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Border Tensions, Women's Realities: A Gender Alert on Afghanistan–Pakistan Hostilities

March 2026

This Gender Alert has been developed by Afghanistan's Operational Gender Coordination Group, with the Regional Operational Coordination Group for the Eastern Region. This Gender Alert is based on preliminary updates, information and reports received from women's organizations and aid actors engaged with women in the Eastern Region of Afghanistan. In light of the active clashes, impacting mobility and access to affected areas, the Gender Alert has been developed with the limited data that could be collected without compromising the safety of enumerators.

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Hostilities along the Durand Line intensified from 26 February 2026, with cross-border shelling, airstrikes, drone activity, and ground clashes affecting ten provinces.¹ As of 2 March, an estimated 115,000 people are

internally displaced across affected provinces, including 66,000 newly displaced due to the escalation.²

In addition, these hostilities have further displaced thousands of households, who were already displaced by the earthquakes in Kunar and Nangarhar.

The August 2025 earthquake-related displacement affected 7,000 households across 11 Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps in Kunar and Nangarhar, seven of which are located in active conflict areas. De facto authorities (DfA) issued evacuation orders to these seven IDP sites and one returnee settlement, requesting returns to places of origin due to security risks. Airstrikes have impacted civilian infrastructure, including the 20-bed emergency hospital, the IOM transit centre, and the Omari returnee reception centre in Torkham, as well as a health facility in Kunar province.³ Meanwhile, land border crossings remain largely closed following deadly fighting in October 2025, permitting only returns from Pakistan to Afghanistan.

This alert analyses the immediate and medium-term needs of women and girls, drawing on primary data from

1 OCHA, Preliminary information, 2 March 2026

2 Ibid. Sex- and age-disaggregated data is not reported in the available figures thus far.

3 Ibid.

displaced women, earthquake-affected communities, and women-led organizations, mainly from the Eastern Region of Afghanistan, which exemplifies overlapping conflict, disaster-related displacement, and cross-border return movements.

Findings: Gendered Impact and Consequences

IMPACT OF HOSTILITIES ON WOMEN

Consultations with women in conflict-affected eastern border areas indicate that women are experiencing layered impact, where physical displacement, housing damage, and livelihood loss are closely interconnected. As women systematically encounter added barriers to movement, resources, and income-generating activities, service access constraints and increased household responsibilities appear to be reinforcing economic and social pressures within affected households.

Women in conflict-affected areas reported that the main challenges they faced were temporary displacement, damage to their homes, and loss of income.⁴ Key services that have been more difficult to access include food, shelter, and health.⁵ They also highlighted that their usual responsibilities in the household have become more challenging, citing increased difficulties with earning income and home-based work, caring for children, older persons or persons with disabilities, and managing household tasks such as cooking and obtaining basic supplies.⁶ When asked what support would be most helpful, they cited cash as the top priority, followed by shelter repair/improvement, food, and healthcare.⁷

COMPOUNDED EFFECTS OF NATURAL DISASTERS, RETURNS, AND HOSTILITIES

Some families are experiencing compounding crises. Since August 2025, 7,000 households have been displaced due to the earthquakes affecting communities in Kunar and Nangahar.⁸ Some of the women and girls from affected communities are being evacuated again due to the escalation of hostilities.

They are dealing with the consecutive loss of homes, community support structures, and methods of meeting their family's basic needs, which significantly heighten exposure to protection risks, particularly for women and girls who face increased vulnerability when displacement, loss of shelter, and weakened support networks intersect.⁹

Women who have been consecutively affected by the earthquakes and the hostilities between Afghanistan and Pakistan cited damage to homes, temporary displacement, and exacerbated household stress as challenges that have increased since the end of February 2026. The prominence of stress among this group suggests cumulative strain within families experiencing repeated disruption.

