

July 2024



# Summary of Countrywide Consultations with Afghan Women

Photo: UN Women/Sayed Habib Bidel

This report captures the voices and concerns of women across Afghanistan as they navigate an increasingly restrictive environment for women's rights. Since its military takeover in August 2021, the Taliban (the de facto authorities (DFA)) has implemented a series of decrees, directives and practices aimed at systematically removing women from Afghan public life and decision-making positions – across almost all sectors. This stream of edicts has also included a ban on girls and young women pursuing secondary and university-level education in Afghanistan.

The near wholesale exclusion of women and girls from broader society, coupled with the overlapping economic and humanitarian crises causing marked deterioration in the living conditions for the overwhelming majority of Afghans, is resulting in shifts in community attitudes towards gender norms and a mental health crisis within families across Afghanistan. On 22 August 2024, the de facto authorities enacted a new decree adopting a law (“On the enforcement of the promotion of virtue and the prevention of vice”) containing 35 articles detailing significant restrictions on the Afghan population, particularly women and girls, including banning women's faces and voices in public, with potentially arbitrary and severe enforcement mechanisms.<sup>1</sup> This research and report capture the situation immediately prior to this newest law, and as such, the situation since has already become more dire for Afghan women and men across the country, at least from an internal normative point of view.

Since August 2022, the United Nations Entity for Women and Gender Equality (UN Women), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) have jointly undertaken quarterly consultations with a wide spectrum of Afghan women, and, more recently, also with Afghan men, inviting respondents to share their opinion on the issues impacting their lives.<sup>2</sup>

These consultations articulate women's priorities and requests to the DFA and international community, while contributing to internationally mandated requirements to ensure the full, equal and meaningful participation of Afghan women in any discussions concerning the future of their society and state. The quarterly consultations provide critical insights for both national and international policymakers, shedding light on the lived experiences and perspectives of women across Afghanistan.

<sup>1</sup> This law imposes wide-ranging and far-reaching restrictions on personal conduct and provides morality police with broad powers of enforcement. Examples of violations enshrined by this law include a requirement for women to conceal their entire bodies, faces and voices when in public, as well as punishments for not praying on time at the mosque and possessing images of living beings: UNAMA, “[Statement from Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of UNAMA](#),” 25 August 2024.

<sup>2</sup> UN Women, UNAMA and IOM consult Afghan women inside the country on a quarterly basis ahead of Security Council meetings. The reports on previous consultations: [April 2024](#), [February 2024](#), [December 2023](#), [September 2023](#), [June 2023](#), [March 2023](#), and [August 2022](#).

## Methodology

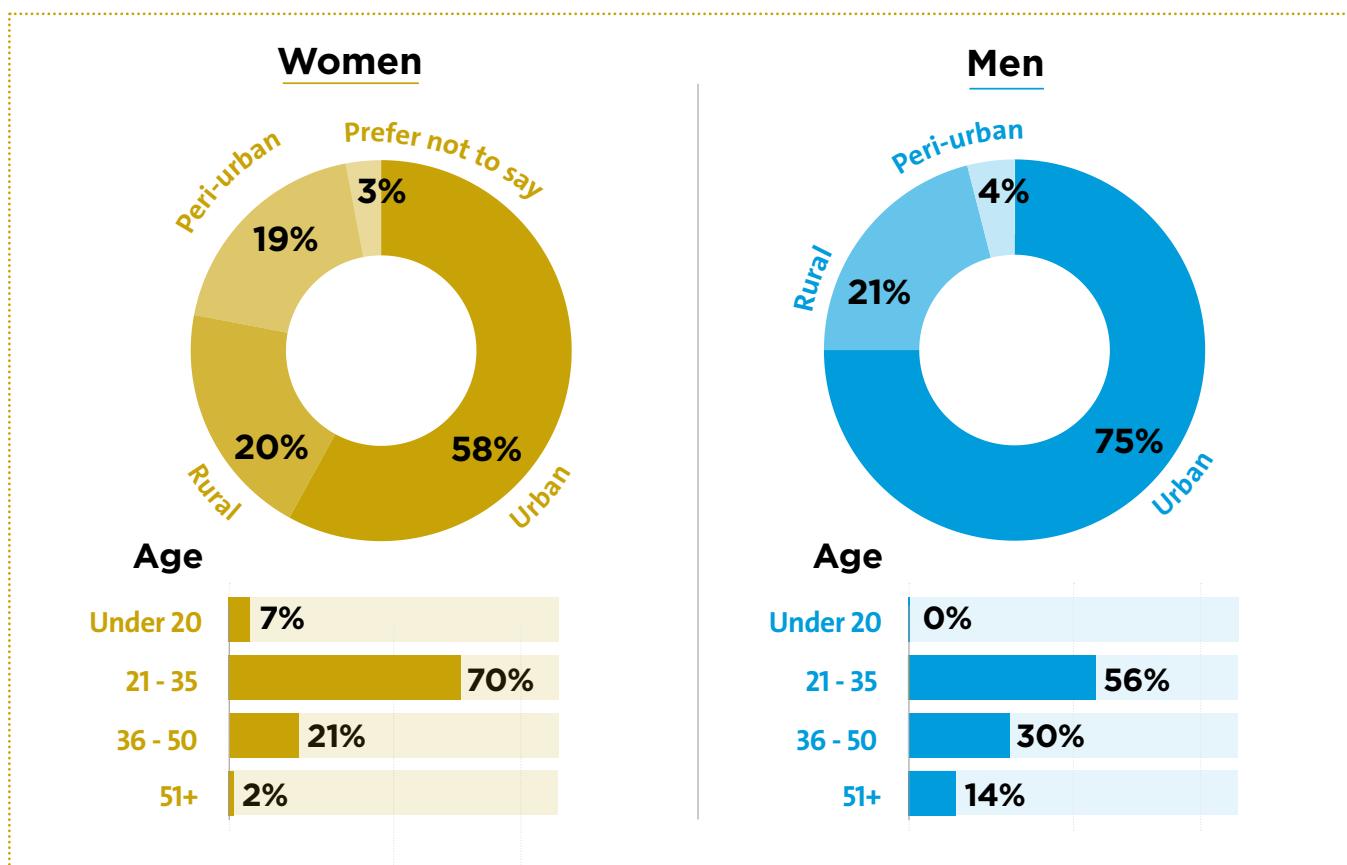
The latest round of quarterly consultations was carried out between 17 and 29 July 2024, with UN Women, IOM and UNAMA convening online and in-person group consultations and conducting individual telesurveys. Through these combined efforts, 776 women were reached, spanning each of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces.

