



Gender update #1: Forced Returns from Pakistan

15 November 2023

Photo: UN Women/Sayed Habib Bidel



This Gender Alert has been developed by the Gender in Humanitarian Action (GiHA) Working Group (GiHAWG) in Afghanistan. The Gender Alert is based on reports, and updates from humanitarian actors, GiHAWG members, and women organizations in the Southern and Eastern regions of Afghanistan. The information was completed based on two focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted with affected women and girls in the Torkham (Nangarhar) border as well as 10 individual interviews with both women and men in Torkham.

Background and information available to date

On 3 October 2023, Pakistan introduced the “Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan”, ordering all undocumented foreign nationals to leave the country. The measure affects 1.7 million Afghan refugees who may be subject to deportation. Since the plan came into force on 1 November 2023, a total of 327,400 Afghan refugees have fled Pakistan crossing the Torkham (Nangarhar) and Spin Boldak (Kandahar) borders.¹ This number continues to increase daily. To respond to these events, the authorities have set up a Returnee Commission, which also oversees local committees at the provincial level, aiming to coordinate the response to the forced displacement.

Forced returnees face insecure conditions at the border points, where thousands are entering every day without shelter and access to basic needs, and uncertain conditions at their destinations. 80% of returnees are women and children² and the situation is particularly critical for the 47% of returnees who are women and girls³, a group comprised of girls and young women aged 6 to 17 as well as Women Heads of Households (WHH)⁴. During the week of 29 October to 4 November alone, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has mapped 102 WHH at Spin Boldak and 856 WHH in Torkham.⁵ This alert provides insights into these women and girls’ immediate and medium-term assistance needs, including in terms of shelter, protection services, psychosocial support and access to livelihood opportunities.

¹Number of returnees as of 11 November 2023. Pakistani border operations – 4 to 11 November. IOM and partners. 11 November 2023

²OCHA, 13 November 2023

³“Pakistani Border Operations Oct 29- Nov 4”, OIM, UNCHR, and various partners, 5 November 2023.

⁴According to data provided by OIM of the Eastern Region, “Undocumented Returnees Data as of 12 November 2023” (OIM, 2023) 61% of all female returnees are aged 6 to 17; 14% of women aged over 18 years old are Heads of Households.

⁵Ibid

Key findings

- **Women returnees face intersecting vulnerabilities:** Afghans have fled the country to Pakistan in various waves in the past decades, due to conflict, political and/or economic reasons, with the last large influx crossing to Pakistan following the Taliban takeover. Afghan women and men are now being forced to return to a country where their initial reasons to leave remain unchanged, while women are now worse off due to the continued deterioration and multiple restrictions on their rights in Afghanistan. Parts of the population being deported have also never lived in Afghanistan. Some girls and young women were born in Pakistan or have spent most of their lives there and have had access to education opportunities, which will no longer be available in Afghanistan. It was reported that Pakistani women married to Afghan refugees were also at risk of being deported due to lack of proper documentation.⁶ Moreover, as is the case in all humanitarian crises, intersectional vulnerabilities aggravate the needs of women heads of households, women with disabilities, young women, women belonging to ethnic minorities, other vulnerable women. In the case of the returnee response, understanding the needs of women who may have fled to Pakistan due to their ethnic origins or their work during the previous Afghan administration is also critical, as they may have asylum claims.
- **Women returnees face heightened protection risks both at border crossings and in areas of relocation:** Women and girls face protection challenges throughout the process of registration and relocation and these risks are amplified by the conditions of the forced returns, with women and WHH experiencing threats and intimidation, including seizure of assets by the Pakistani authorities. Due to the influx of the returning population, delays have also taken place in processing times for registration procedures on the Afghan side of the border. Thousands of returnees are sleeping at reception centers, or in the open air, facing harsh weather conditions, including extreme heat during the day and cold temperatures at night. In this context, women are at higher risk of facing protection concerns. Lack of water points and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) facilities at border points has also exacerbated these risks for women and girls. The gap in WASH facilities leads women and girls to go to the bathroom and bathe outside of the reception center, which can translate into women feeling unsafe, and encountering protection risks, including exposure to gender-based violence (GBV). Moreover, stress generated by the emergency conditions and the lack of stable financial resources for returnees could exacerbate tensions within families which are often likely to lead to increased cases of GBV. Due to low numbers of women staff in the area and with the focus of humanitarian efforts on the emergency of registering families and providing basic services, capturing protection risks and addressing them has proven challenging. Humanitarian organizations were particularly experiencing challenges to women staff participation in the Spin Boldak crossing point, where the number of women staff is reported to be very low⁷. The low number of women staff also increases risks of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Harassment (SEAH) in a context where women returnees may not know reporting channels and may not be able to interact directly with women staff to report instances of SEAH.
- **Returnee women and girls in particular may face various barriers in accessing services and lifesaving information:** Afghan women generally face obstacles when looking to obtain information about available assistance, and often must rely on men family members to do so. This may be even more challenging in the context of displacement. Women and men returnees have shared in FGDs with GiHA WG that they have extremely limited information on how to access basic needs and humanitarian assistance. None of the women in the FGDs knew about services provided by humanitarian actors or how to access them. This was slightly better for men who mentioned they had gotten in touch with some family members who had stayed in Afghanistan or who had already relocated, in order to obtain information. According to interviews and FGDs, women were less familiar with information and changing dynamics within their area of return. In terms of access to assistance, when resettling, limited access to aid for returnees also risks being underpinned by limited documentation. Most returnees come back without a National Identity (ID) card (tazkera) and will need to undergo the process to obtain one. Women are typically less likely to obtain such documents as their access to government buildings is severely restricted and institutional procedures are led by men government staff. Since documentation processing has a cost, women obtaining an ID card may be also less of a priority for families than men doing so, due to limited perceived benefits for the family as women are often not responsible for collecting assistance through their tazkera, a responsibility which is shouldered by men in the households. However, lack of tazkera still limits individual access to regularization options and decreases access to opportunities, resources, and services, further aggravating women's vulnerability. Many agencies and humanitarian actors have shown flexibility and removed tazkera requirements for the reception of services and assistance, a good practice

