

Priorities and recommendations of Afghan women inside Afghanistan

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Photo: UN Women/ Sayed Habib Hidel

Purpose and methodology

The purpose of this brief is to present the key priorities of Afghan women across the country and their recommendations on what the international community and national stakeholders can do to change the current situation. The brief synthesizes findings from 15 in-country consultations with 207 Afghan women,¹ held by UN Women Afghanistan and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).

These consultations were attended by Afghan women leaders from diverse professions² and different backgrounds – of various ages, ethnicities, and religions. Analysis in this brief also draws on data from the August 2022 Bishnaw survey³ conducted by the Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies (DROPS), which asked 2,560 women inside Afghanistan (via telesurvey) the same key questions posed during the consultations.

Limitation: The consultations, undertaken in August and September 2022, drew primarily on the insights of women from diverse professional backgrounds. As part of its ongoing outreach and engagement, both UN Women Afghanistan and UNAMA will seek to expand its consultation process to reflect greater diversity in terms of socioeconomic and education background.

1 In Kunduz, Kabul, Balkh, Bamyán, Baghlan, Kandahar, Herat, Maimana, Badakhshan, and Nangarhar provinces, as well as online.

2 Women human rights defenders, entrepreneurs, health professionals, journalists, lawyers, former civil servants, educators.

3 [Bishnaw](#) is a monthly research process (telesurvey and focus group discussions) run by DROPS, an Afghan-led research entity. The Bishnaw research process reaches to 11 provinces each month (Herat, Paktia, Balkh, Jawzjan, Bamyán, Daikundi, Nangarhar, Kandahar, Badghis, Farah, Baghlan). In August 2022, a special telesurvey was conducted in Panshijr.

What matters most to Afghan women?

91% of women consulted stated that their lives had changed profoundly since August 2021; the remaining 9% of women indicated that they had seen no difference between their life under the Taliban and that under the former Islamic Republic. However, even those women who indicated that their lives had not changed since August 2021 highlighted the harmful sociocultural norms that relegate women to the private sphere and that the ongoing insecurity is disproportionately affecting women.

The key priority for Afghan women, across all consultations, was the **reopening of secondary schools** for girls (100% of the women consulted indicated it as a priority issue). The Afghan women consulted highlighted that unequal educational outcomes will impact Afghanistan's long-term development. The women called on the international community to focus efforts on ensuring the return to **the full spectrum of rights** for women and girls, indicating that concentrating on the right to education would not establish a pathway for the restoration of all rights. Those women consulted stated that narrowly focusing on the right to education could in fact set up a pathway toward accepting a lower threshold of rights for women.

Security was the second most common priority raised (across all consultations, cited by 71% of participants consulted). **Physical security** occupied the main focus in this regard – described by participants as threats, violence, and intimidation; along with **human security** – understood as a psychological sense of safety for women and girls. Afghan women across different professional backgrounds stressed that a necessary precondition for other reversals to gender-specific restrictions are **improved security and safety for women** and the advancement of women's organizations (and civil society more broadly). While those women consulted called for the **removal of all restrictions targeting women**, they also raised the point that removal of restrictions would not guarantee a safe environment for women, highlighting that **improvements in security could only be achieved through structural changes within the Taliban**. The current security conditions for women and girls have been debilitating, leaving them in need of **psychosocial counselling** as an interim and long-term measure to support their overall well-being.

During the consultations, the international community was consistently called upon to **facilitate meaningful spaces – dialogues, meetings, platforms – for women to talk directly** to the de facto authorities (DFA), at the central and provincial levels. Those Afghan women consulted highlighted the importance of meaningful process design, rooted in concrete actions and benchmarks for progress. Given that the Afghan women, across all consultations, emphasized the absence of security among women and girls, any such dialogues facilitated by the international community would need to place a strong emphasis on the security of participants. The women consulted also reiterated – again, across all consultations – that they should be present in the room and should speak for themselves during any bilateral or multilateral negotiations with the Taliban.

Text box 1:

Meaningful and safe consultations

Across all consultations held, Afghan women requested that the international community (United Nations entities, Member States) and national actors (political, religious, community leaders) facilitate consultations, meetings, dialogues, or spaces where they can meet directly with the DFA. To ensure a meaningful process, and that no harm is done in such meetings or processes, the Afghan women suggested that the addressed actors take the following actions:

- **Design a meaningful process in close consultation** with Afghan women leaders – and avoid ad hoc, one-off meetings not tied to a broader strategy.⁴
- **Embed the principle of Do No Harm at the centre of all interventions**, by undertaking conflict sensitivity analysis at all phases of the design and implementation process.
- **Set clear benchmarks and/or milestones** for a mechanism to continuously assess and monitor progress.
- **Analyse security implications and risks**, including the potential for reprisals, threats, and harassment.

