



IN BRIEF



FIGHTING ERASURE: UN WOMEN PARTNERS WITH WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS AND THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

Photo: UN Women/Sayed Habib Bidel

Facing complete removal from public life, women activists and women's organizations are championing the rights of Afghanistan's women and girls, embodying unparalleled resilience. UN Women is providing crucial funding, programming, and hands-on support to sustain women and girls amid systematic targeting – and counter the relentless threats to their rights.

UN Women is the United Nations system lead on gender equality and women's empowerment, born of advocacy by women-led civil society who called for the UN to strengthen its work on gender equality through the creation of a dedicated entity. As such, the key constituency and value add of UN Women is the strength of our networks with women's civil society. Constant cultivation of strong relationships with women's civil society ensures that UN Women is the most relevant and most optimally positioned agency to support rights-based approaches to women's participation, and social and economic empowerment across sectors, including social norms change for gender equality.

In Afghanistan, women-led and women-focused organizations perceive UN Women as playing a crucial role in advocating for full reversal of the bans imposed upon their operations and providing responsive support for their work. One of UN Women's key strategies is focused and intentional investments in services 'by women, for women', including supporting women-led civil society organisations (CSOs), while proactively analysing the context to adhere with the Do No Harm principle. UN Women is continuing to advocate and negotiate for the reopening of spaces for women's organizations, in partnership with UN and international partners.

Grounded in its unique access and commitment to women-led and women-focused CSOs, UN Women has a distinctive value add in amplifying the voices of diverse Afghan women and preserving space for them – in response to the systematic silencing and attempted erasure of Afghan women and girls from public life, and the dismantling of the gender equality infrastructure. Our access to women at all levels, from village to city, and their priorities and recommendations inform all our advocacy and programming work.

A comprehensive and sustained attack on the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan

Over the three years since the militant takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban (referred to as the “de facto authorities” (DFA)), this group has systematically implemented a series of restrictive decrees, edicts, and directives that deeply impact every aspect of women’s lives in the country. Despite widespread condemnation, none of these “meticulously constructed policies of inequality”¹ have been reversed, underscoring clear intent to erase women and girls from public and political life. Afghanistan is now facing an “unprecedented women’s rights crisis”², further exacerbated by targeted attacks on women activists and civil society. Women’s organizations, crucial for progress and accountability on gender equality in Afghanistan and globally, are being specifically targeted by the DFA.

The suppression of these organizations has grave consequences, including serious mental health repercussions for women and girls across Afghanistan, who report feeling trapped, silenced, and stripped of their self-determination. The rising number of women and girls resorting to suicide highlights the desperation many feel. As one woman poignantly told UN rights experts, “We are alive, but not living.”³

Women’s organizations singled out for eradication from public life

The Taliban regime has severely restricted women’s freedom of peaceful assembly and association. Civil society organizations face significant challenges in legally registering, accessing banking services, and obtaining the necessary approvals from the DFA to operate. These barriers include an unprecedented ban on Afghan women working

in non-governmental and international organizations in Afghanistan, issued in December 2022 and extended to include United Nations entities in April 2023. Women staff and beneficiaries face constant threats and harassment.

These operational hurdles, combined with the systematic crackdown on the rights of women and girls, arbitrary arrest, and threats against activists, have led to the inability of many organizations to deliver critical services. In some cases, organizations have been forced to shut down. This situation has deeply affected the mental health of women’s rights activists and women staff at CSOs, who are unable to utilize their expertise to assist those in need.

Despite these challenges, women activists and women’s organizations continue to demonstrate extraordinary resilience and innovation in Afghanistan. One activist expressed her determination, saying, “I realized Afghan women were still fighting. And I chose to be one of them. I called my staff – women and men – and asked them to come back to the office. I changed the focus of our organization, but I continued to work for women only.”⁴

Responding to prevailing need

To uphold our commitment to the women’s movement in Afghanistan, UN Women has adapted and evolved to address the needs and priorities identified by the women of Afghanistan themselves, implementing a range of robust



From UN Women Afghanistan to all the Afghan women and girls we serve, [UN Women website](#) (22 May 2023).

“Our mission is to ensure that Afghan women and girls are not just seen, but heard; not just acknowledged, but empowered.”

1 UN Women (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women). 2022. [‘Statement: ‘Meticulously constructed policies of inequality’ – Afghanistan one year on.’](#) UN Women Executive Director Sima Bahous. News and stories. 15 August 2022.

2 UN Women (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women). 2023. [Expert Group Meeting on International Strategies and Tools to Address the Situation of Women and Girls in Afghanistan](#). 26-27 July 2023, Istanbul, Türkiye. UN Women Afghanistan Country Office.

