



## Violence Against Women Afghanistan Policy Brief

### Introduction

Before the COVID-19 pandemic overtook the headlines, the year 2020 was set to be a critical moment for women's rights and gender equality –with an unprecedented number of political milestones and anniversaries– marking an era of accelerated progress for holistic gender equality and bolder action to deliver on commitments for all women, particularly those affected by conflict.<sup>1,2</sup>

On 9th March 2020 –what should have been the first day of the 64th session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)– Women for Women International launched '**Unheard. Unseen. A Global Agenda for Action**'<sup>3</sup>. This advocacy agenda provided analysis on the key challenges that were halting progress for marginalized women in fragile and conflict-affected states and identifies five priority action areas and related recommendations where urgent action is needed by global leaders. One of these action areas focuses on ending violence against women (VAW) and calls for increased funding and delivery of a survivor-centered approach to all forms of violence against women affected by conflict.

Two days after the launch of 'Unheard. Unseen.', the World Health Organization officially declared COVID-19 a pandemic.

As the world grappled with this new crisis, many of the priorities and recommendations set out within the Agenda for Action became more critical, relevant, and urgent than ever – particularly as the secondary effects of the pandemic exacerbated gender-based violence around the world and threatened years of progress.<sup>4</sup>

Into 2021, violence against women continued to be one of the most pervasive human rights violations.<sup>5</sup> Globally, 1 in 3 women has experienced physical and/or sexual violence at some point in their lives, and that rate is much higher in conflict and post-conflict settings.<sup>6</sup> In Afghanistan, 51% of women face physical and/or sexual violence at the hands of their partner or husband in their lifetime, with 46% of women reporting such violence within the past 12 months.<sup>7</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated inequalities that disproportionately affect marginalized and vulnerable women, including increased rates of VAW. In 2020 alone, 243 million women and girls aged 15-49 faced violence from an intimate partner.<sup>8</sup> Women in Afghanistan experienced a similar escalation of VAW prevalence due to both COVID-19 and the ongoing humanitarian crisis following the fall of the government to the Taliban in August 2021. The prolonged confinement, rise in poverty and unemployment, and weakness of healthcare systems increase the likelihood of encountering VAW.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to intimate partner violence (IPV), VAW can take many forms and includes physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, threats, coercion, taking away someone's right to make decisions, and economic deprivation – both inside and outside of the home.

These forms of violence are intimately linked with women's overall wellbeing, including their physical health, mental health, financial security, and capacity to participate in their community and society.

Women for Women International gathered qualitative and quantitative data from 2019 to 2021 to learn about VAW in communities where we work in Afghanistan, inform our programming and elevate relevant policy recommendations that will support actors across the development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding triple nexus to end violence for all women, everywhere, and especially in crises.



**Violence against women and its complex, long-lasting and multi-dimensional consequences undermine the achievement of women's rights and the successful delivery of the SDGs and WPS agenda.**

*(Cited from Women for Women International's "Unheard. Unseen. - A Global Agenda for Action")*

## Methodology

Since 2002, Women for Women International has reached over 127,000 women across five provinces in Afghanistan through its programs. This brief was developed following multiple qualitative and quantitative research activities including:

- In-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) in 2019 with 12 community leaders and 40 community members, men and women, on their attitudes towards and knowledge of VAW in their communities.
- With men and women, community leaders and community members on their attitudes towards and prevalence of VAW.
- Key informant interviews with 22 participants across 13 provinces in May 2020 to learn about impacts of COVID-19.
- Phone surveys with 80 former participants in November 2021 to learn about their lived realities following the regime change.

There is substantial evidence showing that violence against women generally increases during all types of crises and conflict – be they militant, economic, environmental, health, or political. This policy briefing from Women for Women International builds on this body of evidence by contributing context-specific data on both prevalence and attitudes over a unique three-year period in Afghanistan.