⁶Amnesty International, 10 November 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/11/pakistan-halt-mass-detentions-and-deportations-of-afghan-refugees/>

⁷Updates from humanitarian actors following PSEA focused missions on the ground

which should be implemented by all actors to ensure inclusive access. Another factor aggravating access to populations in need, is the dispersion of the returnees and the challenges faced by women and girls, in particular those within WHH, to share their location, contact humanitarian actors and voice their needs for services. Humanitarian actors active at the borders have also mentioned that due to the overwhelming numbers of returnees, the de facto authorities had not always been able to register all returnee women and children entering the country, and that the priority has been the registration of men. This could further impact the possibility to identify and subsequently localize women and WHH in particular.

- **Many returnee families, particularly WHH risk lacking the financial means to meet their basic needs, including food and shelter.** The conditions of deportation created an overall environment of fear and intimidation causing many families, including women and WHH, to leave (or being forced to leave) their belongings and earnings in Pakistan, with limited prospects on how they will sustain themselves and their families upon return. With limited financial resources available, families are faced with food insecurity and the risk of being stranded if they cannot afford transportation to their preferred area of return. This economic insecurity is aggravated by limited access to social networks that would allow access to information, aid, livelihoods opportunities, shelter, etc. Many returnees left Afghanistan in the first place because of a lack of economic opportunities and had been in Pakistan for years or even decades, and now have few links to their home country. Women are more vulnerable to lack of employment opportunities due to the many restrictions they face to their right to work and study and their mobility in Afghanistan. This is in a context of an already overburdened Afghan economy and services, overly relying on humanitarian aid. In the case of WHH in particular, social and community networks are often vital to obtain information and find opportunities. Without these and with limited financial resources, women and their families may be resorting to negative coping mechanisms to survive, which most often impact women and girls more, such is the case with decreasing food intake, early marriage of daughters and child labour.
- **Mental health needs of women, men, girls and boys are dire and risk deteriorating:** most

returnees consulted by GiHA WG have expressed uncertainty about their future in Afghanistan with the absence of concrete plans for integration. The returnee population has experienced multiple traumatic events, including expulsion threats, detention prior to deportation without any legal rights⁸, uncertain conditions for resettlement, which may have created trauma and shock, thus requiring specialized psychological support and care. Returnees have reported threats and beatings by police, illegal confiscation of houses, jewelry, savings and other belongings, the destruction of identification documents, and other forms of harassment in Pakistan⁹. **In the case of women and girls, they are returning to Afghanistan in a context of increased restrictions on their rights that will further exacerbate their needs.** Some women expressed the concern that, while they were able to go to school and work in Pakistan, they are likely to face many challenges in doing so in Afghanistan due to DfA's restrictions and a deteriorating economic scenario, which may lead to isolation and increased mental health issues, which many Afghan women already suffer from¹⁰. Mental health has been on the decline for women since August 2021 due to attacks on their rights, a situation which has been aggravated by the absence of functioning mental health services in the country¹¹. These challenges are also likely to affect displaced and returnee people disproportionately¹². Returning to a country with severe restrictions to their rights, with limited access to social networks and support systems within communities, puts women and WHH at risk of protection concerns and mental health problems. Men may also face the burden of being the only ones able to and responsible for providing for entire families, which may create pressure and a mental toll.