3 OHCHR (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights). 2023. [Afghanistan: Systematic crackdown on women’s and girls’ rights, UN experts say](#). Statements. Special procedures. 5 May 2023.

4 UN Women (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women). 2022. [‘In the words of Nasima*: “I realized Afghan women were still fighting. And I chose to be one of them.”’](#) News and stories. 11 August 2022.

mechanisms aimed at preserving women's organizations and countering the systematic erasure of women from civil society and public life. As of July 2024, UN Women has forged partnerships with almost 200 diverse women's organizations across the country – a significant increase since the Taliban takeover in August 2021. Over half of the partners engaged are small and grass-roots organizations.

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Along this path, UN Women has developed and deployed three interconnected strategies: flexible and core funding; advocacy for access to decision-making; and agile programming. Through these efforts, we aim to empower women and organizations to again serve their clients and beneficiaries to a high level, reclaim their rightful place in decision-making spaces, and assert the full spectrum of their rights.

Providing flexible funding and accompaniment to keep women's organizations alive

Responding to the demands of the rapidly shifting operating context⁵ and leveraging evidence-based recommendations⁶ on funding women's organizations, UN Women rolled out the pilot programme 'Rebuilding the Women's Movement in Afghanistan' in 2022. Launched to inject investment into over 100 women's organizations across all 34 provinces of Afghanistan, a specific focus has been placed on reaching those population groups identified by UN Women and its partners as being most vulnerable and those living in areas where there is minimal civic support structure.

5 Ibid.

6 Tant, E., Jiménez, D. and T. Rodriguez. 2023. [How to partner with feminist movements for transformative change](#). Briefing/policy paper. Overseas Development Institute. 30 June 2023; Hessini, L. 2023. [Feminist approaches to resource mobilization to address intersectional gender disparities](#).

This approach is vital for smaller, local, and grass-roots organisations. It allows them to think beyond mere survival, become more resilient, and prepare for future interventions at a larger scale.

This initiative has successfully reduced the administrative burdens on women's organizations looking to access funding; for example, by providing proposal templates in local languages and simplifying the reporting process. It also provides core funding rather than project-driven funding in its first phase, followed by small project grants implemented by the partner organizations at the community level.

This approach is vital for smaller, local, and grass-roots organisations. It allows them to think beyond mere survival, become more resilient, and prepare for future participation in humanitarian and development interventions at a larger scale.⁷ A staff member of one of the partners explained: "UN Women is supporting organizations in such a critical time. If we did not have this support, we would have closed months ago."⁸

As of July 2024, the UN Women programme has partnered with 113 organizations across 19 Afghan provinces and supported 626 women staff with steady salaries. The significance of this approach cannot be overstated, given the crucial role of the women's movement for resilience in times of crisis,⁹ and the fact that less than one per cent of official development assistance is going directly to women's organizations and movements.¹⁰

7 In line with this approach, UN Women in Afghanistan also prioritizes (core) funding dedicated to the institutional capacity of local women's organization through the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund.

8 Forthcoming interview with a programme partner.

9 UN Women (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women). 2024. ['Why investing in women's organizations is critical during crisis: Five stories of resilience.'](#) News and stories. Feature. 28 February 2024.

10 OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). 2024. [Latest data on official development assistance \(ODA\) for gender equality and women's empowerment](#). Development Co-operation Directorate, Development Assistance Committee. Development Assistance Committee Network on Gender Equality. 15 February 2024.



Why investing in women's organizations is critical during crisis: Five stories of resilience, [UN Women website](#) (28 February 2024).

The financial support provided under the pilot programme has been embedded in a validated¹¹ accompaniment approach, with this collaborative and empowering style of engagement including bringing partners together more frequently and fostering knowledge exchange and coalition-building. Through the comprehensive capacity development facilitated under the programme, partner organizations receive training and technical assistance on organizational and project management, financial oversight, and communications and advocacy.

Through peer-to-peer exchanges, programme partners can meet other UN Women partners with different levels of experience. They learn from each other, share experiences in navigating the complicated operating environment, and know that they are not alone. The value of the accompaniment approach and capacity development has on many occasions been expressly highlighted by programme partners (“it boosted our confidence”; “[it] opened a window for us as an organization, and now we see a ray of hope”).¹²

Weaving strong local ties

This successful programme illustrates UN Women commitment to localization in providing appropriate, effective, and sustainable support to the women's movement in Afghanistan. This includes allocation of funds and staff to support the five UN Women sub-offices established – in the provinces of Balkh, Bamiyan, Herat, Kandahar and Nangahar.