## Context: Afghanistan and Violence Against Women

After 2001, the Afghan government made considerable strides toward promoting women's rights, notably affirming gender equality via Article 22 in the Constitution, implementing a Presidential decree on the Elimination of Violence Against Women in 2009 –reconfirmed in 2018– and founding several Departments of Women's Affairs and Gender. These national laws built upon an extensive global normative framework underpinning the effort to end VAW, most notably the 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women,<sup>10</sup> which was the first international instrument explicitly addressing VAW as well as General Recommendations 12 and 19 of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).<sup>11</sup>

However, the implementation and socialization of these laws yielded mixed results and much pushback, with no significant reduction in the prevalence of VAW.<sup>12</sup> Opponents of gender equality argued that these laws are at odds with Article 3 of the Constitution which states that no law which contradicts the tenets of Islam shall be passed. Others dismissed the laws as tokenistic measures forced upon Afghanistan by western governments and donors, even while women in Afghanistan themselves argued for the importance and upholding of those same laws.<sup>13</sup>

With the Taliban back at the helm of the government as of August 15th, 2021, the previously referenced women and gender ministries were disbanded. Women are already less visible, more restricted in mobility, and less able to access local support services.<sup>14</sup> The Taliban's acting Minister of Justice announced in September 2021 that "The Islamic Emirate will implement the constitution of the era of former King Mohammad Zahir Shah for the interim period without any content that conflicts with Islamic Sharia and the principles of the Islamic Emirate. Moreover, international laws and instruments which are not in conflict with the principles of Sharia and the Islamic Emirate will be respected, as well."<sup>15</sup>

However, there have been no explicit commitments to the two former Presidential decrees on ending VAW nor to the relevant global frameworks and international laws.

On September 17th, 2021, the United Nations Security Council unanimously approved a resolution calling for the Taliban to create an inclusive government that has "the full, equal and meaningful participation of women" and upholds human rights.<sup>16</sup> This resolution reflects the international community's widespread disappointment in the composition of the interim Taliban government which includes few ethnic minorities and no women. Though the Taliban has declared that it will establish an inclusive government, there continue to be no women or minorities in government as of January 2022 and many Taliban leaders hold the position that no foreign entity should dictate the selection of its Cabinet.<sup>17</sup>

On December 3rd, 2021, the Commission for Cultural Affairs of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan released a Special Decree on Women's Rights, which focused on a woman's right to consent to marriage or re-marriage, banned the practice of giving girls in marriage to settle debts or disputes, asserted a widow's rights to inheritance, and decreed women's rights within a "multi-marriage" (where a man has more than one wife).<sup>18</sup> The decree included no provisions for a woman's rights outside of her roles as a wife or widow, particularly a right to education or work outside the home, and notably made no claim to a woman's equality in any individual, household, or community capacity. The special decree also makes no reference to rights or redress for women who experience violence.

In addition to the uncertainty of women's rights and representations within the new de facto government's legal frameworks, the ongoing and worsening humanitarian, economic and food crises in Afghanistan exacerbate the underlying conditions and drivers for VAW.

Women for Women International's team of staff within Afghanistan and UN Women's Gender Alert both cite a rise in child marriage as a negative coping strategy being used in response to food and economic insecurity. Families have been selling their children –predominantly girl children– to both reduce the number of mouths to feed at home and for additional income to meet basic needs.

In addition to the effect that the country's rising economic insecurity on women's economic deprivation, evidence suggests that household financial insecurity is linked to increased IPV. Decision-makers and powerholders in the international community must do more to support response to and prevention of VAW as a matter of urgent lifesaving assistance in Afghanistan.

## Recommendations Summary

### 1) Humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding sector stakeholders should increase and enhance coordination, localization, and partnerships to end GBV and support survivors in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

#### Coordination

- A) Governments and international organizations must incorporate and prioritize funding for GBV risk mitigation across all the triple nexus' response strategies.
- B) International community should continue its support to the health system during and post-conflict, prioritizing women's health care and referral systems for GBV.
- C) Prioritize violence prevention and recovery –acknowledging the increased risk of many types of violence affecting women and vulnerable groups during times of crisis– by categorizing protection and response services as lifesaving, essential, and non-negotiable as part of aid and security responses.
- D) Governments and agencies must strengthen the ability of non-specialist mental health and psycho-social support actors to deliver psychological first aid as part of the current humanitarian response.

- E) UN agencies, governments and international organizations must strengthen accountability to existing global frameworks of protection as a cross-sectoral mandate to support implementation of GBV prevention and social norms change strategies so that even the most marginalized communities are aware of their rights to protection and redress.