During this latest round of consultations, in-person surveying was also conducted, while keeping safety considerations to the fore of the endeavour. This provided those Afghan women reached with a rare opportunity to come together, share their challenges with other women, and have their experiences documented and made public to the DFA and international actors making decisions that are affecting/will affect their lives.

Engaged in this way, the women reflected upon the three-month period immediately preceding the consultations (April to June); providing details on their experiences, views on engagement in their country by the international community, and recommendations to improve the realization of women’s rights and status of women in Afghanistan. As with the previous consultations conducted, this round covered a mixture of recurring and new topics.<sup>3</sup>

This process allowed a wide spectrum of Afghan women to be reached: women residing in urban areas (comprising 58 per cent of respondents), rural areas (20 per cent) and peri-urban (e.g. the outskirts of a city) areas (19 per cent); women heads of households (35 per cent); internally displaced (19 per cent) and returnee (5 per cent) women; employed (50 per cent) and unemployed (49 per cent) women; and women living with disability (6 per cent). One-third of the women consulted had also participated in at least one previous consultation round.

Consultations were also undertaken with 57 men, across 11 Afghan provinces, enabling complementary analysis on gender disparities while garnering a snapshot of Afghan men’s insights, priorities and recommendations related to women’s rights. The men consulted have similar identity markers to those of the women consulted, with the consultations reaching men living in urban (comprising 75 per cent of men respondents), rural areas (21 per cent) and peri-urban areas (4 per cent); internally displaced (16 per cent) and returnee (5 per cent) men; employed (56 per cent) and unemployed (39 per cent) men; and men living with disability (7 per cent).



<sup>3</sup> Consultations are conducted each quarter with recurrent topics concerning mental health and levels of influence in the household and community, to map indicative trends. New topics are also included in each round, to explore developments and topical issues.

## Key findings

- The consultations found that 79 per cent of women respondents were **denied access to public spaces**, such as parks and health centres, during the previous 12 months. Women reported being denied entry to parks, recreational areas and historical sites, even when accompanied by a mahram (close male relative), with women being explicitly told that such spaces are only for men. This is in contrast to the share of men facing similar restrictions, with only 17 per cent of those men consulted citing such denial of access.
- Most women consulted (69 per cent) indicated **feeling unsafe leaving their homes** by themselves, which they saw as contributing to social isolation and widespread mental health issues, including increased levels of depression and anxiety. Strikingly, 19 per cent of men consulted also felt “not at all” safe leaving the home by themselves indicating a pervasive sense of insecurity despite a reduction in (armed) conflict in Afghanistan.
- **A decline in community attitudes toward girls’ education** was reported by women respondents, both for primary education (according to 47 per cent of women respondents) and secondary education (65 per cent). Nevertheless, some families continue to educate their daughters in secret, while others focus on vocational skills or religious education as practical alternatives given the current circumstances.
- Fifty-seven per cent of women consulted reported experiencing a **significant decline in financial conditions** during the previous three months, compared to 34 per cent of men. Women respondents highlighted gender biases in hiring practices, while both women and men highlighted biases favouring those with connections to the DFA.
- Women experienced a **significant decrease in access to formal and informal legal services**. Some 79 per cent of women indicated that they had not used formal dispute resolution bodies during the previous one-year period, while 25 per cent of women indicated a desire to use such bodies but being unable to do so due to lack of access. Women reported not being allowed to enter courts or public offices dealing with legal affairs without a mahram, and having cases dismissed or ignored due to perceived gender discrimination.



### Access to public spaces and leisure

*“We wanted to go to the park with our family on Eid. The Taliban said that women are not allowed to enter the park, so we returned home. All women are sad. We feel like we are not the people of this country.”*

Since August 2021, public areas in Afghanistan such as parks, nature areas and other recreational facilities have largely become inaccessible to women.<sup>4</sup> Most women consulted (79 per cent) reported that they had been denied access to public spaces in the preceding 12 months, including social centres, mosques, health centres, and parks (compared to 17 per cent of men reporting same).<sup>5</sup>

Numerous women consulted noted not being allowed to enter parks or recreation areas, even when accompanied by a mahram, with women respondents indicating being explicitly told that such spaces are only for men. Women recounted being denied access to cultural and historical sites such as the shrine of Hazrat Ali<sup>6</sup> and other significant locations. Men engaged by the consultations confirmed female family members as being unable to access public and culturally significant spaces. Men consulted also highlighted that the large presence of DFA soldiers in certain provinces, such as Panjshir, also limited access to parks and nature areas. Some

