WOMEN FOR WOMEN INTERNATIONAL



Photo Credit: Women for Women International Program Officer, Arizoo Sadaat. Women for Women International's classes resume in Nangarhar Province in Afghanistan, February 2022

"No one hears our voices"

Situational assessment and recommended actions based on the perspectives and experiences of Afghan women

March 2022

Introduction

Following the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan in August 2021 and the subsequent humanitarian and economic crisis affecting the country, there have been many conversations 'about' women in Afghanistan. But often these discussions omit the perspectives, lived experiences, self-articulated needs, and the very voices of Afghan women themselves. Between December 2021 and February 2022, Women for Women International conducted phone surveys and interviews with current and former participants of our programs across Afghanistan and with Afghan women's rights activists and organizations continuing their work from both within and outside of Afghanistan. The objective of these conversations was to better understand the current experiences and primary challenges of Afghan women, identify any promising support mechanisms, and to listen to their hopes for the future. Women for Women International is being led by this evidence from women to inform our ongoing work and adaptations so that we can continue our long history of standing with Afghan women in the safest and most effective way possible.

Our commitment to amplify the so often overlooked voices of women affected by conflict and the insightful evidence collected through our outreach underpin the recommendations we present to decision-makers, international institutions and other stakeholders in this report. Afghan women are overwhelmingly pleading with the international community to not forget them.

Women for Women International commits to continuing this conversation directly with Afghan women. We urgently call for other implementers, decision-makers, and policymakers across the international community to do the same when shaping their policies and program adaptations. By asking and listening to a diverse and inclusive cross-section of women in Afghanistan and taking swift action, we can fulfil our collective responsibility to stand with Afghan women in their pursuit of a more equal, self-sufficient, and secure future.

Methodology

The first part of the survey conducted by Women for Women International (WfWI) included phone interviews in December 2021 with 80 women in three provinces across Afghanistan. These women were active and former participants in WfWI's programs until August 2021 when programs were suspended.

Of the survey respondents:

58% were married

36% were single

6% were widowed

8 average household size

90+% no formal education

Following the initial phone surveys (which included a combination of closed and open questions), longer in-depth interviews were conducted with thirteen of the original respondents in January 2022.

In addition to conducting interviews with women program participants, WfWI also had detailed conversations with six women's rights activists and experts still working on issues relating to the rights and protection of women and girls within Afghanistan. To protect the security of all respondents, their input has been consolidated with the data from phone surveys and interviews to provide context for specific policy recommendations.

WfWI considers community-based evidence to be central in guiding our advocacy and our program delivery. With this in mind, the results from our surveys and interviews are integrated throughout each of the following sections of the report to introduce and contextualize the findings alongside the program adaptations and policy recommendations that this evidence directly informed.



Photo Credit: Women for Women International Program Officer, Arizoo Sadaat. Women for Women International's classes resume in Nangarhar Province in Afghanistan. February 2022

Situational Assessment Findings



Photo Credit: Women for Women International Program Officer, Arizoo Sadaat. Women for Women International's classes resume in Nangarhar Province in Afghanistan, February 2022

ASSESSMENT HIGHLIGHTS

Women reported the following:

- No economic activities or employment
- Not enough to eat at home
- No education for girls (girls are currently only allowed to attend school until class 6)
- No financial support or access to funds
- Wanting to migrate or leave home with their families
- Resorting to negative coping strategies such as child labor, selling assets, and reducing purchases of essential items

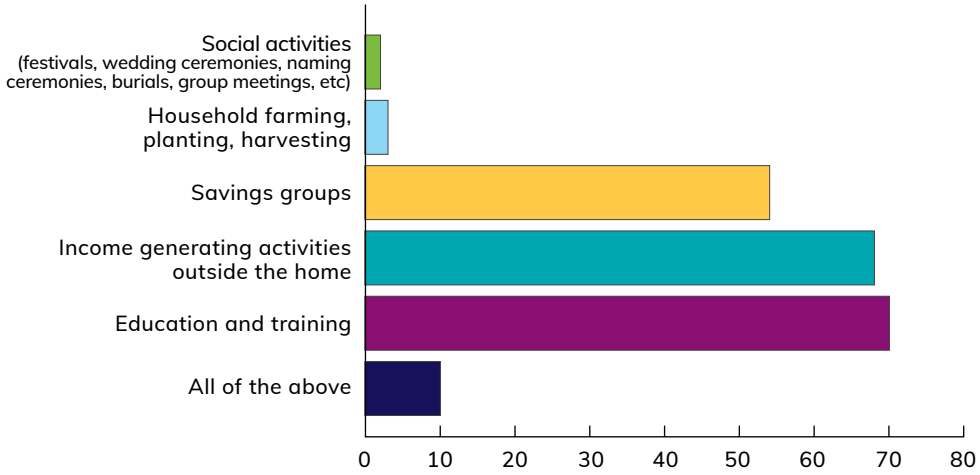
HOW HAS YOUR WEEKLY INCOME CHANGED?