- **Longer term support is needed for women and girls, including through livelihoods, vocational training and education:** Although women stress the need to obtain emergency cash assistance, their top need remains having access to sustainable shelter and income generating activities that support longer term opportunities. Along with voicing concerns around being able to provide education for their children, women have said they prioritize receiving access to livelihood opportunities and vocational training, including funds and equipment to set up small and medium sized businesses as well as skills training on income generating activities. Many women interviewed shared they have skills in activities such

⁸Amnesty International, 10 November 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/11/pakistan-halt-mass-detentions-and-deportations-of-afghan-refugees/>

⁹Human Rights Watch. Pakistan: Afghans Detained, Face Deportation. 31 October 2023 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/10/31/pakistan-afghans-detained-face-deportation>

¹⁰See for instance Afghanistan Protection Cluster: Protection Analysis Update Q4 2022 or OHCHR Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights in Afghanistan and the Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls, June 2023

¹¹See for instance CARE, Mental Health of Women Humanitarian Workers in Afghanistan, 2023 (forthcoming); IOM, UNAMA, UN Women, Summary Report of Country Wide Women's Consultations, 2023 https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/summary-report_september-2023-women-consultations.pdf

¹²IOM, Research Brief: Displacement Trends and Challenges in Afghanistan since 2021, Mental Health. 2022; https://afghanistan.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11071/files/inlinefiles/Digital_RADAR%20research%20papers_mental%20health.pdf

as tailoring, handcraft, and food processing, that could be harnessed through vocational training, if they are provided with simple tools and needed equipment to generate income for their families. Men engaged in interviews carried out by GiHAWG have expressed support for women family members to work and be provided with livelihood skills, an opportunity which should be leveraged by recovery actors. With women also facing protection concerns and being more likely to be impacted by negative coping mechanisms, ensuring livelihood programme also encompass protection services, safe spaces and referrals will be key for longer term support to returnee women and girls.

Key recommendations for humanitarian actors and clusters:

Advocacy and engagement

Pursue engagement with the de facto authorities informed by the differentiated needs and priorities of women and girls on the emergency response (including through the newly set up Returnees Commission and local committees) and ensure advocacy for women staff's participation in the response is done across engagements.

Registration, information and data-collection

Develop gender-responsive joint assessments and regular updates on the specific needs, vulnerabilities of women and girls as well as risks faced by women, and continue engaging with women through FGDs to ensure thorough understanding of women and girl returnees' needs and priorities.

At the border points, ensure WHH are registered when entering the country and registered for assistance. Ensure all women receive information about humanitarian aid, referrals and feedback channels in a gender-responsive manner (in person, by women staff where possible) and orientation on how to obtain basic documentation upon reaching the area of return.

Access to services for women and girls

Ensure the presence of women staff across all stages of the response to map and respond to the differentiated needs of women and girls.

Engage with women from communities, women's groups as well as organized groups of returnees and internally displaced people as these are key to identify harder to reach population including WHH. This could include engaging with skilled returnee women who could support with identification of vulnerable women and provision of feedback and establishing community networks and alert systems to track returnee movement and adapt service

provision accordingly.

Ensure women led organizations are engaged in the response including through facilitating their participation in cluster and humanitarian coordination meetings and ensuring funding for women focused projects.

Protection

Ensure protection by presence through increasing protection related activities and the presence of protection agencies at the border.

Monitor intersecting vulnerabilities and protection concerns at border points (including for WHH, adolescent girls, pregnant women, women human rights defenders, women with disabilities etc).

Mitigate these protection concerns through providing information on referrals to women and girls and providing dedicated WASH facilities as well non-food items including hygiene kits upon arrival.

At the border point, establish dedicated services and spaces for women and girls for information sharing and referral. Ensure these spaces include playground and activities for children who are with their mothers.

PSEAH

Ensure PSEAH reporting mechanisms are in place and that humanitarian responders are trained on PSEAH and GBV referrals

Ensure information on PSEAH is shared with returnee women in a gender-responsive manner, and improve accessibility of referral pathways, including through promoting and facilitating in person interactions with women staff.

Mental Health and Psychosocial Support

Provide psychological support services (PSS) to women, girls, men and boys. Focus on addressing traumatic experience of deportation as well as coping mechanisms for women facing severe restrictions to their rights and mobility.

Livelihoods and longer-term needs

Map returnees' existing skills and interests, particularly those of women, linking them to existing programmatic offer on economic empowerment, livelihoods and vocational training.

Develop longer term comprehensive programmes for women, focusing on livelihoods, vocational training, education, psychosocial support and safe spaces.