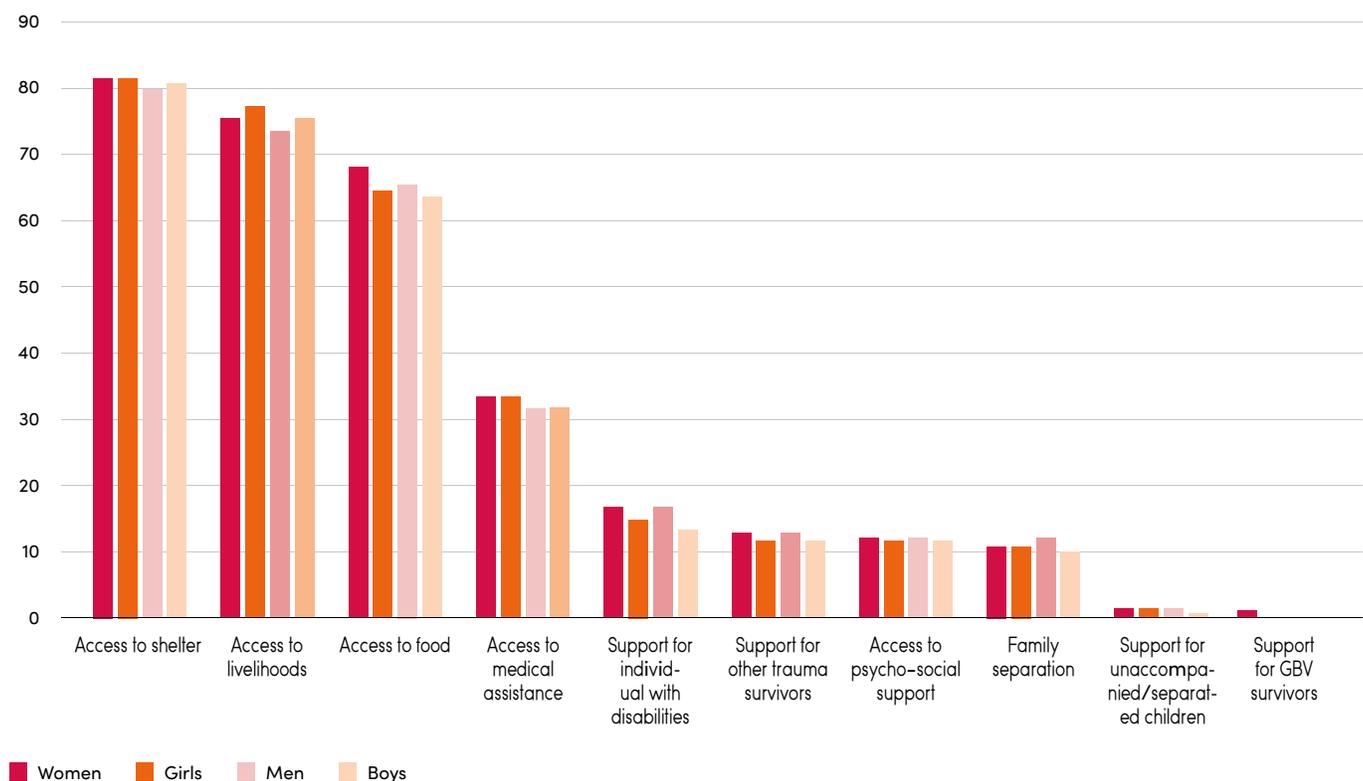
Displaced people face a wide range of challenges, from finding shelter for themselves and their families, to finding jobs and nutritious food. Refugee and asylum-seeking Afghan women and girls in neighboring countries also face many barriers to accessing basic health care, including sexual and reproductive care.

According to data compiled in Pakistan, access to shelter, livelihoods and food were the most cited needs (figure 7). Groups with women and girls focal points were slightly more likely to cite these needs for support. For instance, 82 per cent of women cited the need for shelter, compared to 80 per cent of men; 78 per cent of girls needed access to livelihoods, compared to 76 per cent of boys; and 68 per cent of women noted needing food, compared to 66 per cent of men. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the already precarious economic situation of refugees living in countries neighbouring Afghanistan, which poses additional challenges for displaced populations looking to rebuild their livelihoods. Furthermore, refugee girls also face barriers to attending school due to social norms and poverty. In 2019, the gross enrolment rate for refugee girls in primary school in Pakistan was 70 per cent compared to 92 per cent for boys⁸. This, in turn, further contributes to the challenges of accessing livelihoods and coming out of poverty in adulthood.

