



MAPPING THE OPERATIONAL LANDSCAPE FOR WOMEN CSOs AFGHANISTAN: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group, Afghanistan

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Executive Summary

Afghanistan is one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world with 24.4 million people, 55% of the population, in need of humanitarian assistance.¹ In addition, the financial sanctions applied to Afghanistan after the takeover has paralyzed the banking system, led to a cash and liquidity crisis, and a 40 percent contraction of the GDP within a few weeks. As a result, Afghanistan is on the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe. Half of the Afghan population is suffering from acute food insecurity, 95 percent of households do not have enough to eat, and in the coming months three quarters of the population² will need humanitarian assistance. The number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) reached around 3.5 million in January 2022³ and 97 percent of the Afghan population could fall below the poverty line by mid-2022⁴.

As of August 2021, many CSOs led by women have reportedly stopped working and some heads of organisations and civil society members have left the country. As such, it was necessary to track down representatives to see if their organisations still existed and understand their status – as active or non-active.

¹<https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-humanitarian-response-plan-2022-january-2022>

²FAO (2021): "Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) Acute Food Insecurity Analysis: September 2021 – March 2022", Food Security and Agriculture Cluster (FASC) Afghanistan, IPC Global Support Unit. Available at https://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_Afghanistan_AcuteFoodInsec_2021Oct2022Mar_report.pdf

³UNOCHA (2022): "The United Nations Humanitarian Response Plan for Afghanistan 2022", UNOCHA Afghanistan, January 2022. Available at <https://afghanistan.un.org/en/167820-afghanistan-humanitarian-response-plan-2022>

⁴UNDP (2021): "Economic instability and uncertainty in Afghanistan after August 15", UNDP Afghanistan, September 2021. Available at: <https://www.undp.org/publications/economic-instability-and-uncertainty-afghanistan-after-august-15>

Women and women's organisations can be at the forefront of providing critical protection and assistance bringing their contextual knowledge, skills, resources, and experiences to emergency preparedness, response, and resilience building. Their role in holding governments accountable for the enforcement of equitable laws and policies is invaluable in ensuring effective response to the needs of the most marginalized communities and especially those of women and girls.

This study looks at the challenges, barriers, and opportunities of women-led civil society organisations (CSOs) across Afghanistan working in different sectors, with the aim to inform how partners can boost their power and agency and support them to respond to the needs of the most marginalized communities as well as their participation and leadership within the humanitarian response in Afghanistan. The research was commissioned by the Gender in Humanitarian Action (GiHA) working group for Afghanistan's humanitarian response.

The study took place in February and March 2022. The methodology comprised of mapping women-led and women focused organisations using initial lists from the GiHA working group and NGO coordination platforms, before collecting other contacts through referrals. This was followed with field research in 15 provinces, where the research team travelled to and held Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with women CSOs and national women staff. Interviews were also held with provincial level de facto authorities to understand challenges faced and perceptions of different stakeholders in each province. A questionnaire was developed to interview national women's NGOs and CSOs across all provinces.

At the end of the field research, information was collected from 279 women participants in 23 FGD, and 96 individual organisation interviews conducted in 25 provinces some face to face some remotely. . This information was used to update the contact database of women CSOs.

Key findings for the field research

Challenges and Barriers for Women CSOs

Limitations in movement - Women working in NGOs and CSOs face different restrictions under the de facto authorities. The most well-known is the requirement for all women to wear the hijab and to be escorted by a *Mahram* or chaperone when moving outside a certain perimeter of their home. This can vary in each province or district. There is frustration about the lack of clear guidance being provided by the de facto authorities, and this affects not only individual women and their families but also the offices and aid organisations that employ them. There is also the added economic cost of the *Mahram* for travel and the difficulty for some women who do not have a member of the family to provide the mandatory escort.

Intimidation and bureaucratic constraints - Women CSOs face a difficult administrative environment under the de facto authorities. One of the key constrained mentioned was the struggle to get official documents renewed or extended by different de facto authorities such as business licences for selling handicrafts in markets and CSO registrations. Some women in FGDs said that they had been too frightened to directly engage with the de facto authorities since August 2021. According to several staff of de facto provincial Directorates of Justice, there has been a directive from Kabul to stop certain types of associations continuing their work – those that worked in human rights, advocacy, and social activities.

Lack of Funding - 77 percent of women CSOs interviewed reported they had no projects in 2022. There were also barriers in withdrawing funds from bank accounts inside Afghanistan and receiving funds from outside the country since August 2021 due to restrictions and compliance requirements imposed by the international regulatory regime in force since the Taliban takeover in August 2021. The national NGOs and CSOs that partnered with UN agencies and international NGOs have

managed better with money provided in cash by their partners or through hawala in some cases. However, there are important safety, compliance, and insurance related challenges that women CSOs are disproportionately affected by when dealing with large quantities of physical cash. Many smaller CSOs that had income generating projects were also suffering from economic decline since August 2021.

Humanitarian aid distribution - Women participants in the FGDs agreed that humanitarian assistance was extremely important for many people who had nothing, especially remote villages and newly displaced. However, they were critical of the way distributions were happening and the lack of support for economic activities in the longer term. The main concern of women CSOs was the inequitable distribution by aid agencies and the missing out of vulnerable families. This criticism was also voiced by provincial de facto authorities. In all FGDs there were examples given of certain groups being favoured in distribution: either belonging to the authorities, to the elders of the villages, to important people or to the staff of humanitarian agencies.