#### Localization and Partnerships

- A) Prioritize partnerships with local women's rights organizations (WROs) providing services to survivors, especially in Afghanistan where women are restricted to same-sex engagement with service providers and face limited mobility to seek out support services outside the home.
- B) Services delivered should include context-adapted sexual and reproductive health services, access to justice, mental health and psycho-social support, the creation of safe spaces, economic empowerment, and community sensitization and mobilization to challenge stigma and discrimination.

- C) Within these partnerships with local WROs in Afghanistan, donors demonstrate active and consistent partnership by:
- Absorbing perceived risk in financial transactions that cover staff salaries and other budgeted activities that may be taxed by the Taliban Government; and
  - Offering flexibility in such partnerships for the creative adaptations necessary to continue their work within the complex and ever-shifting operating environment.

## 2) Donors must invest in integrated, survivor-centered, and localized approaches that:

- A) Address root causes and community norms and support context-specific redress and support mechanisms:  
An integrated and survivor-centered approach –which emphasizes women’s economic power as well as norms change– is necessary to address root causes of violence against women and achieve tangible change in the daily lives of women. This type of holistic graduation model is one we have developed and led over the past 26 years to support women to heal, thrive, and take ownership of their futures, even within the most challenging conflict settings.
- B) Emphasize and fund partnerships for practically accessible support resources for women including community-based protection mechanisms, strengthened referrals systems and direct services for GBV survivors.
- C) Support ongoing engagement with prospective allies and champions including men, family members, and community members. Funding should support women advocates, male champions, formal and non-formal groups to broker community-level agreements with government and traditional power holders.

Grow and strengthen community-based organizations, networks, and groups to develop community- and survivor-led strategies and priorities for preventing VAW and supporting survivors.

## 3) International governments and multilateral institutions should pursue all avenues to safeguard the rights of Afghan women and girls including:

- A) Ensuring humanitarian and development aid contains specific provisions and conditions allowing women aid workers to support the specific needs of women and girls and mitigating and responding to ongoing conflict and violence across the country.
- B) Sustained pressure from the international community for the Afghanistan Government’s commitment to ‘inclusivity’ to include a formal recommitment to international legal frameworks which prohibit violence against women and children, an expansion on the current decree for women’s rights, and including women in the government.
- C) Negotiate for explicit protections by the government for women and services for women rather than relying on the promise that certain freedoms for women are ‘not banned’. Without explicit protections and laws, the chilling effect within communities leads to de facto restrictions on such freedoms or mobility, as it is risky for women unless they are specifically protected by law.
- D) Women must be permitted and supported to staff health and community centers to provide support to GBV survivors who are often women and children, restricted to same-gender interactions by social norms.

## Findings

### ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS: VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

In the interviews conducted in 2019 on community attitudes toward VAW, interviewers and facilitators in Afghanistan focused on attitudes about VAW, common forms of VAW (physical violence, marital rape and sexual violence, economic deprivation, and harmful traditional practices), ways to respond to incidents of violence, and resources available for survivors. While many community leaders interviewed in 2019 stressed some positive changes regarding VAW, others still held harmful attitudes towards women displayed in previous data collections, indicating there is still a long way to go in terms of transforming attitudes and experiences of VAW. Supplemental data gathered in May 2020 and November 2021 illustrate how COVID-19 and the Taliban takeover of the government reinforced root causes and drivers of violence, elevated patriarchal attitudes, and raised rates of VAW, as specified in the sections below.

#### 1. Physical Violence

In-depth interviews with local male council members in 2019 revealed that VAW occurs regularly in these communities and is often viewed as normal. In fact, most male council members said it is normal for a woman to be beaten for minor mistakes. A woman council member countered that while men do beat women for certain mistakes that they believe are a woman's fault, she would not describe VAW as 'normal' in the community.



**A husband usually beats his wife when she is reasoning with him, doing arguments, talking loudly, not following traditional clothes/costumes or going outside home without prior permission from husband. In such cases, she makes her husband to lose temper and beat her.**

*(Local Council Member, Female)*

A female teacher similarly confirmed that men beat their wives for perceived mistakes and held the view that it is a woman's responsibility to avoid "provoking" a beating from her husband.