All 80 women (100%) surveyed in December 2021 reported that their household financial situation had deteriorated, with 45% of women reporting a reduction in their personal income and the remaining 55% of women reported that they were no longer bringing in any income to their households.

> **Whenever I think about future, I become confused because nothing is clear, we lost our hope and forget all the goals that we had in the past, we just think about what to eat and how to earn money to buy some food for our family.**

WHAT ACTIVITIES WERE YOU DOING BEFORE THAT YOU CAN NO LONGER PARTICIPATE IN?



Regarding restrictions on participation in public life and activities, 78 out of 80 women surveyed said they were restricted from participating in the income generating activities that they were doing before. This new restriction – due to both the new de facto ban on women in the workplace and fears for personal safety – likely contributed to the reported drop in weekly income.

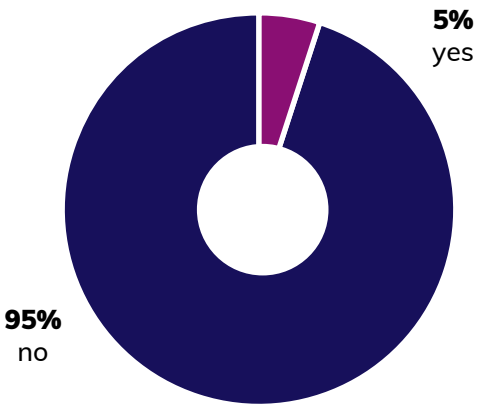
HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE FOOD SECURITY IN YOUR HOUSEHOLD?



All women also reported experiencing food shortages, with one third of women responding that they 'sometimes' did not have enough to eat, and two thirds of women responding that they 'often' did not have enough to eat at home.

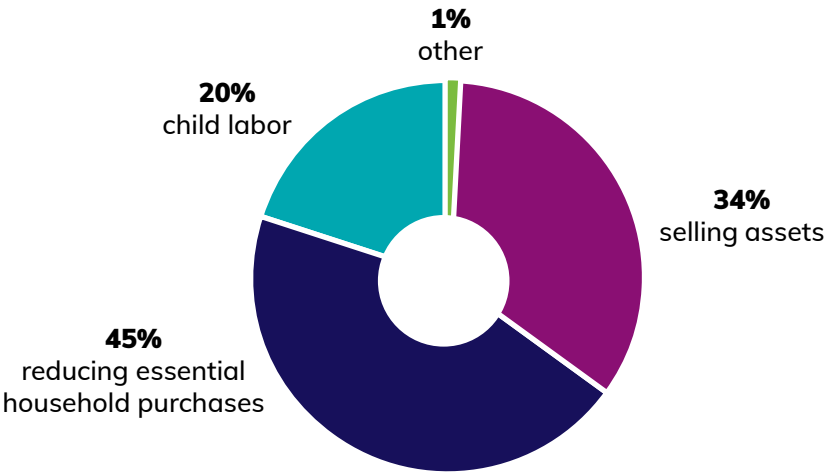
> **"There is food and we need it, but we cannot afford it to buy for our households if the situation remains for longtime, lots of people will lose their lives especially children and women; so, the intervention of international community and global leaders are highly necessary to have dialogues with Taliban, women, and civil society organizations to survive and empower the innocent lives of people."**

HAVE YOU RECEIVED ASSISTANCE IN THE COMMUNITY FROM GOVERNMENT, ORGANIZATIONS, AND/OR INDIVIDUALS SINCE AUGUST?