“I came from Torkham four days ago. We do not have water, proper washing facilities, or basic household items. We are facing serious difficulties” - woman in Shenwar district of Nangahar province

The women who were cumulatively affected by the August 2025 earthquakes and the current conflict, reported difficulty in accessing food and shelter and increased challenges in actualizing household responsibilities.¹⁰ Accessing healthcare is one of the main household responsibilities that they were struggling to meet.¹¹ When asked what support would be most helpful, they also mentioned access to safe water and hygiene.¹² Women affected by the earthquakes had already highlighted concerns when accessing safe water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities in the earthquake response in many IDP camps, reflecting gender specific needs for privacy, safety, and access to WASH support.¹³

4 O-GCG, 02 March, Assessment with Affected Women, Eastern Region

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 OCHA, Preliminary information, 2 March 2026

9 Global Protection Cluster, Afghanistan Protection Analysis Update, Oct 2025

10 O-GCG, 02 March, Assessment with Affected Women, Eastern Region

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 GiHA WG, 2026, [Gender Analysis of Afghanistan 2025 Earthquakes and Recovery](#); GiHA WG, 2025, [Gender Alert: Needs of women and girls after the eastern Afghanistan earthquake](#)

One affected woman remarked: “I came from Torkham four days ago. We do not have water, proper washing facilities, or basic household items. We are facing serious difficulties.”¹⁴

The regional context may further influence displacement dynamics. Overlapping regional crises are likely to shape returnee trends into Afghanistan. Ongoing tensions in the Middle East is expected to increase Afghans’ return to Afghanistan from Iran. Any rise in return flows would compound existing displacement pressures across the country.¹⁵

IMPACTS ON SERVICE DELIVERY – AND WOMEN DELIVERING SERVICES

Due to active conflict in areas where IDP camps were set up following the earthquake, services and support available in these sites have been disrupted, and in some instances, suspended. Preliminary reports also indicate that some earthquake affected IDPs have moved to other IDP sites following evacuation orders, while in other cases the DfA has requested families to return to areas of origin that remain heavily damaged by the earthquakes, where many fear ongoing risks such as landslides and unstable terrain. Emergency, social protection, school feeding, community-based education and livelihood activities have been reported to be suspended in districts of Nangarhar, Nuristan, Kunar, Laghman, Paktika, Paktya, Khost, Kandahar, Helmand provinces.¹⁶ Approximately 160,000 people have been impacted by the suspension of emergency food distributions.¹⁷

Consultations with women humanitarian workers highlighted that the current escalation is placing strain not only on affected communities, but also on the women humanitarians who support them. Women staff emphasized the need for continued and predictable support to sustain outreach to displaced populations, particularly



Photo: Member of the Regional Operational Coordination Group for the Eastern Region

as insecurity disrupts field activities and communities relocate.¹⁸ Women staff stressed the importance of maintaining project continuity, flexible programming approaches, and regular coordination meetings to ensure information flow and collective problem-solving.¹⁹ They also underscored the need for investment in the mental well-being of staff, noting that support must extend beyond beneficiaries to those delivering frontline services.²⁰

Women staff also raised concerns about employment security and mobility constraints. Staff who are primary breadwinners expressed fear of contract interruption during periods of instability.²¹ At the same time, travel restrictions, requirements for a mahram, and family caregiving responsibilities were reported as limiting women’s ability to move for work, while men colleagues often have greater flexibility.²² These structural barriers, combined with heightened insecurity, risk reducing women’s participation in humanitarian response at a time when their presence remains crucial for reaching women and girls in affected communities.

14 O-GCG, 02 March, Assessment with Affected Women, Eastern Region

15 See GiHA WG, 2025, [Gender Alert: Gendered Needs and Challenges of Afghans Returning from Iran and Pakistan](#)

16 World Food Programme, 3 March 2026, [Press briefing at the Palais des Nations in Geneva](#) by John Aylieff, WFP Afghanistan Representative and Country Director; preliminary reports from Afghanistan’s education cluster partners, 2 March 2026

17 World Food Programme, [Press briefing at the Palais des Nations in Geneva](#) by John Aylieff, WFP Afghanistan Representative and Country Director, 3 March 2026