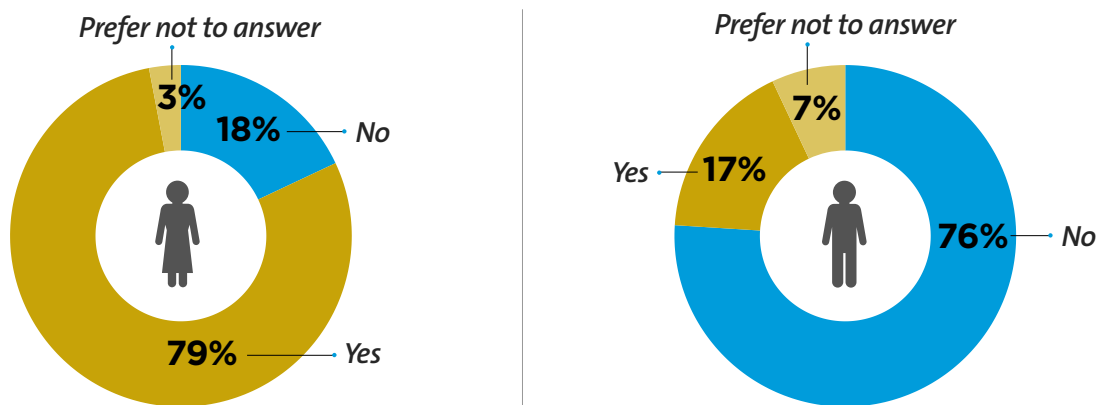
<sup>4</sup> Among a patchwork of local-level directives and practices banning women from accessing various public spaces, women were banned from using bathhouses and visiting parks in 2022: NBC News. 2022. “[Taliban ban women from parks and gyms in Afghanistan](#).” 10 November 2022; The Guardian. 2022. “[Taliban stop Afghan women from using bathhouses in northern provinces](#).” 7 January 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Some participants mentioned that they had not faced specific restrictions because there were no public spaces such as parks or recreation centres in their area, or because they had not attempted to venture outside of the home.

<sup>6</sup> The reputed burial place of Imam Ali, located in Mazar-i-Sharif.

women mentioned that leisure outings were still possible, although limited to nature areas outside the city or visits to relatives' homes, but that such outings were not frequent and carry risk of harassment or worse from the DFA.<sup>7</sup>

**In the past year, have you been denied access to public spaces such as social centres, mosque, health centre, park (e.g. you tried to enter, but were told you are not allowed to enter)?**



The absence of spaces in Afghanistan specifically designated for women is further restricting their ability to engage in leisure activities. The closure of education centres and limited employment opportunities has left many women confined to their homes, with little opportunity (or reason) to leave. Consequently, most women consulted (57 per cent) indicated that they leave the home less than once per day (compared to 23 per cent of men indicating such practice), with some 22 per cent of women respondents leaving their home less than once per week (compared to 4 per cent of men respondents). The prohibitions around public space access were reported to severely affect the mental and emotional well-being of women surveyed, deepening their sense of exclusion and reinforcing the feeling of being treated as second-class citizens. This newest decree of 22 August<sup>8</sup> risks worsening women's isolation and subjugation.

Many women consulted reported that these mental health struggles are not only affecting them personally but also causing tension and violence within their households.<sup>9</sup> Respondents report increased aggression, depression and anxiety, which has negatively impacted their interactions with family members, particularly children. Men consulted also indicated suffering from poor mental health and, as noted, in several cases indicated feeling unsafe venturing outside of the home.<sup>10</sup> Unprompted to relate such information, some men consulted noted that mental health issues were leading to domestic violence, even inside their own homes. The combined pressures of confinement and social isolation are creating severe mental health and well-being challenges for Afghan families.

While some women indicated avoiding public spaces due to fear of encountering DFA members or societal pressure, others have faced direct confrontations with DFA members that have led to humiliation and a further decline in their sense of security and dignity. Indeed, some 69 per cent of women consulted indicated feeling "not at all" safe venturing outside of the home by themselves, with this share dropping to 13 per cent when venturing outside the home in the company of a mahram. Strikingly, 19 per cent of men felt "not at all" safe leaving the home by themselves. This pervasive climate of fear has left many Afghan women, and men, confined to their homes, with little opportunity for social engagement or recreation within their community.

<sup>7</sup> Shapour, R. 2024. "The Daily Hustle: Going on a picnic with your family, if you're a girl." Afghanistan Analysts Network. 23 July 2024.

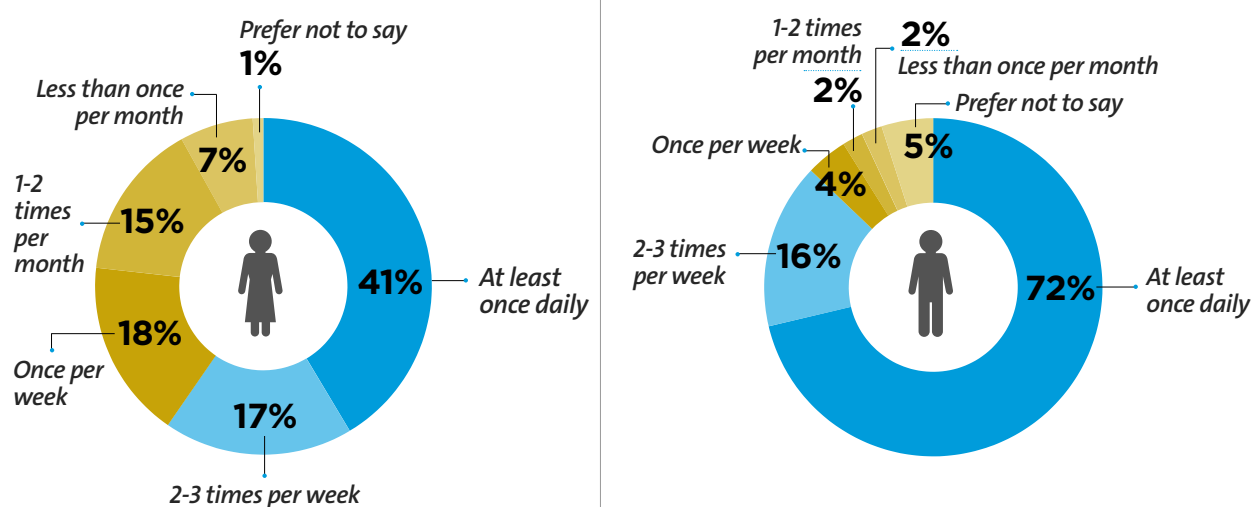
<sup>8</sup> See footnote 1.

<sup>9</sup> 81 per cent of women consulted judge their mental health to be "bad" (33 per cent) or "very bad" (47 per cent). This builds on a persistent, bleak picture from previous rounds. In April 2024, most women self-reported that their mental health (feelings of anxiety, isolation, depression) was "very bad" (40 per cent) or "bad" (28 per cent).