When asked if they had received any assistance in the community – whether monetary or material - only 5% of respondents reported receiving assistance from individuals and/or government. This reported support took the form of a one-time provision of wheat by the local authorities and a cash amount from an individual. Since this question was asked prior to the UN Security Council authorization of a humanitarian exemption to sanctions on December 22nd, 2021 via Resolution 2615, international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) may have since been able to expand their presence and provision of humanitarian assistance in the communities that we previously surveyed. Women for Women International's own activities resumed in January 2022 once formal authorization was granted, and included cash transfers of stipend arrears directly to program participants. But at the time of the survey in early December, no women reported receiving assistance from NGOs or other aid organizations.

WHAT NEGATIVE COPING STRATEGIES HAVE YOUR FAMILY APPLIED?



In response to our December 2021 phone surveys, 98% of women reported resorting to negative coping strategies due to the economic crisis. Of that 98% of women, 20% had to pull their children out of school to help earn money to feed their households, in addition to a significant percentage of women who had to sell household assets and reduce essential household purchases.

Because of their reduced household spending in the face of the lack of income generating opportunities and available funds, women reported that they needed fuel to heat their rooms through the winter, wood and gas to cook, food, drinking water, electricity and essential items such as medicines.

In the face of the immediate humanitarian crisis, women are also asking for longer term solutions and services to restore their agency and hope for the future such as economic opportunities, financial support, and mental health and psychosocial support.

Women for Women International's Programmatic Adaptations

Following the Taliban's takeover of Kabul in August 2021, WfWI suspended programs while awaiting authorization from the new de facto government to resume work. It was also crucial to wait until both our staff and program participants felt safe to do so. As of January 2022, and after receiving formal approval from the de facto government to resume activities, WfWI has partially resumed an adaptation of its in-person Stronger Women, Stronger Nations core social and economic empowerment program for marginalized women.

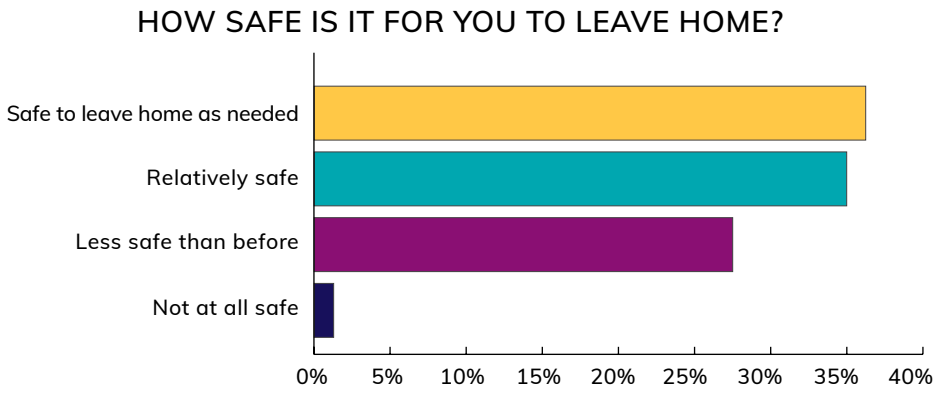
97%

of women reported experiencing restrictions on their freedoms

WfWI based its adapted program delivery on the feedback from participants, as outlined below, and on supplementary risk and security assessments.

Our 'Stronger Women, Stronger Nations' program is delivered in-person and in a group classroom setting. Thus, it was critical to assess whether women felt safe leaving their homes to attend the program again in this format.

While 97% of women reported new restrictions on their freedom, 36% of women said it is safe to leave their home to attend a WfWI program class and 35% said it was relatively safe. The remainder reported that leaving home was less safe than before the government transition and about 1% said it was not safe at all to leave home. The decision to continue in-person program delivery was also made because of the inability to transition to a mobile or remote curriculum learning format due to women's literacy levels, the lack of electricity, and limited access to internet and mobile phones. To address some of these limitations, we will be piloting the distribution of mobile phones to participants to support remote engagement in the event of future interruptions.