Nearly all community members interviewed cited drug-addiction and illiteracy as the main reasons that a husband might beat his wife for "no reason." This was a common point of emphasis among interviewees in describing the prevalence of marital rape and economic deprivation as well.



**Yes, husband gets angry and beats his wife if the food is burnt or she comes late at home. Most of such behavior is done by illiterate husband whose literacy level is low. Majority of men beat their wives for no reason, and most of them who beat their wives are heroin addicted.**

*(Teacher, Female)*

Female community leaders less readily accepted that there are “mistakes” such as disrespecting elders or going outside without permission that could ever justify a beating.

“**No, it is not good. He is not doing good job if beating his wife nor it is his right to do so.**”

*(Female Community Leader)*

However, this view was not universal, and some women community leaders shared the same view as male leaders that the burden of avoiding a beating fell to the woman. Most men participating in focus group discussions (FGDs) shared their view that VAW for any reason was a relic of the past and did not occur anymore, whereas about half of the women in FGDs stated that they had heard of recent occurrences of physical violence happening in their communities. Despite general acknowledgment of occurrences of VAW within the women’s FGDs, women shared mixed views on whether they believed it was “normal” for men to beat women for minor mistakes.

“**Yes, it is normal. They are not mature; they do not consider the issue but know beating women only.**”

*(Woman, FGD participant)*

Additional data collected gathered by Women for Women International in Afghanistan between 2020-2021 indicated a worsening of these trends. Evidence gathered during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic indicated a global rise in gender-based violence, including VAW, particularly due to the ways the pandemic and its lockdowns created or compounded economic and social stressors. In research conducted in May 2020 by Women for Women International and the Afghan Women’s Resource Center (AWRC), with the support of Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS), participants shared that the measures undertaken to contain the COVID-19 outbreak -along with

economic concerns, stress, and cramped living conditions contributed to spikes in violence at home.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, isolation caused by lockdown measures not only increased the risk of experiencing violence, but also made it more difficult and dangerous for women to seek help.

In phone surveys conducted in November 2021, women participating in Women for Women International’s programs reported shifts in key drivers of IPV, including economic instability, loss of labor for themselves and their male family members, and limited mobility and access to networks. The survey did not ask about specific instances of violence out of safety concerns for women participating in the phone call from their homes with their families. However, women reported that the lack of economic activities, labor, and employment has led to all family members staying at home, increased depression, and to a “deterioration [in] our relationship.”

These findings highlight the worsening of conditions that are known risk factors for increases in IPV.

## 2. Marital Rape

Community leaders and members were also asked about marital rape, where the husband forces his wife to have sex even when she doesn’t consent. A female Community Leader confirmed the practice and that “they do it because they feel superior and do not consider their wives’ issues or the reason of denial.” Most male council members said that the practice is not normal. One member shared the common sentiment that intercourse between a husband and wife is “secret”, suggesting this type of VAW may not be openly discussed, which would make it difficult to track.

“**No. We have not heard of such incidents yet. And we do not know about husband wife’s secrets.**”

*(Local Council Member, Male)*

Women indicated that it was normal, but also expressed that women should not reject or deny sex without a “valid reason.” This is consistent with religious references that are interpreted by some community members to mean that a woman cannot reject her husband’s request for sex.

Overall, while most men indicated that it was not normal for a man to demand or force sex from his wife, most of the women expressed that it was indeed a normal practice.

### 3. Rape

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The overwhelming consensus across the community members and leaders was that women continue to be blamed or negatively perceived in cases of rape. Men and women in the discussion groups explained that many people question the reasons behind a woman’s rape or accuse her of having an affair, dressing indecently, and generally provoking men to rape. There are cases in which women are told they deserved to be raped:

“**People in our community blame the girl only. They even consider her deserv(ing) of rape...But they do not see that the (rapist) man is to be blamed.**”

*(Female Community Leader)*

There was the most consensus from community members around the community attitudes that continue to blame and punish women who are raped. Only one community member claimed that men were blamed by the community in instances of rape.

Survey findings from November 2021 suggest that new restrictions on women’s mobility and rights inside and outside the home would exacerbate the existing stigma surrounding rape and reduce survivors’ access to justice or support.