11 UN Women (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women). 2018. [Independent Global Programme Evaluation of the Fund for Gender Equality, 2009-2017: Volume 1. Final Evaluation Report](#). ImpactReady.

12 Forthcoming interview with a programme partner.

Through their strong local networks and insights, the sub-offices play an important role in maintaining UN Women legitimacy and sustainability in the delivery of its triple mandate: normative support, UN coordination, and programme operations. For our partners in the field, the sub-offices play the role of trusted counterparts within reach and ever forthcoming with help on navigating the localized management style of the DFA in the respective regions.

Moreover, the pilot programme boosts donor and international partner awareness on the central role of grass-roots women's organizations in constrained and fragile contexts and the importance of supporting these actors. Looking ahead, UN Women aims to engage partner organizations in longer-term funding time frames to allow organizations to plan and grow sustainably.

At the end of the pilot phase, UN Women will build upon lessons emerging from the programme evaluation and scale up this initiative to support the Afghan women's movement through refined strategies that secure broader (and deeper) reach.

Advocating for access to decision-making spaces to ensure women's participation and leadership

In a context where the gender equality institutional architecture has been wholly dismantled, including the Ministry of Women's Affairs, and where women are excluded from participation in public and political life, UN Women advocacy efforts centre on the protection and advancement of women's and girls' rights and the active engagement of women's civil society in all decision-making spaces. Given the indispensable and rightful role of the women's movement in shaping the future of Afghanistan, it is imperative “that Afghan women are not just talked about, but that they are heard from directly”.¹³

Our goal is clear: ensure that Afghan women's voices are not only heard but actively shaping policymaking processes.

13 Davidian, A. 2021. [‘Expert's take: Gender equality is critical for Afghanistan's future, long-term development, and sustained peace.’](#) UN Women. 12 October 2021.

Facilitating guidance for political decision-making

As part of our political support under the Women, Peace and Security agenda, UN Women seeks to ensure that the voices of Afghan women influence international decision-making, and that decision makers have access to high-quality and up-to-date gender analysis and research. Our goal is clear: ensure that Afghan women's voices are not only heard but actively shaping policymaking processes.

To this end, UN Women, in collaboration with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and the International Organization for Migration, have since August 2022 conducted quarterly consultations to capture the voices of a diverse cross-section of Afghan women on topics under discussion within the international community. Relaying their concerns voiced, recommendations, and insights (on women's rights issues and otherwise) to a wider audience, UN Women synthesizes the findings that emerge into reports published in Dari, Pashto, and English.¹⁴ The reports are then strategically disseminated, with a view to achieving maximum reach and impact on decision makers from the DFA and the international community.

In June 2024, UN Women launched the most comprehensive gender analysis of Afghanistan since the Taliban seized state power in August 2021 – the *Afghanistan Gender Country Profile*.¹⁵ The *Profile* analyses the in-country gender equality infrastructure over the past 40 years, tracing how decades of progress on gender equality have been trampled upon by a patchwork of more than 70 decrees, directives, statements and systemized practices introduced by the DFA over three years, to target the rights, lives, and bodies of Afghan women and girls.¹⁶ This pioneering document also provides recommendations to all stakeholders for action in support of Afghan women and girls, including the need for sustained and adaptable funding to strengthen women's civil society organizations.

14 For example, see: UN Women (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women), UNAMA (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan), International Organization for Migration (IOM). 2023. [Afghan Women's Voices – Summary report of countrywide women's consultations](#). March 2023.

15 UN Women (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women). 2024. [Afghanistan Gender Country Profile](#). UN Women Afghanistan Country Office.

16 Estimated figure based on decrees, directives, and statements in the form of media reports, letters, audio, text, social media messages, and reports of practices by DFA officials reported between August 2021 and March 2024.



Summary report of country-wide women's consultations, [UN Women website](#) (September 2023).

UN Women also helped to bring together Afghan women in consultative spaces ahead of the UN-convened meetings on the future of Afghanistan in Doha, Qatar. During February 2024, UN Women spearheaded a submission process to gather the views of Afghan women's organizations on key policy windows related to the future of their society and state – ahead of the second UN Meeting of Special Envoys on Afghanistan in Doha. To inform the discussion taking place, UN Women developed into a report 70 submissions received from prominent figures within women's civil society in Afghanistan¹⁷ and delivered this document to key decision makers in Doha prior to the high-level meeting. Facilitating such spaces for Afghan women continues to be a core focus of UN Women in a context where their political perspectives have been systematically undermined.