<sup>10</sup> 84 per cent of men said their mental health was "bad" (42 per cent) or "very bad" (42 per cent). In April 2024, men consulted judged their mental health to be "very bad" (23 per cent) or "bad" (27 per cent).



## How often do you leave your home?



### Community attitudes to girls' education

*"Over time, I realized that people who were in favour of girls' education are either silent out of fear or agree with this oppression."*

Women consulted indicated that they felt a normative shift in community attitudes toward women's rights, driven by fear of DFA reprisals and the deepening of patriarchal norms across their country. Nearly half (47 per cent) of the women consulted indicated feeling that community support for primary education for girls had declined, a figure that rises to 65 per cent when asked about secondary education for girls.<sup>11</sup> This may reflect a shift in social norms toward more conservative patriarchal values,<sup>12</sup> fostered in part by de facto ministry initiatives to "reform the thinking of the youth"<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, such a shift in societal attitudes raised concerns among the women consulted, with several noting that some within their community view the restrictions as beneficial for family life and reflectant of the rightful duties and place of women within society, viewing secondary education for girls as unnecessary or even shameful. While this does not reflect the broader views of Afghans, some respondents noted that they have observed families and communities previously supportive of girls' education increasingly losing hope in this regard on account of the DFA restrictions on education beyond this level. Women and men consulted indicated that some families reportedly see little value in girls attending primary school if they cannot continue on to secondary education, anecdotally leading to a decline in motivation among female students and an increase in early marriage.

<sup>11</sup> Conversely, the men consulted were more likely to express optimism in this regard, with 26 per cent indicating that they believed that community attitudes toward women working had improved, with 39 per cent indicating this sentiment in regard to secondary education for girls. When asked "Do you think community attitudes toward primary school-aged girls studying have changed since the Taliban takeover?", 19 per cent of men chose the (multiple choice) answer "more accepted now", with 18 per cent selecting "less accepted now"; and 58 per cent indicating "it has not changed". When asked "Do you think community attitudes toward secondary school-aged girls studying have changed since the Taliban takeover?", 39 per cent of men responded "more accepted now", 14 per cent opted for "less accepted now", and 39 per cent indicated "it has not changed".

<sup>12</sup> The Survey of the Afghan People undertaken in 2019 by the Asia Foundation showed high levels of support for equal access to education with 89.7 per cent of Afghans supporting equal access to primary education, with slightly less support for equal access to secondary education (86.8 per cent) and university education (75.1 per cent). For further insight in this regard, see a previous report in this series of consultation reports, which details how DFA policies are impacting family relations and affecting the thinking of boys and girls: UN Women (United Nations Entity for Women and Gender Equality), IOM (International Organization for Migration), UNAMA (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan). 2024. [Summary of countrywide women's consultations across Afghanistan](#). February 2024.

<sup>13</sup> This is reflected in efforts by the de facto Ministry of Information and Culture, which in mid-2023 introduced its Trust and Economy Project, involving a countrywide network of councils that aimed to "reform the thinking of the youth": van Bijlert, M. 2023. [How the Emirate wants to be perceived: a closer look at the Accountability Programme](#). Afghanistan Analysts Network. Recent reports suggest that the engagement with the youth by some de facto Departments of Information and Culture has focused on preserving cultural values and traditions with a strong religious lens, including an emphasis on the "Islamic hijab".

In this context, parents are forced to choose from limited coping mechanisms in an effort to counteract the adverse effects of DFA policies on the lives of their children. Some women respondents sought opportunities and financial independence for their daughters through acquisition of vocational skills, such as sewing. Others suggested a shift in focus towards compliance by sending girls to madrassas for religious education as a means to reduce their seclusion and as, in practice, it was viewed as the only viable alternative to education under the current circumstances.<sup>14</sup> Many women consulted indicated that their families and communities continue to believe that education will again become fully available to girls and women in Afghanistan.



## Income-generating activities and private sector engagement

*“The job market is not good for women, the salaries are decreased for women, it is getting worse day by day and there is no hope for change.”*

The impact of the dire economic situation in Afghanistan is being compounded by job losses and salary decreases, among Afghan women in particular. While the DFA have not issued a comprehensive ban on women working in the private sector, the patchwork of discriminatory decrees woven comes together in such a way as to strongly impact women’s ability to work.

Speaking of their experience during the previous three-month period, the majority of respondents consulted indicated significant deterioration in the employment landscape, with 73 per cent of women and 55 per cent of men reporting weakening conditions for income generation. Among the women consulted, 57 per cent noted that their situation had become “significantly worse”, compared to 34 per cent of men noting the same, highlighting gender disparity in the Afghan job market.

Afghan women face significant challenges in securing and retaining jobs. Where women are not outright banned, they tend to be offered mainly unskilled, low-paying jobs (regardless of qualification and experience).<sup>15</sup> Women consulted expressed frustration at employers often choosing to hire men over women, as discriminatory DFA restrictions and practices make hiring women more burdensome – financially and administratively, as well as putting companies at higher risk of DFA harassment. The practical reality of this threat appears to be confirmed by recent reports indicating that the de facto Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice has been closing offices deemed to be in violation of the ban on women working for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and gender segregation rules for office settings.<sup>16</sup>

Numerous respondents also highlighted that in many cases where women are selected for jobs, they go to those with connections to DFA or company leaders. Many of the men consulted also highlighted this phenomenon, making the point that being affiliated with the DFA had become a prerequisite for public sector employment, with recruitment interviews probing whether the applicant supported the Taliban during the Republic era.

Systemic pay cuts, pay inequity and a salary cap recently codified were highlighted by many respondents as limiting the amount of income that women can earn in the Afghan public sector. Respondents noted that salaries for women, particularly in education, health and public services, have been reduced to levels that “do not cover their daily expenses”. The June 2024 DFA directive standardizing the salaries of women working in the public sector “who do not attend work daily”<sup>17</sup> to AFN5,000 (approximately US\$70.00) per month, regardless of grade, has led to reduced and withheld pay for many women civil servants.<sup>18</sup> This development has resulted in significant financial and mental strain on those women working in the last remaining public jobs available to them, and risks being replicated in the private sector – which accounts for the vast majority of Afghan women engaged in paid activities.