“**In rape cases, boys are usually blamed because girls are weak and it is considered that girls are usually very serious about their prestige and dignity.**”

*(Local Council Member, Female)*

One-third of women participating in the November 2021 phone survey noted that their personal safety had worsened, and one quarter of women highlighted their personal isolation as a concern post-August 2021.

Women for Women International’s 2019 qualitative research had already shown that social norms created a disincentive for women to report rape and often yielded more consequences for rape victims rather than rapists. Our 2021 research showed that women’s personal safety is now worsening and that their ability to reach out for support, health services, and justice in cases of rape or other abuses are suppressed by new norms that make it dangerous for women to be out in public at all.

### 4. Economic Deprivation

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“**When a man is jobless or has no money, he starts taking money from his wife and does not give it to her.**”

*(Local Council Member, Male)*

Not only are wives seen as men’s property, but their incomes are too. This control of women’s property and income leaves women at an economically and socially disadvantaged position if they wish to speak up about abuse.<sup>23</sup>



Some community members and leaders shared their perception that men only took their wives' income in the unique instances that the men were 'jobless' or 'illiterate'. Despite their perception that economic deprivation was a unique occurrence, community members did not outrightly state that they felt women should be able to spend income independent of their husband's permission or consent.

In our November 2021 survey, 100% of women reported that their household financial situation had deteriorated and that they did not have enough to eat either some or much of the time.

Over half of women reported there was no household income and 45% of women reported losses or decreases in their household business. At the individual level, 98% of women reported being unable to participate in any economic activity outside of their homes where previously they were able to participate in Women for Women International's vocational training, some business activities, and in community savings and loan groups.



**In our community, it is normal that husband controls his wife's money and income.**

*(Local Council Member, Male)*

The conditions prior to the Taliban takeover of government already supported community attitudes which condoned the economic deprivation of women. The subsequent economic crisis and loss of income for women suggests that women have even less control and access to money and are thus disproportionately impacted by the humanitarian crisis affecting the country.

## CUSTOMS VERSUS LAWS

Though many fragile and conflict-affected states have laws, institutions and policies that seek to prevent GBV, protect women's rights, and foster their progress these can be symbolic, lacking enforcement, and weakened by conflict. Further, marginalized women typically lack the means or information necessary to access such mechanisms, and their ability to do so is also mediated by their families or customary institutions.<sup>24</sup>

At the global level, agendas and frameworks largely fail to prioritise needs of women in FCAS due to a systemic lack of representation from women's advocates and collectives.<sup>25</sup> Analysed via the 'Social Transformative' approach used by the Netherlands government, the intersecting exclusions faced by marginalized women in FCAS are rooted in patriarchal power asymmetries that favor men and oppress women.<sup>26</sup>

These gendered inequalities of power are held in place by formal mechanisms (laws, policies, and resource allocations) and informal mechanisms (cultural norms and practices) that have a profound impact on women's individual and systemic access to opportunities, rights, and entitlements.<sup>27</sup> Sometimes articulated as gender norms (values, beliefs, customs), these informal mechanisms are entrenched in culture, operating at the systemic, community, and individual levels.<sup>28</sup> For example, nationwide statistics from the Population Reference Bureau show that 92% of Afghan women believe a husband can justify beating his wife in at least one of these cases: she goes out without telling him, refuses sex, burns the food, or neglects the children.<sup>29</sup> This trend emerged in our findings, as well, with women and men alike expressing justifications for physical violence and economic deprivation.

While former Afghan law generally condemned VAW,<sup>30</sup> participants expressed that tradition and community leaders still play a major role in determining men's behavior and societal opinions. Community members felt that they should comply with the national law over local norms and traditions. However, they also admitted that not everyone felt that way and many were not even aware of the laws governing VAW and harmful gender practices.

This confusion surrounding the prevailing laws is likely to increase as the new de facto government slowly develops and rolls out a new legal framework and constitution. There is already inconsistency in the rollout of policies at the national and provincial levels which may translate to further uncertainty around compliance. Additionally, the de facto government has resisted offering explicit protections for women outside of its recent Special Decree only made vague commitments to uphold women's rights within the parameters of Islam.