Ensuring women's leadership in humanitarian action

The expertise of women's organizations and their unique ability to reach millions of Afghan women and girls with life-saving assistance is irreplaceable, amid a dire humanitarian crisis – where more than half of the population requires humanitarian assistance, gender-based violence (GBV) has increased, and an entire society lives under the threat of food insecurity and malnutrition.¹⁸ UN Women is therefore also ensuring the leadership and participation of

17 UN Women (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women). 2024. [Summary of Submission Process on Afghanistan's Future](#). UN Women Afghanistan Country Office. February 2024.

18 OCHA (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs). 2023. [Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2024](#). Humanitarian Programme Cycle 2024.

women's organizations in the humanitarian coordination architecture, including by facilitating their membership and central role in humanitarian clusters and coordination frameworks.

This participation allows Afghan women's organizations and activists to increase their knowledge of humanitarian and negotiation processes, while boosting their ability to apply for humanitarian funding. Engagement at this level also equips in-country coordination structures with crucial insight from diverse perspectives, including on the needs and priorities of women and girls.

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With the support of UN Women, women's organizations have continued to inform, access, and guide the humanitarian response on Afghanistan; for example, the Women Advisory Group (WAG) has provided strategic guidance to the Humanitarian Country Team on ways to improve women's access to assistance and on entry points for engaging the DFA on gender issues. The WAG, comprised of Afghan women leaders and heads of organizations, documents and monitors gender issues on the ground and raises them in various forums with the support of UN Women. As of July 2024, the WAG has 30 members, across 24 Afghan provinces.

As chair of the Gender in Humanitarian Action (GiHA) Working Group, UN Women successfully advocated in 2023 for engagement of women's organizations by cluster partners to feature in the Humanitarian Response Plan, both as an indicator and in the minimum standards for quality programming.¹⁹

Leveraging agile, civil society-led programmes to ensure that no one is left behind

In the face of the unparalleled convergence of humanitarian, economic, and rights challenges for women and girls in Afghanistan, effective programming to support this group is essential, and UN Women programming in the country is



Hundreds of thousands of Afghans face harsh return after expulsion from Pakistan, [UN Women website](#) (15 December 2023).

only possible through close partnership with the women's movement. Women's organizations and activists are the experts on the ground. They provide invaluable knowledge, guidance, and legitimacy for the protection and promotion of the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan. They are also the only partners able to reach women and girls at the community level with contextualized and appropriate basic and essential services, as well as access to education and economic opportunities.

UN Women programming is embedded in a strategy that recognizes the essential need to keep women's organizations alive and sustained to strengthen the women's movement in Afghanistan. Given the considerable risks of implementing women's empowerment activities in Afghanistan, UN Women applies a rigorous Do No Harm approach, maintaining a low corporate profile and developing all interventions in line with the risks and priorities identified together with its civil society partners.

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Our programmatic partnership with women's organizations goes beyond timely delivery of tailored capacity development, core funding, and organizational support for increased resilience. As part of the accompaniment approach employed, UN Women also emphasizes the provision of mental health and psychosocial support, alongside peer-to-peer exchange and coalition-building for our civil

¹⁹ Ibid.

society partners across programmatic areas – increasing their well-being, helping them to navigate a high-pressure situation, and supporting movement-building.

Reaching the most marginalized women and girls through all available entry points

Delivering perpetually responsive programming, UN Women supports its Afghan partner organizations in navigating the restrictions imposed upon them and explores all available entry points to promote women’s empowerment and gender equality. Particularly conducive entry points (sectors and programmatic areas) include interventions on livelihoods and economic empowerment, education, and health and other essential and basic services for those most in need and at risk.

Centring our agile programming around women’s organizations, UN Women is putting the UN principle of *Leave No One Behind* into practice on the ground. Our partnership-based programming has been pivotal in extending support to the most vulnerable segments of Afghan society, by specifically targeting the most vulnerable population groups such as women heads of households, survivors of GBV, young women and girls, those living with disabilities, internally displaced and economically disadvantaged women, and women returnees.

Under women’s economic empowerment efforts, UN Women has partnered with more than 25 local CSOs since August 2021. These diverse project partners provide skills training, access to finance and grants, and entrepreneurship support to help women access economic opportunities and become financially independent.

To cite some results facilitated via engagement of civil society in this area, 6,283 women have gained essential business management skills; and 1,282 women-owned businesses have received vital support in the form of cash and business assets, enhancing their operational capabilities and fostering sustainable growth. In adherence with the UN Women strategy to reach the most vulnerable, these programmes specifically targeted women and girls in vulnerable situations, such as women affected by GBV, widows, and female heads of households.