18 O-GCG, 02 March, FGD with women humanitarian workers, Eastern Region

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

Key asks of women humanitarian workers for continued delivery of aid

- Continued support to women-led organizations who remain frontline responders reaching displaced, returnee, and vulnerable communities. “Supporting women staff allows us to support other women, sustain our work, and amplify the voices of women in our communities more effectively.” (Woman Humanitarian quoted in O-GCG, 02 March, FGD with women humanitarian workers, Eastern Region).
- Continuity of projects without interruption despite insecurity and displacement.
- Flexible funding and programming modalities to allow service delivery as communities relocate.
- Strengthen coordination mechanisms, including regular meetings and FGDs, to enable information-sharing, guidance, and collective advocacy.
- Dedicated investment in the mental health and well-being of women humanitarian workers, not only beneficiaries. “If support continues, as women staff, we will go wherever people move and keep working.” (Woman Humanitarian quoted in O-GCG, 02 March, FGD with women humanitarian workers, Eastern Region).
- Assurances of contracts being maintained. Women staff family breadwinners fear job insecurity.

Immediate recommendations for all clusters and humanitarian actors: ON WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION

- Enable the **participation of women staff and women-led organizations** in the response
 - Ensure continued support to women and girls through the participation of women staff,
 - **Advocate** with the DfA to enable full participation of WLOs and women humanitarian workers to provide targeted services for women and girls,
 - Continued **investment** in the quality of the response, including supporting women staff through transportation costs and ‘mahram’ costs, and
 - Link up, work with and coordinate, including through aid coordination platforms and mechanisms, with **women-led organizations** recognizing their understanding of the communities and their access to women and girls.
- Ensure **duty of care** for women staff, e.g., by providing accessible mental health support for staff in person and via phone, by resharing referral pathways on sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) and sexual harassment (SH) and gender-based violence.
- **Ensure displaced women can voice their needs regarding the humanitarian assistance received.** To do so, **consult with women, women leaders and CSOs on the needs of women**, with regards to their place of relocation, needs in terms of humanitarian assistance.
- For women to voice their concerns and preference regarding humanitarian assistance, **create gender-sensitive feedback channels, including face-to face feedback mechanisms which are preferred by women.** These mechanisms are vital to prevent and respond to SEA and SH and to support protection monitoring, offering women trusted spaces to report concerns, signal harmful practices, and highlight emerging protection risks.

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ON WOMEN'S ACCESS TO AID

- Provide **sex and age-disaggregated breakdowns** of affected populations to ensure the response caters to women's and girls' needs.
- Advocate with the DfA to authorize **immediate resumption of activities** at new IDP camps/relocation areas, advocating for the presence of partners providing targeted services **"for women and girls, by women"** in new IDP camps/relocation areas.
- **Mobilize health** and mobile medical **teams** to provide essential healthcare services in new relocation areas, in particular for women and girls.
- Assess and strengthen **women's ability to access markets**: Before implementing **cash distributions**, conduct a rapid gender-sensitive market and access assessment to verify that women, especially Women-Headed Households (WHHs), can safely and independently access markets, vendors, and financial service providers. Where barriers exist (e.g., mobility restrictions, safety concerns, lack of documentation), integrate mitigation measures such as accompaniment, mobile vendors, or alternative delivery mechanisms.
- Provide **cash top-ups for WHHs** when delivering cash assistance, particularly Multi-Purpose Cash Assistance, and cash for rent, to ensure that women-headed households receive appropriate top-ups to address their heightened vulnerability and specific financial burdens.

Methodology:

This alert was prepared based on limited quantitative and qualitative data. One focus group discussion with women humanitarian workers from 12 women-led and women-focused organizations operating in Kunar and at Torkham Border in the Eastern Region was conducted on 3 March 2026, to document the impact of hostilities on women aid workers already affected by multiple bans and restrictions. On 2 and 3 March, 30 affected women responded to the Interagency Community Rapid Needs Assessment conducted in 19 districts of 2 provinces of the Eastern Region. Half were in IDP camps due to primarily to the recent earthquakes and in some cases the returnee crises, highlighting compounding vulnerability.

Methodological limitations: In order to capture the rapidly evolving security situation, the gender alert has been developed with the limited available data, which has been able to be collected without compromising the safety of enumerators during ongoing hostilities.

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