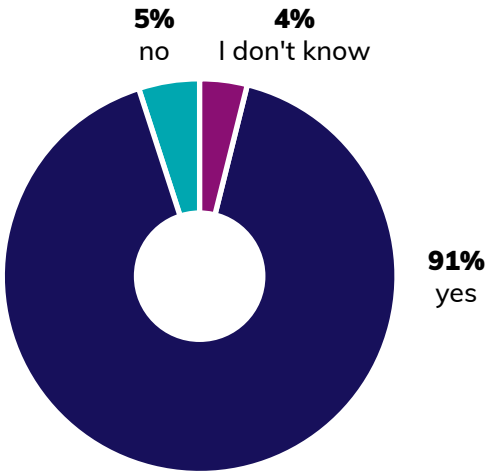


Only 58% of women have their own mobile phone for their own personal use; while 42% women reported that they could borrow someone's mobile phone in their home for private calls, if necessary. WfWI's full program cannot be delivered remotely due to literacy levels and unpredictable access to phones and airtime, as well as the fact that the program involves hands-on training in income generating skills. To provide as much immediate support to women as possible, WfWI is testing mobile stipend delivery and has been providing psychological first aid (PFA) to women via phone until training centers can be re-opened.

After assessing access and availability, we also sought to determine whether women would want to resume classes if they were offered. Two-thirds of women indicated that they were interested in continuing their classes if the activities were perceived as safe under the de facto government's restrictions, while the remaining one-third of respondents said that their interest in resuming classes was contingent on their household situation not deteriorating further. In late January 2022 when WfWI restarted training in one province, 99% of women returned as participants in the program.

The financial and emotional impact of the Taliban takeover also informed women's desire to resume programs. Women were eager to reconnect with their classmates to reduce the isolation they had been experiencing at home. They were also eager to resume at-home income generating activities and to receive their monthly stipends from WfWI once again. When WfWI resumed programs, our priority was to issue the monthly stipends, including arrears and a winterization stipend to cover the increased costs of fuel and food. We have also made PFA available to women by incorporating these discussions into the core curriculum and sharing messages in local languages. Typically WfWI's program provides referral services for women for health care, legal, and psychosocial support, but these support services are currently extremely limited.

DO YOU FEEL A GREATER NEED FOR PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT?



Although WfWI was able to resume some activities in one province in Afghanistan by January 2022, authorization is still pending for other locations and certain adaptations were required or implied in order to remain compliant with the de facto government's interpretation of *sharia* and women's participation. These adaptations include:

- Separation of male and female staff in the office
- The economic empowerment and vocational training component of the program shifted to focus more heavily on food security through individual farming and poultry kits which reduce the need for women to meet in groups for their respective income generating activities and provide women with a food source in addition to income. The other income-generating activity supported through the program is tailoring, which can also be done at home.
- Suspension of the Change Agent program, Women for Women International's grassroots advocacy program that supports women who demonstrate particular passion and leadership to advocate for and secure changes on the issues they prioritize. Change Agents feel the most fear about resuming work due to the disappearances or reported killing of activists.

> **"I live in fear every moment and I can't go out of house, I can go out of home when I have urgent work and even I don't say to my relatives that I am women rights defender or discuss about our activities and I try to be very low profile. Our staff faces the same risks."**

> **If our WfWI program starts again, then beside the fact that we receive small amount of money we can meet our mates and exchange our ideas with each other, it will not only financially support us it will give us mental peace too otherwise it has been months that we were not able to go out of our homes.**

Our survey results and adaptations demonstrate that women are eager to participate in former economic and education activities when it is safe to do so and when development programs address their holistic, immediate and longer-term needs. The recent return to the classroom by WfWI program participants has been celebrated by participants and staff alike. But the challenges facing WfWI and other women's rights organizations in delivering on their missions are likely to mount in coming coming weeks and months without action from donors and the international community at large.

> **Currently there is no opportunities for Afghan women and girls to raise their voices which can be heard by government, because they lose all the opportunities of going outside their home, as you know better that all the media also cannot share our voices they have fear from Taliban.**

Recommended actions based the perspectives and experiences of Afghan women

From all respondents, one overarching message emerged – that the international community still has an important role to play in exercising its power and leverage to support Afghan women's rights and alleviate the economic crisis affecting the country. Women's rights are often portrayed as at odds with addressing the immediate needs of the humanitarian and security crisis in Afghanistan, but this is a false presentation of a zero-sum game. Women were not meaningfully included during Afghanistan's peace negotiations and in the many many decision-making processes and spaces as part of the same argument, contributing to the crisis that disproportionately affects Afghan women today.