The Afghan women consulted unanimously agreed on the use of economic, political, and diplomatic **pressures on the Taliban** as key instruments in reversing restrictions on women's rights – despite varying perspectives about the use of continuing the freeze on assets currently in effect and its impact on both the Taliban and the Afghan people. The women consulted supported the continuation of the travel ban, highlighting that any markers of recognition need to be benchmarked against meaningful progress in restoring and protecting women's rights. The women agreed on the importance of the application of continued pressure on the DFA by means of various sanctions; although, as noted, perspectives differed over the continuation of the freezing of assets. **International actors were warned that an uncoordinated approach in their engagement with the Taliban risks undermining advocacy efforts and reducing the overall impact of diplomatic pressure.**

International donors were urged to increase financial support for women's organizations and leaders, and to ensure that **the provision of any such aid be dependent on the ensuring of women's rights and gender equality.** Women's participation was seen as imperative for effective humanitarian delivery, with the women consulted therefore calling upon the international community to make women's right to work in this sector a non-negotiable aspect.

National stakeholders – including political, religious, and community leaders – were seen as key intermediaries in building **trust between women's organizations and the DFA**, providing spaces to discuss issues among Afghan women and the DFA and allowing women's organizations to restart their work. In one consultation, those consulted indicated feeling that the private sector – as a stakeholder that would benefit from improved investment conditions and the recognition of the Taliban – could play a role in influencing the Taliban to change its position on women's rights. National stakeholders were viewed by the Afghan women consulted as key advocates for rebuilding civic space and removing the barriers facing women's organizations.

⁴ For guidance on how to design and implement meaningful consultations, see [here](#). For approaches to gender-sensitive process design, see [here](#).

While they were mentioned by the women during each of the consultations held, **the humanitarian situation and the accompanying overwhelming needs did not feature among the top priorities of women** in any of the provinces covered by the survey. This finding was also reflected in the telesurvey undertaken by DROPS in August 2022, where 2,560 women inside Afghanistan were asked about what mattered most to them. Of the 2,560 respondents, **38% stated that women’s rights mattered the most**, followed by access to public services (22%), security (17%), addressing poverty (11%) and improved access to humanitarian aid (11%).⁵

Top priorities for women workers in different sectors

In each of the 15 consultations, women from different professional backgrounds were asked to reflect upon the top priority in their sector. The table below outlines the top priorities raised for each sector, taking into consideration all consultations held.

Sector	Priorities
Women human rights defenders (WHRDs)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Improving safety and security, including protection from detention and violence. 2. Funding and financial support for WHRDs and women’s rights organizations. 3. Putting in place measures to guarantee women’s political participation and inclusion of women’s organizations in decision-making and governance structures.
Media	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reinstating freedom of speech and removing media content restrictions.⁶ 2. Improving the safety and security of women journalists. 3. Increasing employment opportunities, salaries, and the number of women working in the media.
Former civil servants	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reinstating the right to work, including for women civil servants. 2. Ensuring women can access jobs in leadership and decision-making roles. 3. Improving safety and security, and protection from violence; including by implementing the Taliban amnesty commitment.
Legal	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reinstating the right to work for women in the legal sector (e.g. enabling women lawyers to renew licences, participate in the judiciary). 2. Re-establishing the gender-based violence (GBV) architecture (e.g. the Ending Violence Against Women law, specialized courts, shelters run by women’s organizations). 3. Reinstating the protection of women’s rights under the rule of law and within the judicial system.

⁵ All DROPS data gathered through the telesurvey is publicly available on the [Bishnaw platform](#).

Sector	Priorities
Humanitarian	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Improving the reach of humanitarian aid to women, particularly in remote areas. 2. Increasing the availability of employment opportunities for women humanitarian staff, including by removing the mahram decree. 3. Funding women-led NGOs working in the humanitarian sector.
Health	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Improving access to health services, including by removing barriers in rural areas and the mahram decree. 2. Increasing the number of women employed in the health sector, across all functions. 3. Increasing the resources available to hospitals, including by addressing equipment and medicine shortages.
Primary and secondary education	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reopening girls' secondary schools and increasing access and retention of girls in schools. 2. Increasing the number of women working in the education sector, including in leadership roles. 3. Providing scholarship opportunities for girls and women, including to finish secondary education and explore international opportunities.
Tertiary education	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Removing gender segregation among students and lecturers and limitations on female students' freedom of movement and dress. 2. Providing scholarships for female students and capacity-building for women lecturers. 3. Ensuring safety and security for university lecturers
Entrepreneurship/ Business	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Issuing licences to women-led businesses. 2. Providing financial support directly to women-led businesses. 3. Ensuring the safety and security of women in business, including by ending harassment.