Although only 1 per cent of groups with women focal points cited support for survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) among their needs for assistance, about 13 per cent noted needing support related to traumatic events and requiring access to psycho-social support, which may be a result of GBV or other forms of violence. Due to sensitivity and other factors, violence-related experiences are likely to be underreported.

FIGURE 7

Key needs for support among Afghans in need of international protection fleeing to Pakistan, by sex, 2021 (percentage)



Source: UNHCR records from key informant interviews in Pakistan. Note: The option "other needs" has been excluded from the figure.

Costs and lack of documentation pose challenges to accessing services for internally displaced Afghans

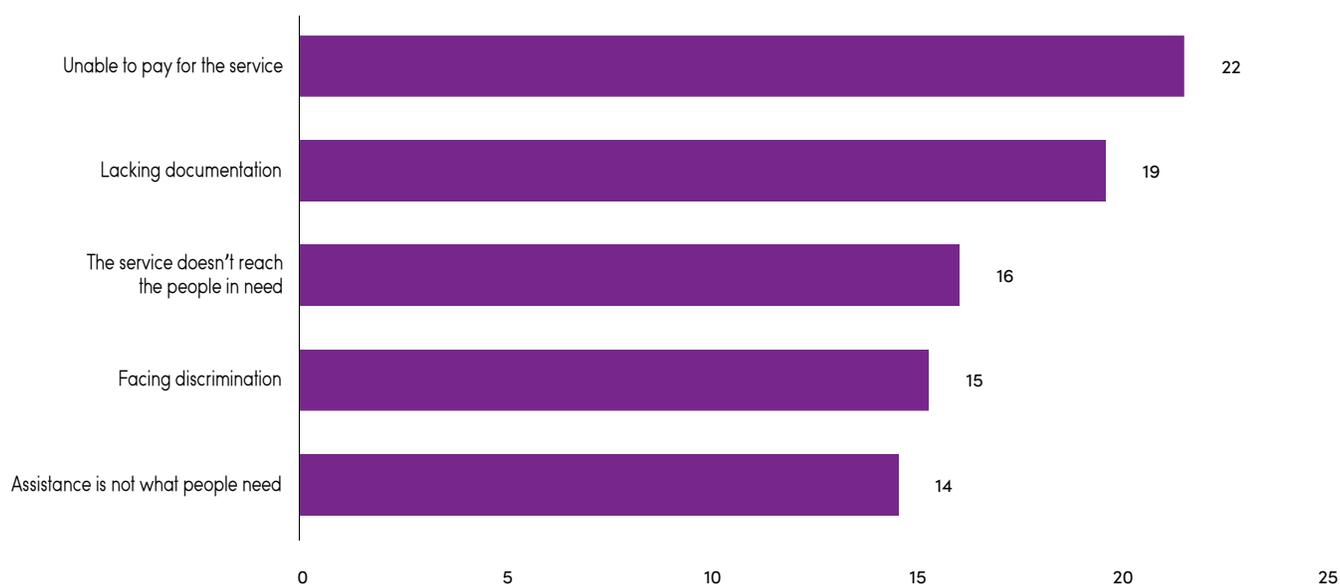
The economic crisis in Afghanistan brought about by political instability, droughts and the COVID-19 pandemic has substantially affected the availability of income-generating opportunities.⁹ Furthermore, it is estimated that restrictions on female employment in Afghanistan may inflict an immediate economic loss of between \$600 million and \$1 billion (3–5 per cent of the country’s gross domestic product).¹⁰ As a result, there are concerns that Afghans will resort to harmful coping mechanisms, such as child marriage and the sale of girls. In 2017, an estimated 28 per cent of young women in Afghanistan had been married or in a union before turning 18¹¹. Since the onset of the current crisis, UNICEF has received credible reports of families offering daughters as young as 20 days old up for future marriage in return for a dowry.¹²

The lack of services in the country is putting many at a heightened risk of falling into extreme poverty. According to interviews conducted by the Afghanistan Protection Cluster, 63 per cent of respondents noted that, even where services were available, their community members were unable to access them. These services ranged from livelihood support to health, shelter and education, among others. The most frequently cited barriers included the inability to pay for the service, and lack of documentation (figure 8). As women are more likely to hold informal jobs and less likely to complete formal education, they may find it harder to access services. Moreover, 23 per cent of women noted they lack documentation, compared to 10 per cent of men. For internally displaced Afghans, the risk of lacking documentation is even higher. Coupled with poverty and safety concerns, the lack of documentation may make accessing services particularly challenging for internally displaced women and girls.