Many of the recommendations below are specific to women's rights, participation, and inclusion in public life within Afghanistan. But beyond acting on these specific recommendations, policymakers and advocates alike must embed participation and inclusion of Afghan women into our processes for developing recommendations and policies henceforth by directly engaging with Afghan civil society and asking and listening to Afghan women themselves.

> **Only WfWI has asked us to share our voices about the current situation, and we are thankful, I no longer see any opportunity in the current government to make my voice heard to international leaders. In this government anyone who raises their voice is silenced forever. Many Afghan women protested for women's rights but have been threatened.**

These recommendations refer to evidence from our surveys and interviews with Afghan women and our interviews with women's rights activists working in Afghanistan as the foundation for urgent action by the international community including governments, donors, global institutions and international non-governmental organizations.

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AND INCLUSION

Recommendation	Evidence and Context
The international community must hold the de facto government accountable to their commitment to reopen secondary school classrooms to girls and women beyond class 6 (age 11-12) on March 21st, 2022 and support their ongoing efforts to reinvest in education infrastructure and teachers.	In his February 15th, 2022 remarks at the US Institute for Peace, US Special Representative for Afghanistan, Tom West, stated that following their takeover of Kabul, one of the Taliban's first requests was for support in reinstating Afghanistan's civil servants.[1] The international community has also demonstrated an interest in prioritizing health and education infrastructure. The de facto government has made encouraging statements committing to reopen secondary schools to girls after Nowruz – the Afghan New Year - March 21, 2022.[2] ***"If Taliban do not accept women rights and do not allow women to go to school and doing jobs then our future and our child's future will be dark, everyone will die from hunger and poverty, beside all the problem that women have with this new government there is no job opportunities not only for women for men, as well, so I can say if this situation continues our future will be so short and bad."*** Through survey and interview responses, women expressed their darkest outlooks for the future when they considered the lack of opportunity to attend school or for their daughters to attend school and go on to find jobs. Education was cited as one of the most significant gains for women over the past twenty years, and one that women are desperate to preserve and expand through support from the international community. The de facto government's own commitment to reopen classrooms and rebuild school infrastructure by the end of March 2022 is one that the international community should actively support and monitor closely through an independent verification mechanism and through additional outreach and interviews with Afghan women and girls to assess their access to education in practice. ***"I have worry about my future and don't feel well, I am a school student, with the new government of Taliban I am also deprived from education. I had a big dream and inspiration for a better future, but it will be just a dream, it will not be completed. Everyone is worried for their unknown future and situation."***

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AND INCLUSION

Recommendation	Evidence and Context
The international community has a responsibility to engage in dialogue advancing women's rights with de facto government leaders while holding the position of withholding formal diplomatic recognition of the Taliban as a government without – at a minimum - their explicit commitment and adoption of national laws that allow for full equal rights for women including those relating to their education, employment, and participation in public life.	***"We have a lot of problems that I want to share with international communities but now the only thing I want to ask is that they should not accept Taliban as Government of Afghanistan because they are misusing Islamic Laws, there is nothing in Islam that said women do not have the right to get education or work out of home, that they are forcing this on us now."*** Many women identified that their top ask to the international community is to not formally recognize the de facto government before it explicitly grant women's rights, but that the international community should actively engage with the de facto government to advocate on behalf of those rights, specifically: • Right to education • Right to employment • Legal frameworks for preventing violence against women • Bans against forced marriage (note that an explicit ban against forced marriage was included in a special decree by the de facto government leadership released in December 2021, but is still reported to be widely practiced) • Inclusion in the government ***"The first and only thing that all Afghan people may want from International Community and Leaders is that they do not accept the government of Taliban. Or at least make them compelled to accept and give the women's right as we also want our rights."***
The international community must continue asking Afghan women about their experiences, needs, and priorities as part of a meaningful consultation process for decision-making connected to any policies or programs relating to Afghanistan.	***"The international community must listen to our voices on women's rights e.g. education and our employment, and they should convince the Taliban to give women equal rights in society."*** Women in our programs and in partner WROs overwhelmingly expressed that they continue to feel unheard and unseen by the international community. Additionally, many discussions with Afghan women are with women who have already left Afghanistan due to the great personal risk that they faced by staying in the country. However, it is critical to find and utilize mechanisms that would allow international stakeholders to consult with a more diverse range of women within Afghanistan due to the differences in the vulnerabilities and risks they face, proximity to ongoing conflict, and their prioritization of needs. ***"No one to hear our voice it is 6th month that we are asking for our basic rights but no one is advocating for our rights or hearing our voices."***