Increased violence and disrespect for women and girls, harmful social practices - Respect for women had declined since the arrival of the de facto authorities. This was not only due to stricter rules put in place for women and girls by the de facto authorities and reinforced conservative behaviour of men advancing discriminatory gender norms, but also due to the reduced advocacy and human rights activities that many women CSOs had been engaged in. The dismantling of institutions where women could go and complain, or raise issues such as at the Human Rights Commission and Ministry of Women's Affairs was another factor contributing to the overall decline in ensuring accountability to rights and respect for women and girls.

Sector specific operational restrictions for women CSOs - Women CSOs mentioned that all projects needed to be introduced and discussed with communities and de facto authorities in preparation before activities started as standard best practice. Some sectors of work can be more easily accepted by communities such as health activities, hygiene promotion and livelihoods activities, where the benefits are easily understood. Women participants in FGDs mentioned that advocacy, rights projects, and women's shelters had initially closed in August 2021, some due to insecurity, others closed by the de facto authorities, but since then some of these had quietly re-started again.

Opportunities for Partnership and Funding

Navigating the requirements from donors and ensuring compliance with due diligence and capacity assessments required by UN agencies and INGOs for partnership meant that smaller national and women CSOs struggled to compete. The best practice would be for proposals to be prepared in local languages and applications processes to be made more flexible and simplified. It was also suggested that dedicated support from the international community- donors, INGO, and UN to prepare and design the project would enable women CSO to access funding. This would help strengthen the role of women's organisations and encourage their ideas and creativity without demanding over-rigid processes. This approach is contrary to current donor funding requirements and demands creativity and a greater appetite for risk-taking from partners and donors in order to provide the right support for smaller women's organisations.

Recommendations

For international community, including donors, the UN:

- 1. Funding grants for women CSOs:** Flexible small grants for grassroots women CSOs at provincial levels is strongly recommended to donors as there are important complex challenges to making bulk transfers safely and reliably to meet important levels of humanitarian needs unless new mechanisms, with appropriate political backing, are put in place. There is also a need

for sustained support to women CSOs at the provincial level to meet the organisational capacity requirements to absorb funds as well as negotiate access with the de facto local authorities. A combination of vocational training, advocacy activities, and education courses can be offered in resource centres for women beneficiaries. Flexible ways of transferring funds should also be encouraged (such as hawala) as banking is extremely limited in many provinces.

- 2. Women staff across all levels of decision making in humanitarian assistance:** Humanitarian partners need to hire and promote national women staff in senior positions on all levels in main offices and field operations to strengthen the participation of women in the humanitarian response. This will not only support the greater inclusion of women beneficiaries but also enable Afghan women to be at the table when decisions are made. The safety and wellbeing of women humanitarian staff is a responsibility of all humanitarian partners as well as continued advocacy with donors to explain necessary additional costs necessary for employing women, such as the cost of mahram escorts, which must be budgeted for. The members of the Women's Advisory Group (WAG) to the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) have already taken up advocacy for women humanitarian staff as a priority and can ask HCT and GiHA members to present regular updates on women staff numbers.
- 3. Engagement with de facto authorities:** Women CSOs are looking to the international community to support them and engage with the de facto authorities. Discussions with the de facto Ministry of Justice on a national level need to be held to clarify the position of national civil society associations and whether they can continue to be registered there, as in the past. If not, alternatives must be suggested. There should also be discussions about how to create a channel for women to engage directly with de facto authorities. The idea of a 'Women's Commission' has been suggested in some discussions with the de facto authorities but the details of how this would work on national and sub-national levels need to be developed so that women can engage with de facto authorities in the provinces more easily. These discussions should start as soon as possible and be supported by the international community, including donors, otherwise, there is a risk of women's organisations being further marginalised.

For humanitarian aid actors:

- 4. Women CSOs in field monitoring teams:** The role of women CSOs in monitoring community distributions for OCHA and the humanitarian community and following up with women beneficiaries on behalf of the Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) Working Group must be promoted. They should be locally based and assigned to specific areas. This would be much more cost effective than hiring monitors centrally.
- 5. Advocacy for women CSOs through WAG members:** The HCT- Women Advisory Group members must continue high-level advocacy to enhance the operational space and participation of women CSOs in humanitarian assistance. This must be encouraged and supported by OCHA, including through involving women CSOs in engagement with women at the provincial level and reporting back to GiHA and the HCT on challenges and solutions. There needs to be a systematic tracking of the challenges raised in the meetings and advocacy on national and local levels as the situation changes in provinces, and due to the turnover in provincial de facto authorities.
- 6. Engaging in the clusters at provincial and national levels:** Women CSOs can play an important role as first responders in disasters and field monitors so links need to be built between them and the clusters at provincial and national levels. At district levels, there are some networks created by some of the Disaster Risk and Rehabilitation actors with local communities which can include women CSOs. Youth groups can also play an important role in supporting the clusters at the local level. Clusters should systematically invite women CSOs to give their perspectives and experience in relevant meetings, complementing the advisory role of the WAG to the HCT.

For the Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group:

- 7. Training materials:** Trainings have been requested by women FGD participants in proposal writing, organisation development, humanitarian systems, and principles. Also training for de facto authorities on humanitarian principles and the Joint Operating Principles is required. Much of these materials will be available among different UN and NGO members, but the GiHA working group should ensure the materials and courses are appropriate for the level of women CSOs and in local languages.
- 8. Centralised database and follow-up with women diaspora groups:** As an outcome of this survey, an updated list of women CSOs and national NGOs with a large proportion of women's programming is now available with the GiHA working group. This can be used to provide information on women CSOs for donors and cluster partners (respecting confidentiality) and should be maintained and regularly updated by the GiHA working group. A useful follow-up study should be carried out to identify links with women's diaspora organisations in different countries and see how they can provide support and funding to CSOs and affected populations, in collaboration with NGOs already working with the Afghan diaspora.

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Fiona Gall, 30 March 2022