<sup>14</sup> Madrassa learning, the provision of Islamic recitation classes to boys and girls, typically occurs for 2-3 hours per day as an addition to, not replacement for, formal academic learning. Madrassas are generally run by local religious leaders, who are commonly self-appointed rather than assigned their position on the basis of specific qualifications: UN Women. (forthcoming). Afghanistan Gender Index.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> UNAMA (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan). 2024. [Update on the human rights situation in Afghanistan: April – June 2024](#).

<sup>17</sup> On 7 July 2024, the de facto Ministry of Finance issued a letter clarifying that the June directive would be applied to women civil servants “who do not attend work daily or do not perform their duties according to their job description” and does not apply to women who are reporting to work and performing their duties in line with their job descriptions.

<sup>18</sup> In the face of confusion as to whether the policy applies to all women staff or only those asked to remain home, DFA leaders have not provided clarified instructions, leaving de facto ministries to err on the side of compliance with many women’s salaries reduced or withheld.

Men consulted also indicated facing difficulties in covering daily expenses, highlighting the broader economic challenges affecting the overwhelming majority of Afghans. The economic crisis has exacerbated (un)employment conditions and depleted financial resilience among both women and men respondents, with many highlighting the toll this is also taking on the youth.

Nevertheless, men's access to employment remains significantly higher than that of women. Among the respondents engaged during this round of consultations, women were more likely to work from home – either formally or informally, or without earning a standalone income<sup>19</sup> – or be unemployed (49 per cent of respondents) than men (39 per cent).<sup>20</sup> Women respondents indicated feeling that attitudes within their community toward women working outside the home had become less supportive since the Taliban's military takeover.<sup>21</sup> Some respondents reported growing social stigma around women working outside the home, with it being viewed as immoral or as bringing dishonour to their families.

While there remain some opportunities for women in the private sector via home-based enterprises, women emphasized that financial constraints and lack of access to starting capital hamper their ability to launch businesses. Both men and women consulted reiterated these financial constraints and also noted increasing regulatory requirements including taxation and administrative costs. Those women who do operate enterprises face barriers to accessing markets and typically require the availability of a mahram to engage in outward-facing economic activity.<sup>22</sup> Many of the women consulted expressed a desire for vocational training, financial assistance and changes in DFA policy to enable them to utilize available opportunities.

Some women noted that they have access to income generated online, although this was not widely available to most participants, given the barriers to (women's) access to internet. Male respondents emphasized the need to support farmers through de facto state or non-governmental initiatives. Even under circumstances where women have found a means to work from home – online or through home-based enterprises – some report that they do so with fear, under the constant threat of new policies or practices that could further limit their opportunities.



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*“A woman was referred to the community-led council, but they insulted her using bad words. Women should wear burqa and sit in a corner in the councils; they are not allowed to talk and just can say yes or no.”*

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Consultation findings reveal marked deterioration in women's access to legal and dispute resolution services in Afghanistan. Before the Taliban takeover, women played significant roles in the justice system as defense lawyers, judges, and prosecutors, supported by a nationwide legal infrastructure dedicated to ending violence against women (EVAW).<sup>23</sup> The increasing exclusion of women from the Afghan legal system is evident from these consultations, where women highlighted their systematic exclusion from both formal and informal dispute resolution processes.

Of the women consulted, 79 per cent indicated that they had not used any formal dispute resolution bodies during the year prior to consultation,<sup>24</sup> while 25 per cent indicated that while they desired to use such bodies, they could not do so due to their lack of access. Many participants reported that women are not allowed to enter courts or public offices dealing with legal affairs without a male guardian, and that even instances where they are admitted, their cases are often dismissed or ignored due to gender discrimination.

<sup>19</sup> Women were more likely to work from home, formally (10 per cent), informally (10 per cent), and without earning an income (8 per cent), compared to men (0 per cent, 2 per cent and 2 per cent, respectively). Some 5 per cent of women were informally employed outside the home, compared to 18 per cent of men. Additionally, women consulted were less likely to be formally employed outside the home (30 per cent) compared to men consulted (46 per cent).

<sup>20</sup> These figures are reinforced by data collected in March 2024 for the UN Women Afghanistan Gender Index (forthcoming), which found that 24.15 per cent of Afghan women participated in the labour force, compared with 88.92 per cent of Afghan men.