ECONOMIC AND HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

Recommendation	Evidence and Context
The international community, particularly donor governments and international financial institutions, should develop a financial solution that balances the need to restore function to the Afghanistan Central Bank, allow Afghans to access funds in their bank accounts, and restore private economic activity.	***"International communities should create employment opportunities and help Afghan people to be self-sufficient, helping for one or two months cannot be sufficient and cannot solve our problems."*** The focus of the international community on humanitarian aid has been necessary in the immediate aftermath of the Taliban takeover of Kabul. However, the focus on a humanitarian response should not undercut the need for a sustainable solution to to address the devastating poverty affecting the country. Women consistently reported that food and other essential items were often available, but that they had no money to afford such items. The initial reports of negative coping mechanisms such as child labor and selling household assets have worsened to dire reports of selling children and body parts cited by the WROs we spoke with. WROs are also unable to pay staff or access funds to implement adapted activities within the country. To fulfill this recommendation, the United States government must also reconsider its recent decision to block and transfer the Central Bank of Afghanistan's reserve funds held in the United States for humanitarian assistance. The lack of clarity around the bureaucratic mechanism, timeline, or parameters for the distribution of these funds, as well as a definitive statement on whether private assets are included in the funds being re-purposed, risks undercutting Afghanistan's long term economic recovery, as well as the agency and dignity of the Afghan people. The announcement of this policy has already prompted backlash by Afghanistan's de facto government, thus heightening the security risks to national and local NGOs in Afghanistan. ***"The assets of Afghanistan belong to its people. The Central Bank and the economy must be supported if the people are to survive. Taking funds from the Afghan people is the unkindest and most inappropriate response for a country that is going through the worst humanitarian crisis in its history."***[3] The international community must commit itself to the task of developing a longer-term banking solution which upholds the agency and self-sufficiency of Afghan people, restores liquidity and financial activity, and supports the function of Afghanistan's banking system. Without this solution, no amount of humanitarian aid will be sufficient to end the poverty or famine affecting the country.

SUSTAINING THE AFGHAN WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT WITHIN AFGHANISTAN AND BEYOND

Recommendation	Evidence and Context
Donors must be led by local women's rights organizations and provide them with flexible, adaptive funding that covers both direct and indirect costs (including salaries) and covers activities beyond humanitarian aid.	***"The international community is showing one thing to the world and another thing to Afghanistan – they are just sharing slogans about women and children. Don't close your eyes on Afghan women."*** Interviews with WROs uncovered the reality that the chilling effect of the Taliban takeover has led to donors pre-emptively erasing gender and women's rights from any approved and future funding. Interview respondents referenced needing to make significant shifts to their work which in some cases delayed their ability to resume activities. If continued, these shifts would limit their ability to fully deliver on their mission of supporting Afghan women and advancing women's rights. Examples include: • Due to implied pressure from the de facto government authorities - who will not speak to women heading up National and Local NGOs - some WROs have replaced the women in their organizational leadership positions with men so that the WROs senior staff can advocate to and communicate with the de facto government's designated Ministry of the Economy. • Donors will not accept any accept any project that explicitly references women's rights or gender and have asked organizations to change their funded projects/ activities/plans to remove some sensitive activities – due to lack of guidelines by the de facto government which formally permit such work. • Donors have suspended economic empowerment projects or have required WROs to convert the projects to immediate humanitarian aid. • WROs report that some countries have conveyed that they will not support WROs until the de facto government releases clearer policies on activities permitted. • WROs are unable to pay staff or access funds to implement adapted activities within the country due to policies by some donors, governments, and banks. ***"The international community should implement the projects in Afghanistan as they were working before which can help us in employment opportunities for men and women."*** Some WROs also expressed that they were themselves proactively reframing any of their work that would previously be defined as 'women's empowerment' out of security concerns. However, they would prefer that donors allow local WROs the flexibility to adapt and resume women's empowerment activities as they are able to, and possibly in new formats, rather than being required to write those activities out of their grants completely.