The lack of explicit protections and rights has led to a chilling effect where individuals default to increased restriction on women's rights and mobility; 98% of women interviewed in November 2021 reported increased restrictions on their freedoms. People are erring on the side of excessive caution and restrictions due to the fear that –without explicit protection for certain activities– women or their families would be punished for actions which are not yet explicitly prohibited, but are not explicitly permitted.<sup>31</sup>

The cultural domain of harmful gender norms and customs is particularly resistant to change, even when a government is committed to enacting and implementing formal policies or laws to address them.<sup>32</sup> Thus, any attempts to reduce VAW must catalyse transformational change in power relations –especially cultural norms and practices– that reinforce women's unequal status and limited access to rights and resources. In Afghanistan's current context, the international community will have an outsized role to play in requiring women's participation and explicit, rights-based protections by the national government.

“**No, in our community men do not take money from their wives, yet they underestimate women. They do not believe in women if they can also be a source of income for their families.**”

*(Teacher, Female)*

## COMMUNITY RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

Cultural norms and practices also play an important role in determining which VAW prevention and support services are most effective in each community's unique context –if and when those services are available at all.

Services in Afghanistan are heavily concentrated within urban areas over rural communities and are severely underfunded, hindering women's access to safety. In their Gender Alert for Afghanistan, UN Women highlighted that COVID-19 has significantly reduced utilization of VAW services such as helplines, police and justice response, counselling, and even healthcare. In addition to and likely compounded by challenges in access to services, even before the pandemic, only 20% of victims of VAW sought help.<sup>33</sup>

Community leaders and teachers play an important role in combatting VAW in Afghanistan, but our findings indicate that many of these actors continue to accept certain types of violence and blame women for provoking men to be violent in the first place. Male community leaders continue to justify beating a woman if she is perceived as disrespecting her family elders or husband.

Local council leaders were most adamant about the unacceptability of wife beating and noted that they would ensure the woman receives support and that the dispute was resolved. A male local council member even asserted that they would refer the issue to the “directorate of women's affairs.”<sup>34</sup>

Nonetheless, a majority of community leaders still advise women to be careful and to try not to anger their husbands to avoid violence and encourage resolution within the family rather than through government or social services. Community members and leaders primarily identified village elders, Imams, and the couple's families as the primary points of contact for resolving issues of VAW. “The best option is the family's elder because he knows better about their concerns and solutions. If he did not succeed, it should be referred to government”, voiced a local council member.



**A woman can use such resources to get their support for her rights although such steps are rarely taken by women in villages.** ”

*(Man, Community Member)*

Several women in the community explained that reporting issues outside the family leads to societal scrutiny, as VAW is considered a private matter that should be discussed within the household. Others believe that many women do not seek help from NGOs because they cannot easily access their offices from villages and rural areas, and because their husbands don't allow them to go. A woman confessed during a focus group discussion that “men do not allow their women to go outside in such cases even though they face challenges; they have to tolerate the situation. If she still goes outside her home to seek others' help, it is considered a shame for her family.”



**In our community it was normal for a man to beat his wife or daughter for mistakes like coming late to home or burning food, but not now. However, in case they disrespect the elders of the family or a wife does not respect her husband, they are beaten.** ”

*(Male Community Leader)*

When it comes to rape, community members widely shared that the woman is seen as the culprit for “the defamation of entire clan/village's prestige”, pointing to the social scrutiny women must face if they come forward about their experiences of sexual assault outside the home.

Following being raped, “the girl's family does not accept her anymore nor do they allow her to come home.” In an extremely worrisome account, a man said that “the girl's family compels the man to propose to the raped girl for marriage; otherwise, the girl's family will kill both.”

Indeed, the Taliban sees no difference between rape and *zina*, or extramarital sexual intercourse, for which a woman can be deemed at fault.