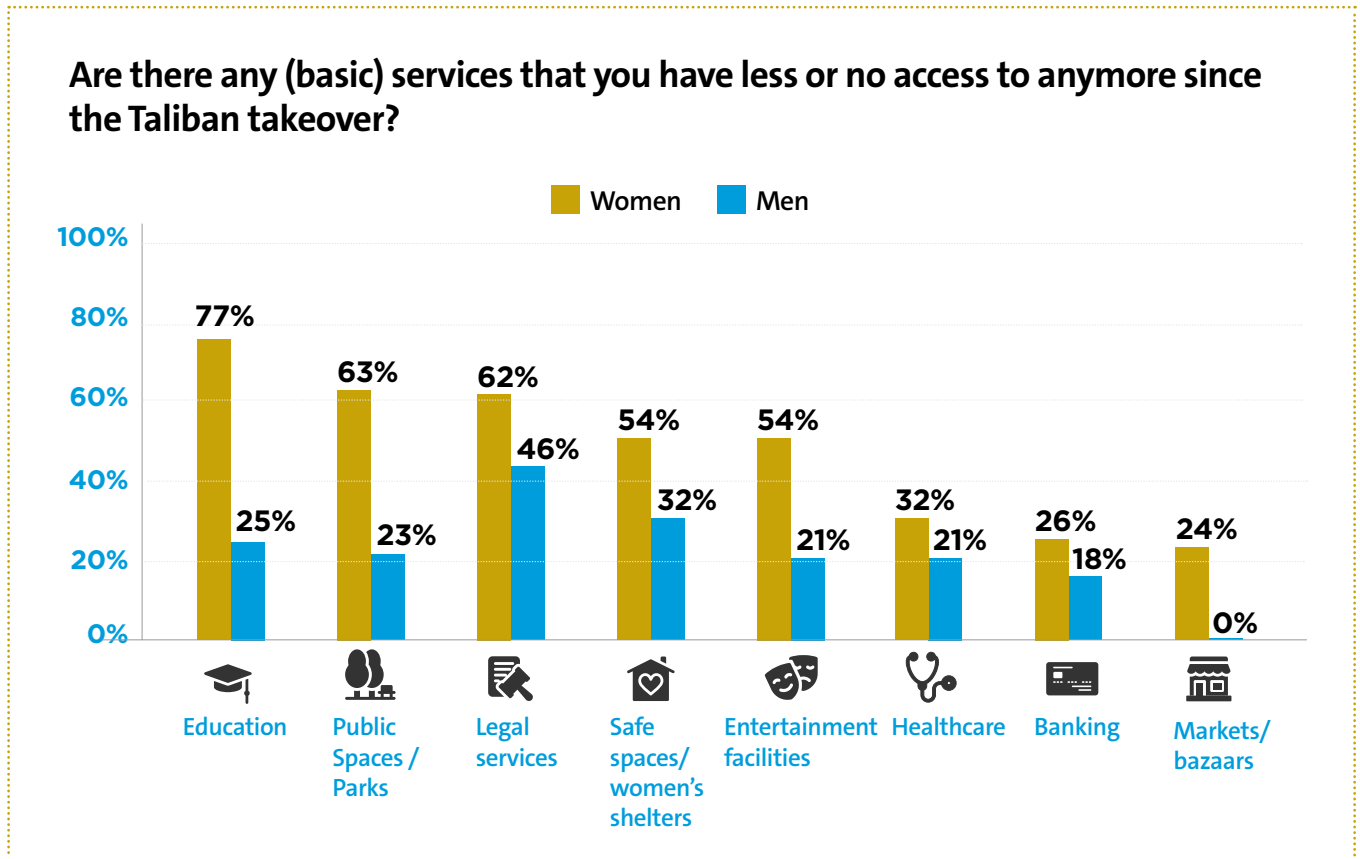
<sup>21</sup> Some 76 per cent of women indicated feeling that women working outside the home is less accepted now, compared to before the Taliban takeover, in comparison to 19 per cent of men.

<sup>22</sup> For more on the challenges and opportunities for women entrepreneurs in Afghanistan currently see: UNDP (United Nations Development Programme). 2024. [Listening to women entrepreneurs in Afghanistan: their struggle and resilience](#).

<sup>23</sup> Gehrig, M. 2022. [Legal and justice system changes and implications for gender equality and women's rights in Afghanistan](#). UN Women.

<sup>24</sup> Of those women consulted, only five per cent had used them “once”, and another five per cent “more than once” (during the one-year period prior to consultation). In addition, 62 per cent of women reported having less access to legal services since the Taliban's military takeover.

Men were significantly more likely than women to use both formal and informal dispute resolution bodies (speaking in regard to the 12-month period immediately prior, of the men consulted, 15 and 31 per cent indicated using the former once and more than once, respectively, and 17 and 28 per cent indicated using the latter once and more than once). Notwithstanding, men also cited lack of sufficient access to such bodies when needed.<sup>25</sup> Many men consulted also reflected on the arbitrary and unreliable nature of justice through the formal justice system – from courts being closed arbitrarily to political interference resulting in reversal of rulings.



The dismantling of legal and social services that once addressed domestic violence and various legal disputes faced by this population group has left women without formal support systems and limited access to safe places or shelters, which have been shut down by the DFA. Fifty-four per cent of women respondents reported diminished or no access to safe spaces or women's shelters. Some women noted being in a situation where they sought a divorce, for example, and were not allowed to participate in proceedings, could not proceed without male consent, or needed to pay large sums of money to have their case advanced. Others highlighted that fear of potential backlash or dishonour within their communities create additional obstacles to accessing justice. Patriarchal cultural norms were identified as fostering a negative perception of women who assert their rights, viewing them as subversive with the effect of discouraging them from seeking justice.

Access to informal dispute resolution bodies in Afghanistan, such as community-led councils or shuras, is limited for women. Few women respondents used informal dispute resolution bodies in the past year,<sup>26</sup> though they were more likely to use informal than formal bodies. Many women consulted indicated that they were excluded from community decision-making bodies due to adherence to cultural norms, gender biases and restrictions imposed by the DFA. When women do seek resolution, they often turn to community leaders, rather than official bodies, to resolve disputes. However, analysis shows that such bodies prioritize social cohesion above all other considerations, typically ruling in favour of men, to the detriment of women raising issues.

<sup>25</sup> Some 26 per cent of men indicated having a desire to use formal dispute resolution bodies in the previous year but being unavailable to do so, with the equivalent share in regard to informal dispute resolution bodies standing at 22 per cent.

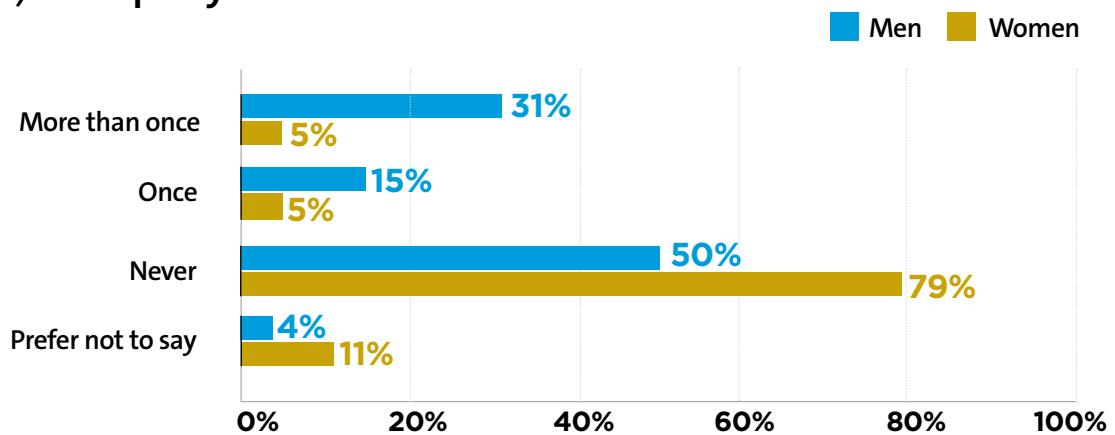
<sup>26</sup> Speaking in regard to their use of informal dispute resolution bodies (e.g. community-led resolution mechanisms, shuras) during the one-year period immediately prior to consultation, women responded as follows: "never" (73 per cent); "once" (11 per cent); "more than once" (10 per cent); "prefer not to say" (6 per cent).