SUSTAINING THE AFGHAN WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT WITHIN AFGHANISTAN AND BEYOND

Recommendation	Evidence and Context
The protection of the life and property, and the freedom of movement of the Afghan women leaders and organization staff must be guaranteed by the de facto government.	In October 2021, humanitarian and human rights organizations reported restrictions on the effective operational delivery of humanitarian assistance due to Taliban policies restricting access for women aid workers.[4] In his recent remarks at the US Institute for Peace, US Special Representative for Afghanistan, Tom West, shared that "*when we began interagency dialogue with the Taliban, I remember that female humanitarian aid workers really only had access to four or five provinces. Today that number is 34 (out of 34). It's countrywide.*" He proffered that the de facto government deserves some credit for this improved humanitarian access.[5] However, humanitarian and women's rights organizations also share that many of the restrictions such as the requirement of a mahram - a woman's chaperone or escort, typically required to be a close male relative - were still prohibitive to ensuring that women had unfettered access to delivering and receiving humanitarian aid. Further, reprisal killings and disappearances have sparked fear in the women we spoke with about their future and ability to participate fully in public life.[6] The current government has repeatedly asserted that this practice is against their policy of general amnesty. However, many governments and Afghan women themselves suspect that the practice of reprisal killings and disappearances is still happening and may, in fact, be underreported.[7] The de facto government should be encouraged to maintain its current policy of general amnesty in practice and hold accountable those who are acting inconsistently with this policy. ***"We don't know any source to raise our voice, while from other side we do not have the courage to raise our voice too because you know some people who raised their voices the Taliban killed them or act bad against them, even media are afraid to broadcast their voices or demonstration who asked for their rights."*** Many WROs we interviewed expressed safety concerns related to: • **Safety of their staff:** WRO's are concerned for safety of staff that need to travel to an office or project site for work, particularly in organizations staffed entirely or primarily by women who are concerned about being found in offices without a mahram. • **Maintaining their assets or offices:** WROs report assets and office spaces (both rented and owned spaces) being appropriated by the de facto government with uncertainty around the process of reclaiming said assets. • **Safety of community beneficiaries:** Without an explicit policy from the current de facto government guaranteeing safe implementation of activities, WROs report that their beneficiaries are afraid of attending activities or seeking support services. WROs report that their beneficiaries are also scared to attend activities or seek support.

SUSTAINING THE AFGHAN WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT WITHIN AFGHANISTAN AND BEYOND

Recommendation	Evidence and Context
The international community must support and enable a global movement for Afghan women's rights led by Afghan women through funding, prioritization, and support for coordination mechanisms.	***"Above all financial support or resources, the main thing to support women's rights organizations to deliver our mission is official backing of international community to not compromise the women's organizations and missions...when bigger donors are selecting implementing partners, maybe only 5% of those partners have women working for them; they do not bother to do an assessment to see who is active in the area and still available to implement this work from within Afghanistan itself, so right now what we face is that the world is ignoring women's roles not only in the public life and government level, but in civil society where we are trying to continue our work."*** WROs also expressed that they felt international donors were giving up too soon and not using the leverage they had available with the de facto government to preserve their programs and apply pressure to sustain projects that went beyond the purview of aid delivery. In the past, the international community would consider gender equality in both the staffing and beneficiaries of humanitarian aid projects. But WROs noted that more recently, they perceive that this has been deprioritized at a time that WROs feel gender mainstreaming and equality should continue to be emphasized by larger multilateral institutions and donors in humanitarian aid delivery. Women's rights activists inside and outside Afghanistan also shared that it was difficult to collaborate with their partners in the women's rights movement in order to safely coordinate action and policy positions. By supporting mechanisms for engagement, communication, and coordination among Afghan women and women leaders, the international community can ensure that Afghan women remain at the helm of the Afghan women's rights movement. Such a mechanism would also enable women's rights activists to solicit input from non-English speaking women that still live in Afghanistan who often do not have a platform to make their voices heard to the international community.