These damaging norms and the culture of fear prevent women from seeking redress, support, or justice. Women are not only blamed or maligned if they are raped, but male council members noted that they may even be beaten by their own families or killed if accused of *zina*. Furthermore, community women expressed that marital rape is normal, notably in forced marriages, where “women are treated like animals.” This is consistent with trends of honor killings and forced marriages in cases of rape to save family honor in patriarchal societies.<sup>35,36</sup>

Community leaders were able to cite long lists of people, organizations, or resources available to support women, such as village elders, village agents, community council, women's affairs office, human rights office, government organizations, NGOs, police, and court/legal authorities. Despite mentioning numerous formal structures, some women community leaders also felt the best option was to first seek support through traditional channels such as family or village elders, and to only seek formal support if the situation could not be resolved or accepted.



**If my choice, I would have shared it with my father first and then would have asked my parents' permission to solve the issue through a legal and safe ways where none of us are harmed.** ”

*(Female Community Leader)*

Women in focus group discussions confided a mix of hope and hopelessness in changing the acceptability of accessing resources. Women themselves cited the same list of support resources and organizations that community leaders did:

“**On village level, community council, human rights office, religious scholar or community council, court and or other legislative institutions and district governor’s office are available to help victim women.**”

*(Woman, Community Member)*

However, under the new government, local Taliban leaders and local religious leaders are the key decision-makers and many of these resources or support centers cited previously by women have been decommissioned or disbanded.

The new decision-makers are guided solely by sharia law which offers little recourse and redress for women since there has been no recommitment to any legal frameworks which would criminalize VAW and supplement a sharia interpretation of such practices in the community.

The August 2021 change in government and growing economic crisis has significantly compounded challenges of service availability and access at the community level.

In addition to compounding pre-existing challenges in community response and services, 91% of women interviewed in November 2021 reported a greater need for psychosocial support than before August 2021. Only 5% of women reported receiving assistance of any kind – government, non-governmental, aid, etc. - over the same period.

Women’s gaps in knowledge of services in 2019 interviews and FGDs similarly demonstrated unmet need for accessible and safe support for women survivors.



## Hopes for the Future

Our research and conversations with community members illustrated widespread acceptability of VAW in the community and limited options for recourse. However, when asked about the progress being made to reduce VAW, community members and leaders were optimistic. They cited the progress made in reducing child marriage and increases in girl's education.



**Compared to past, we see very positive changes in women's situation, violence against women has been decreased but not controlled. The positive change is, for example, before child marriage was normal but now it is controlled.**

*(Male Community Leader)*

Generally, where community members noted progress, they also noted that there was room to do more and do better to reduce VAW.



**Changes are seen but they are not enough.**

*(Woman, Community Member)*

The August 2021 Taliban takeover of Kabul has already yielded drastic shifts in policies and social norms. The de facto government's restrictions on women's rights threaten both the optimism and appetite for reforming laws and shifting norms to eliminate VAW.

In November 2021 surveys, women conveyed their anxiety and depression related to the economic and food crisis, and also due to their isolation from society. In addition to gaps in support services for women experiencing violence, women are experiencing psychosocial, and economic problems but they don't know who to contact or how to make contact under the current conditions. Over 90% of women interviewed reported having a greater need for psychosocial support as they face an unknown future, depressed families, and no income-generating activities. They say that everyone is concerned for their future, and especially for girls' education and their rights.

VAW is a deep-rooted and complex threat to women in FCAS. The recommendations set forth in this policy brief address the role for actors at all levels in ending VAW, and emphasize the need for coordinated, holistic programming and context-specific, community-driven protection and support services. Even as Afghanistan faces a humanitarian crisis and threats against the gains made in policies and laws enshrining their rights, Afghan women continue to stand up and declare that the past twenty years of progress "are not enough."<sup>37</sup> It is incumbent upon the international community to stand with Afghan women and ensure their voices and experiences do not become afterthoughts in the response to Afghanistan's humanitarian and human rights crises.

Afghan women's experiences and their participation should be central to the global efforts to eliminate VAW and achieve gender equality even amidst crises and conflict.

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# Get in touch

**For our Global Policy and Advocacy Team,  
please contact:**

[advocacy@womenforwomen.org](mailto:advocacy@womenforwomen.org)

**US Office:**

[www.womenforwomen.org](http://www.womenforwomen.org)

**UK Office:**

[www.womenforwomen.org.uk](http://www.womenforwomen.org.uk)

**Germany Office:**

[www.womenforwomeninternational.de](http://www.womenforwomeninternational.de)



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