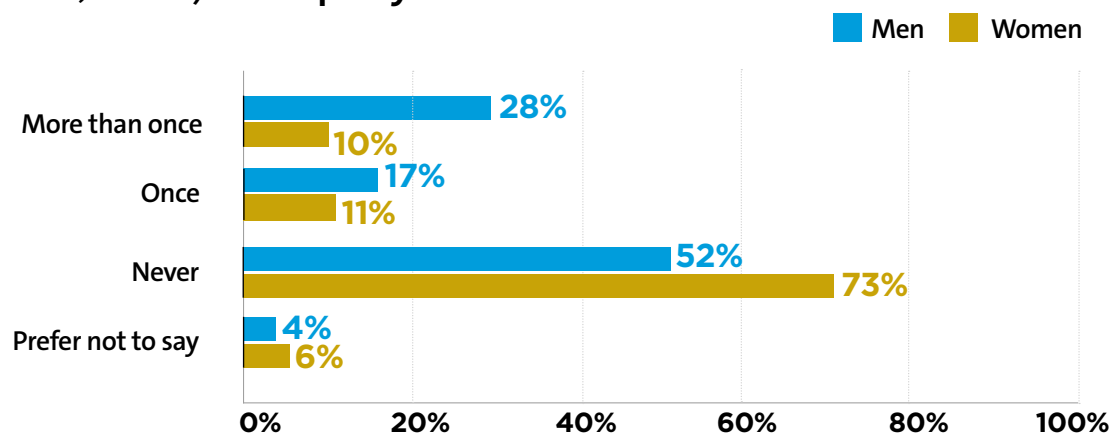
Several women consulted who indicated seeking help from such bodies reported being insulted and having their plea ignored.<sup>27</sup> These outcomes are often influenced by the presence in these decision-making bodies of DFA members and/or local leaders, and with no female representation in bodies, women’s right to fair treatment is jeopardized.

Some of the men consulted also indicated feeling that informal justice was unlikely to allow for a fair or enforceable outcome to cases brought. This dynamic is contributing to a widespread feeling of helplessness among women and reliance on male relatives or community leaders for legal redress – who may deliberately not act in their best interests, or be unable to do so due to the prevailing societal context.

### How many times have you made use of formal dispute resolution bodies (e.g. courts) in the past year?



### Have you made use of informal dispute resolution bodies (e.g. community-led resolution, shuras) in the past year?



<sup>27</sup> In several situations of this kind, women were reportedly told that they should not be voicing these concerns and instead should return home and obey their husband.

## Recommendations

### The Afghan women and men consulted call on the de facto authorities to:

#### ADDRESS restrictions to girls' education:

- **Reopen** schools for girls, immediately and for all levels, and ensure that they have access to quality education in a safe and supportive environment.
- **Commit** to respecting international human rights standards, including those related to the rights of women and girls and to which Afghanistan is a state party, as a necessary step on any path toward gaining international recognition and support.

#### REMOVE barriers to women's economic empowerment:

- **Promote** economic policies that support women's equal participation in the workforce, including through ensuring pay equity and equal access to leadership roles and hiring practices and salary scales that are free from gender discrimination, recognizing the essential contribution of women to the Afghan economy and society.
- **Remove** *mahram* requirements, enabling women to freely engage in labour activities, access public services such as health care, and undertake recreational pursuits.
- **Eliminate** the barriers imposed on women-led NGOs and private sector businesses, and simplify the process for obtaining work permissions and licenses. In this endeavour, the policy of replacing women on company boards of directors with men should be abandoned, and women allowed to retain leadership positions in NGOs and the private sector without prejudice.

#### GUARANTEE women's access to services, justice and public spaces:

- **Provide** legal protections that ensure that women have equal access to justice and fair treatment before the law at community, provincial and national levels.
- **Guarantee** that women can access public spaces, such as parks, gyms, health centres and markets, promoting their right to freedom of movement and leisure.
- **Ensure** that women have access to essential health care services, including maternal and reproductive health, by allowing female healthcare workers to operate and women to access health services freely and fully.
- **Encourage** the participation of women in decision-making processes at all levels of government and society, recognizing the necessity of meaningful participation by Afghan women as a main stakeholder if a stable and prosperous Afghanistan is to be built.

### The Afghan women and men consulted call on the international community to:

#### INCREASE advocacy for Afghan women's rights:

- **Renew** high-level diplomatic efforts to encourage the DFA to uphold international human rights standards, particularly concerning women's rights to education, employment, and freedom of movement.
- **Increase** resources to monitoring, documenting and reporting initiatives to capture the human rights violations that are occurring each day in Afghanistan, particularly those targeting women and girls. Ensure monitoring can be done with a view to increasing awareness of such occurrences among state and international actors and increasing pressure on the DFA to ensure that such violations do not occur.
- **Encourage** the DFA to engage in direct dialogue with women's groups and women leaders to clearly understand and address their needs, ideally creating a channel and formal mechanism to hear directly from Afghan women.