EXPLICIT NATIONAL LAWS AND POLICIES

Recommendation	Evidence and Context
When advocating for humanitarian and women's rights policies, the international community should push for explicit laws and guidelines at the national level and a designated singular authority to manage the implementation of these laws and guidelines. The de facto government should develop a specific law, policy, and guidelines to inform civil society and women's rights organizations program adaptations and support restarting activities and project implementation.	International governments and donor organizations have have the power, leverage, access, and security to negotiate with the de facto government that national and local NGOs do not have. In interviews, a key challenge that WROs cited in resuming their work was the lack of coordination, specific laws, or singular entity governing the resumption of aid and development programming. The differences in interpretation between national proclamation versus provincial or local level policy has led to delays, inconsistencies, and greater security risks. Activists and aid workers report that people are being stopped by area authorities and without an explicit law or policy "on paper", there is a higher perceived risk in resuming work or merely traveling for approved activities. Respondents also reported confusion for civil society when seeking approvals or seeking to comply with guidelines, highlighting that "when civil society has a strategy or request, we don't even know where to go or who to go through."

UN COMMITMENT TO WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Recommendation	Evidence and Context
The UN and member states must explicitly include women's rights, participation, and inclusion in society as a strategic objective and priority in the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) renewed mandate up for approval on 17 March 2022.	The UN Secretary General's recent report on peace and security within Afghanistan outlines the extent to which women's participation in public life and their rights have been rolled back since August 2021.[8] However, the strategic objectives and priorities in the Secretary General's recommendations fail to specifically reference women's rights. The six-month UNAMA renewal in 2021 also omitted the specific mention of women and girls at the protest of China and Russia, but the original mandate centered women's rights as a key objective and priority.[9] The renewed UNAMA mandate must maintain and expand these priorities and be supplemented through an independent verification mechanism, which the de facto government have already indicated some agreement with. ***"The international community's actions are indirectly and directly reinforcing the Taliban's idea of what women should be – in statement and in action."*** Women clearly asked the international community to uphold women and girls' rights as essential conditions for engagement with Afghanistan's de facto government. The UN is a key actor and the UNAMA mandate an explicit statement of the international community's strategy and priorities for engagement with Afghanistan. To truly uphold women's rights through statement and action, the international community cannot allow for the quiet rollback of women's rights as a central priority within the UNAMA mandate.

UN COMMITMENT TO WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Recommendation	Evidence and Context
The UN and member states must include the freedom of humanitarian operations by NGOs and humanitarian actors – including national and local NGOs - within Afghanistan as a strategic objective and priority.	The Afghanistan Ministry of Economy has issued new 'Monitoring and Control' guidelines intended to monitor and control NGO and other humanitarian actors' work in Afghanistan. This guidance clashes with Humanitarian Principles, particularly the principle of independence which mandates that humanitarian action "be autonomous from the political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian action is being implemented."[10] The guidelines would also greatly reduce the efficiency of NGOs to deliver on programming and restrict the international community's leverage to ensure that female aid workers can continue working and that the Taliban will not recruit NGO staff as fighters – both identified as priorities in our interviews with WROs. The humanitarian and human rights community fear that – without explicit international denouncement of the Monitoring and Control guidelines – the guidelines will interfere with community selection, budget allocations, and program implementation. ***"The international community should implement the projects in Afghanistan as they were working before which can help us in employment opportunities for men and women."***



Photo Credit: Women for Women International Program Officer, Arizoo Sadaat. Women for Women International's classes resume in Nangarhar Province in Afghanistan, February 2022

Conclusion: The time to listen to and stand with Afghan women is now

The international community has a collective responsibility and significant role to play in supporting the immediate and long-term policies that support the Afghan people, and especially Afghan women and girls, in sustaining their livelihoods and upholding the rights they have fought twenty years to gain. Urgently acting on these recommendations and committing to meaningfully including Afghan women in future policy decisions offers the best chance to uphold their agency and human rights.

> **"I think if Taliban do not accept the women right and do not allow women to get education and work so the future of Afghanistan is dark and unclear specially for women, because they completely take our freedom, we cannot go to school, we cannot speak freely to ask our right, we cannot go to work to earn money and live our life as women do in other countries, most of the people are suffering from hunger and do not have food to eat today so how can they have hope for future."**

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