Through their participation in projects on economic empowerment, beneficiaries improve their skillsets and increase their access to income-generating activities, while learning about sensitive health topics and receiving psychosocial counselling and peer support in a secure and

encouraging setting. One young woman acquiring skills via a training programme, at a local women’s enterprise supported in Kandahar province, declared that after “just hoping to die” due to the abuse, deprivation, and hunger in her life, she now enjoys learning in a safe environment alongside other women, adding “the most important thing is that I am getting well mentally by spending time here”.²⁰



Elevating skills and hope for women in Afghanistan, [UN Women website](#) (5 March 2024).

In delivering its humanitarian programming, UN Women also counts on women’s civil society to ensure the gender sensitivity and reach of the humanitarian response in Afghanistan. Through its partnership with women’s civil society, UN Women provides gender-sensitive surveying/assessments and direct assistance to women and girls in need, bringing some relief into their lives. This intervention can be life-saving for the most vulnerable, such as female-headed households, at particular risk during times of crisis.

Through civil society partnerships with 14 CSOs under the Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF) alone, over 4,500 direct beneficiaries have been reached with humanitarian services²¹ – 3,235 women, 1,032 men, 218 girls and 131 boys; 60 per cent of whom were internally displaced persons and 15 per cent were women or girls living with disabilities. Additionally, the WPHF supported programmatic activities from 107 women-focused CSOs, increasing participation and leadership of women in humanitarian planning and response.

²⁰ UN Women (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women). 2024. ‘[Elevating skills and hope for women in Afghanistan](#).’ Stories. 5 March 2024.

²¹ Data from the 2023 annual report to the Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund (internal).

Supporting women's organizations in real time: UN Women response to the 2023 Herat earthquakes

As part of the rapid response to the series of earthquakes that struck Herat province in late 2023,²² UN Women mobilized local civil society partners with expertise in humanitarian response. As co-chair of the GiHA Working Group for the West Region of Afghanistan, UN Women ensured that 47 per cent of surveyors deployed to identify the optimal direction for the humanitarian response were women, and provided technical support and funding to several of these surveyors. UN Women also financially supported women staff of four organizations to participate in the pilot for a community feedback mechanism on earthquake response.

As a result of these partnerships with civil society, the voices of 550 women heads of households informed the post-earthquake response in Herat, which was crucial to ensuring access to women and girls in earthquake-affected areas and communities with targeted interventions.²³ Over 500 women received direct cash assistance, mental health and psychosocial support, and kits with non-food items, such as menstrual hygiene products, shoes, and blankets.²⁴ UN Women also provided 12,000 beneficiaries and 1,338 households (1,225 of them women-headed households) with flexible cash assistance to face the harsh winter that followed, again specifically targeting members of the most vulnerable groups – such as widows, women living with disabilities, and internally displaced women.²⁵



In the words of Afghanistan's earthquake survivor Sayeeda: "I am infinitely happy that I can have supplies for winter and not go to bed hungry", [UN Women website](#) (13 March 2024).

Widespread global solidarity needed to safeguard, sustain, and empower Afghan women

UN Women will continue to stand by the women of Afghanistan and the women's organizations that serve them, as an unwavering and trusted ally. We pledge to continually innovate, reinvent, and rethink – so that we respond effectively to the evolving needs of those we serve.

Echoing the Expert Group recommendation²⁶ to see the women's rights crisis and the humanitarian crisis as interconnected and requiring simultaneous resolution, UN Women calls on donors, policymakers, and all partners to join us in committing to Afghan women and girls.

Together, we can – and must – support women's organizations with flexible and long-term funding; amplify and elevate the voices of Afghan women in all decision-making forums; and prioritize and ensure a leading role for Afghan women's civil society in all policy, programming, and advocacy actions.

²² Due to its geographical position, Afghanistan is frequently struck by small earthquakes, which cause injury and loss of human life, displacement, and material damage, and periodically suffers major earthquakes that bring mass devastation to large swathes of population and land – such as the series of four magnitude 6.3 earthquakes which struck Herat province between 7 and 11 October 2023.

²³ UN Women (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women). 2023. [Infographic](#): UN Women's Response to Herat Earthquake.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ UN Women (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women). 2024. ['Cash assistance enables Afghan women to weather the harsh winter.'](#) Stories. 22 March 2024.

²⁶ UN Women (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women). 2023. [Expert Group Meeting on International Strategies and Tools to Address the Situation of Women and Girls in Afghanistan](#). 26-27 July 2023, Istanbul, Türkiye. UN Women Afghanistan Country Office.