Afghan women and girls living in displacement settings may also be at a heightened risk of GBV, as a result of hostilities with the host community, precarious living arrangements, limited freedom of movement and limited access to protection and redress mechanisms. As highlighted in group discussions conducted by the Afghanistan Protection Cluster, almost 35 per cent of women respondents reported feeling unsafe and 8 per cent noted GBV risks as a specific reason for feeling unsafe. Other reasons cited in focus groups included growing insecurity and presence of armed groups, among others. Within the country, many GBV services have been discontinued and legal documentation is required for accessing the services that remain.

FIGURE 8

Main reasons for being unable to access existing services (percentage of respondents that noted each reason), 2021



Source: Key informant interviews (n=1,075) and surveys (n=6,661) conducted by the GPC in Afghanistan in 2021. Available at www.globalprotectioncluster.org/wp-content/uploads/AFG_Protection-Analysis-Update_Q3_Final.pdf.

Evidence also suggests that dispute resolution mechanisms favor host communities over returnee and displaced population (87 per cent of host community respondents said their disputes had been resolved compared with 77 per cent of internally displaced people¹³). Fees were found to be key barriers to accessing these mechanisms.

In localities such as Badakhshan and Herat the lack of women staff among service providers was raised as a barrier. Data are currently unavailable to determine the proportion of public services that include women providers in Afghanistan. However, information on the provinces that lack agreements for the full engagement of women humanitarian staff can provide some insight. As of 25 December 2021, nine provinces in the country had only partial agreements for women humanitarian staff. That is, while some organizations secured the ability for women staff to work in all sectors, others were only able to secure agreements for work in health and education. This leaves 3,492,666 women¹⁴ (more than 18 per cent of Afghan women and girls) without or with limited access to women aid workers. Engagement with the de facto authorities to advocate for expanding partial agreements is currently on-going but, in most cases, assurances received have only been verbal. This is particularly worrisome in conservative communities, where only women aid workers are allowed to speak to women and girls for needs assessments and provision of aid. If their views aren't provided or taken into consideration, this may result in gender-blind interventions. Even where women humanitarian workers are allowed to operate, their work often remains conditional on the accompaniment by a male chaperone, which may deter women and girls from disclosing certain needs and may affect survey responses.

INFOGRAPHIC 3

More than 3 MILLION
women and girls in Afghanistan live in provinces without full agreements for women humanitarian workers to operate.



When allowed, they often need a male chaperone

Source: UN Women calculations based on state of agreements as of 25 December 2021 and Afghanistan National Statistics and Information Authority (NSIA) population estimates.

Endnotes

1. An estimated 2,224,659 refugees were registered in the caseload of Refugee Response Plan countries.
2. An estimated 77,919 people approached UNHCR in Refugee Response Plan countries between January and October 2021.
3. For the purpose of this analysis, “non-partnered” refers to people fleeing either alone or in nuclear groups without an opposite sex adult. No information was available for this analysis on the actual marital status of Afghans in need of international protection.
4. See, for instance: [New York Times](#) (30 August 2021), [BBC News](#) (28 September 2021), [Wall Street Journal](#) (3 November 2021) or [Global Protection cluster](#), among others.
5. See: UNFPA, Measuring the prevalence of violence against women in Asia-Pacific, <https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/en/knownvawdata>
6. The Afghanistan Protection Cluster is part of the GPC, a network of nongovernmental organizations, international organizations and United Nations agencies, engaged in protection work in humanitarian crises, including armed conflict, climate change related and natural disasters. The mandate of the GPC originated from the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, led by UNHCR, governed by a Strategic Advisory Group, co-chaired by the GPC coordinator and an operational non-governmental organization, and serviced by a multi-partner operations cell. More information is available here: www.globalprotectioncluster.org/field-support/field-protection-clusters/afghanistan/.
7. See: Afghanistan Protection Cluster: Analysis update, October 2021. Available from: https://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/wp-content/uploads/AFG_Protection-Analysis-Update_Q3_Final.pdf
8. Source: UNHCR internal records.
9. See Afghanistan Protection Analysis Update Q2, United Nations Treaty Bodies Media Statement, ‘Afghanistan: UN committees urge Taliban to honour their promises to protect women and girls’, 30th August 2021, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/SP/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27414&LangID=E>
10. UNDP, ‘Afghanistan: Socio-Economic Outlook 2021-2022: Averting a Basic Needs Crisis’, 01 December 2021, available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-socio-economic-outlook-2021-2022-averting-basic-needs-crisis>
11. See: <https://data.unicef.org/>
12. See: <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/girls-increasingly-risk-child-marriage-afghanistan>
13. Source: Afghanistan protection cluster, available from: https://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/wp-content/uploads/AFG_Protection-Analysis-Update_Q3_Final.pdf
14. Aggregate calculated utilizing the state of agreements as of 25 December 2021, along with population estimates from the Afghanistan National Statistics and Information Authority.