Target and increase funding to further targeted programming that limits the impact of restrictions on women and girls:

- **Strengthen and support local NGOs** working under difficult conditions to provide services and advocacy for women and girls in Afghanistan, through providing financial and technical support directly to women-led NGOs and businesses, including grants, loans and capacity-building programmes.
- **Establish and fund alternative and online education initiatives for girls and women** in Afghanistan, ensuring that they can continue their education despite the restrictions imposed upon them by the DFA.
- **Develop and support mental health programmes for Afghan women and girls** suffering as result of the restrictions on their rights and freedoms, including the effects of social isolation and economic hardship.
- **Provide legal assistance and advocacy for women facing discrimination and violence** in Afghanistan, ensuring that they have access to justice, even in an informal capacity.
- **Fund vocational training and small business initiatives aimed at Afghan women**, helping them to achieve financial independence in the face of severe restrictions on formal employment.
- **Develop programmes to assist Afghan women and families to safely migrate** to countries where they can freely access education and employment opportunities.

## Annex I

### Methodological note

A total of 776 female participants were reached through the July 2024 consultations, consisting of 653 participants reached through group consultations and 123 through individual interviews across all 34 provinces.<sup>28</sup> A small group of men were also engaged to allow for comparative analysis – 55 men were reached in group consultations and 2 men were interviewed. Respondents are asked a mixture of up to 10 multiple choice questions and up to 20 open-ended questions intended to primarily capture their perceptions.

#### *Perceptions survey*

The perceptions survey captures respondents' opinions, attitudes, beliefs and experiences related to issues affecting them, as a way to measure intangible or sensitive issues that are otherwise difficult to quantify. Data collected through this perceptions survey helps to address information gaps, especially in data-scarce environments like Afghanistan, by offering an alternative way to collect insights and validate other data sources, test policy assumptions, monitor state-society relations and prioritize citizen perspectives.

#### *Sampling*

Respondents are selected through a purposive, snowballing methodology, to mitigate security risks and foster open discussions on sensitive issues. This cautious outreach strategy ensures that group consultations and interviews are conducted with individuals who are likely to provide valuable insights while maintaining discretion and reducing the likelihood of compromising participants' perceived and real safety during the process.

##### Purposive

Women are selected with careful consideration of security and the ability to discuss their experiences openly, particularly concerning the impacts of Taliban policies on their lives. This ensures that participants can safely share their perspectives.

##### Snowballing

Using the established networks of IOM, UNAMA and UN Women, consultations reach participants through referrals and word-of-mouth. This approach minimizes exposure to potential risks by allowing trusted participants to recommend others, thereby building a trusted chain of referrals.

#### *Trends analysis*

The situation of female and male respondents are analysed as indicative trends over time, providing an insight into changes experienced over time. These trends are observed at the sample group level, rather than individual level, due to the changing sample group across each round of consultations. The sample includes individuals with similar identity markers,<sup>29</sup> with roughly 30 per cent having participated in at least one previous round of consultations. The aggregate trends observed across different rounds can indicate broader shifts in attitudes, behaviors, or conditions. Findings from previous rounds are validated in consultations to support the examination of shifts over time.

<sup>28</sup> The province break-down is as follows: Badakhshan, 39; Badghis, 37; Baghlan, 17; Balkh, 46; Bamyan, 44; Daykundi, 14; Farah, 13; Faryab, 43; Ghazni, 20; Ghor, 14; Hilmand, 30; Hirat, 73; Jawzjan, 30; Kabul, 70; Kandahar, 26; Kapisa, 3; Khost, 11; Kunar, 22; Kunduz, 22; Laghman, 25; Logar, 2; Maidan Wardak, 5; Nangarhar, 30; Nimroz, 29; Nuristan, 20; Paktika, 11; Paktya, 12; Panjsher, 3; Parwan, 3; Samangan, 25; Sar-e-Pul, 29; Takhar, 2; Uruzgan, 5; and Zabul, 1.

<sup>29</sup> For more on the profile of respondents, see methodology section on page 3 of the report.

## **Annex II**

### **DFA Response to UN Women, UNAMA and IOM WPS Consultations July 2024**

As part of engagement, the de facto authorities were invited to comment on this consultation report. Below is the response received from de facto Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 8 October 2024 in Pashto. The response was received in Pashto and translated verbatim into English and Dari. In case of discrepancies, the Pashto version of the response should be relied on. The consultation report was not changed following the receipt of comments from the DFA to preserve the integrity of the voices of Afghan women across the country that shared their views with UN Women, IOM and UNAMA. One consistent ask from Afghan women involved in the consultation process is for the UN to transmit their messages to the DFA. Sharing an advanced copy of the quarterly consultation report is one way for to directly share the perspectives and recommendations of Afghan women with the DFA.

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs express their concerns and responses regarding the latest consultation report as follows:

#### **A: Methodology:**

The methodology used to consult with Afghan women is flawed. Consequently, it is illogical to broadly accuse the Islamic Emirate based on this approach. The opinions of only 776 female respondents, who are expected to represent all women in a country where they constitute half the population, cannot justify the baseless accusations against millions of women.

Circulating and disseminating such accusations—found in the summary report—based solely on a remote survey undermines the reputation and credibility of the UN and other international organizations. Such actions and reports will not alleviate the suffering of Afghan women.

#### **B: Access to Public Spaces**

Women have the freedom of movement throughout the country. International organizations have observed that Afghan women can leave their homes, visit their relatives at any time, and enjoy nature freely.

#### **C: Community Behavior towards Girls' Education**

Girls have access to education up to grade 6 in schools, as well as opportunities for higher education in religious schools (madrasas) and medical institutes. Additionally, hundreds of thousands of girls and women are receiving vocational training in areas such as tailoring, carpet weaving, and other livelihood sectors.

#### **D: Income Generating Activities and Private Sector Engagement**

More than 8000 women across the country have obtained business continuity licenses last year. The Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) supports women's contribution to the economic growth of the country. In addition, as you are aware, special attention has been paid to the contribution of women-led SMEs in various exhibitions to display their products for marketing.

#### **E: Access to Judicial System**

Women have full access to judicial institutions across the country, with thousands of women visiting these institutions to pursue their cases. In addition to provisions for male prisoners, female prisoners are offered special and safe shelters designed for women and girls facing domestic and social challenges in all provinces, along with facilities for their children. As a result, all female prisoners and their children feel secure within the prison system.