Recommendations for international and national stakeholders

The Afghan women participants cited the following actors as having most influence with the Taliban (in order of perceived level of influence): 1) UN Member States (the international community); 2) States in the region and neighbouring states; 3) Afghan religious scholars and community leaders; and 4) The United Nations (system). According to the women consulted, these stakeholders engage with the Taliban, directly and indirectly, and have tools at their disposal to exert pressure through political, economic, diplomatic, or religious means.

Those Afghan women consulted set forth key recommendations for the four groups of stakeholders perceived to have most influence with the Taliban. The most common recommendations – raised during each of the 15 consultations – are outlined below.

1.) UN Member States:

- **Engage Afghan women directly, across policy and programming work in Afghanistan**, by meeting and consulting with them on decision-making and including them in meetings with the Taliban – if direct meetings are not possible, direct consultations with Afghan women living in Afghanistan should be undertaken to channel their views and priorities.
- **Advocate for the full spectrum of women’s rights** in any bilateral or multilateral discussions with the Taliban and develop a coordinated approach to ensure coherence of messaging around women’s rights.
- **Continue the exertion of pressure on the DFA** through various economic, political, and diplomatic sanctions.
- **Ensure that funding is dependent on the achieving of gender equality markers and that strong monitoring systems** are in place to increase transparency and accountability, particularly around delivery of financial and humanitarian aid to target groups.
- **Provide direct financial support** (i.e. not through a third party) to women’s organizations and ensure flexibility around reporting requirements.

2.) States in the region and neighbouring states:

- **Apply diplomatic pressure on the DFA** by maintaining sanctions, non-recognition, and enforcing the travel ban.
- **Advocate directly with the DFA** on women’s rights and encourage the formation of an inclusive, responsive, and representative governance structure.
- **Use the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation as a vehicle** to influence the DFA position on women’s rights.

3.) Afghan religious scholars and community leaders:

- **Engage the DFA and local community leaders on the rights and freedoms** afforded to women and girls under Islam.
- **Consider taking on an intermediary role between civil society and the DFA** to build trust and create spaces for safe discuss of community concerns, including in regard to women’s rights and gender equality.

4) The United Nations:

- **Facilitate spaces and dialogue between Afghan women and the DFA**, through the formation of a women's dialogue group and the creation of a dialogue space.
- **Build on the priorities voiced by Afghan women and engage with the DFA** at provincial and national level to advocate on concrete areas that could improve the lives of women and girls.
- **Advocate for the re-establishment of independent human rights monitoring mechanisms**, such as the Afghanistan Human Rights Commission, and strategically use reports and data to drive advocacy on human rights issues.
- **Provide direct financial support, rather than via a third party, to women's organizations**, ensuring flexibility on reporting requirements.
- **Coordinate between the DFA and women's organizations** to ensure that barriers to their work and business ownership are addressed.
- **Facilitate and support women's organizations and leaders inside Afghanistan** in establishing a coordination platform and engaging with civil society outside of the country.
- **Establish women's committees and/or working groups at national and subnational level** to address key issues affecting women, such as GBV and the distribution of humanitarian assistance.

Text box 2:

Bishnaw survey – recommendations for the international community

DROPs asked 2,560 women inside Afghanistan via telesurvey what they felt the international community could do to improve the lives of women and girls in Afghanistan. The responses to multiple-choice questions posed:

What can international actors do to better support women's organizations in Afghanistan?

1. Ensure their full mobility – 41% of respondents indicated this response
2. Ensure safe spaces for civic participation – 21%
3. Respond to women's humanitarian needs – 17%
4. Provide financial support to women's civil society organizations – 13%
5. Engage directly with women's civil organizations in-country – 8%

What can the international community do to improve conditions for women?

1. Facilitate women in talking directly with the Taliban – 26%
2. Link international aid to better conditions for women – 26%
3. Engage in direct discussions with the Taliban – 24%
4. Consult with civil society – 14%
5. Provide international recognition to the Taliban – 11%