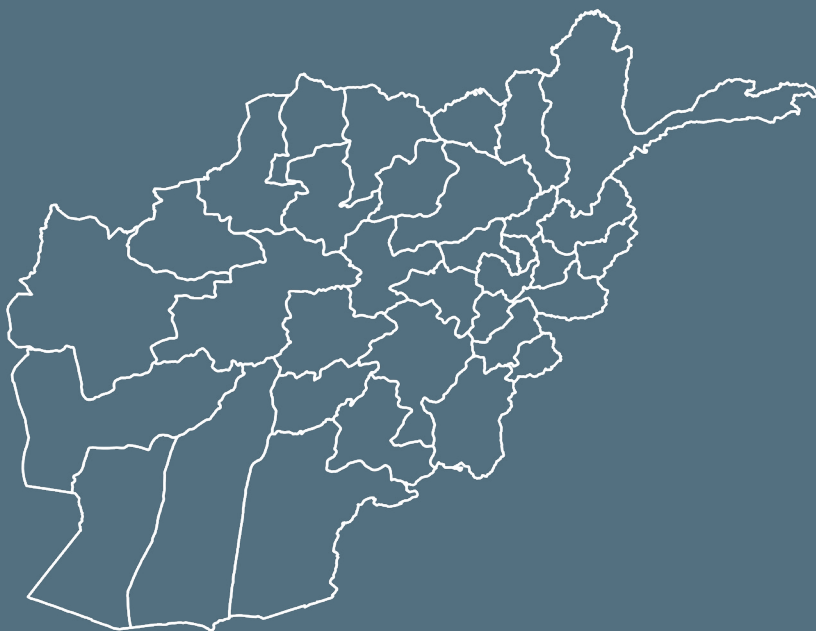


“Only a woman can understand another woman.”

Perceptions on aid in Afghanistan after the bans on women aid workers

Afghanistan • June 2023



GROUND TRUTH
SOLUTIONS

Salma:
consulting *سالمه*

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Executive summary

Women and girls are increasingly being excluded from public space in Afghanistan. Since the Taliban took over as de facto authorities in August 2021, they have imposed a long list of restrictions on women's movement, activities, and rights, making it increasingly challenging for women to access humanitarian aid. The recent bans on women aid workers in December 2022¹ and April 2023² have left many women completely cut off from humanitarian assistance. But even before, organisations were struggling to reach women effectively.

Ground Truth Solutions (GTS) and Salma Consulting, supported by UN Women through the Gender in Humanitarian Action (GiHA) Working Group, spoke to almost 4,000 women and men living in Afghanistan. Two rounds of household surveys and focus group discussions took place in October–December 2022 and February–March 2023. In these conversations, we collected communities' views on how aid is provided, how gender norms and restrictions affect access to humanitarian assistance, and the extent to which aid takes into account the distinct needs and social norms of women and men in Afghanistan.

We collected our second round of data after the nationwide ban on women non-governmental organisation (NGO) workers, but just before this ban was extended to Afghan women working for the United Nations. The findings provide timely insight into the perceptions of women accessing aid without the availability of women aid workers. Understanding access barriers for women and what communities think should happen can help humanitarians engage and reach women and girls with vital assistance.

This report provides an overview of our most important findings. For additional breakdowns, please contact the [research teams](#) at Ground Truth Solutions and Salma Consulting.

Main findings

- There is a stark rise in people who say their needs are not met, and women highlight that they cannot access aid from women. Apart from these two exceptions there are no major differences in perceptions of aid in this round compared to the first round of data collection before the ban on women working for NGOs. It is important to note that women were often excluded from aid and engagement even before the ban. Men most need cash, food assistance, and education, while women mention the need for items such as clothes and sewing machines as well. People remain unsatisfied with how humanitarian organisations select people to receive aid. Concerns include inappropriate selection criteria, corruption, community leaders recommending their relatives, and the failure to use women's knowledge to identify other vulnerable women in the community.
- Women generally feel safe accessing aid, but have concerns about distances, physical transportation, and associated costs. After the ban, they are additionally concerned about the absence of women aid distributors, which increases stress and anxiety. Women mention instances of verbal abuse at distribution sites. Men NGO staff and women all say they feel discomfort and concern about their security when engaging with one another during humanitarian aid distribution and follow-up. Men feel less safe accessing aid and those living in central and south-eastern Afghanistan feel least safe. The

¹ BBC News. December 2022. "[Afghanistan: Taliban ban women from working for NGOs](#)".

² Aljazeera. April 2023. "[UN says its female staffers banned from working in Afghanistan](#)".

vast majority of women and most men are against the ban, which they believe results in vulnerable women missing out on aid and a decrease in foreign aid.

- Women's specific needs are unmet by humanitarian aid. Humanitarian organisations rarely provide gender-specific aid – such as menstrual hygiene resources, nappies, and baby formula. Men do not always know the needs of women and girls and as such are not an appropriate source of information. Women say that they are most aware of the variety of support their households need. They want to be asked about their households' most urgent needs, especially if cash is not provided.
- Households seek more long-term support to strengthen household resilience. People want assistance to help them earn an income. The only option that many people have to meet their households' needs is to adopt harmful coping mechanisms, from taking loans to sending children to work or letting daughters marry early. Aid can help prevent this. The use of coping mechanisms has become more extreme as aid packages have become smaller in recent months.
- Both men and women find women providing feedback through male family members most suitable. They also support women-to-women channels;³ around half of the men and women we spoke with say that women should provide feedback to other women in their community. Hotlines remain unpopular, people prefer to speak face-to-face. Women and older people, especially those living in rural areas, lack access to phones.
- Communities are motivated to help ensure vulnerable women benefit from aid. This can include selecting women from their community to support organisations to engage with women in the community, and allocating men to collect aid on behalf of women who could otherwise not access aid. Gaps in aid that is responsive to the specific differences and varying needs of women and men predate the ban on women in NGOs. Organisations often lack the capacity, knowledge, and resources to adequately design and implement such programming.

³ These include all-women community meetings, women reporting to women leaders, and women talking to other women on the phone.

Recommendations

In line with commitments to ensure aid is sensitive to gender differences and takes steps to address them, these recommendations aim to support humanitarian actors and donors to better include and work with women and girls. They are rooted in community perceptions presented here and in our previous report⁴ and are supplemented by existing literature on Afghanistan's current context and insights from the "Gender-responsive research and data collection" training held by Salma Consulting and Ground Truth Solutions in March 2023.

Recommendations for implementing organisations

- Provide aid that responds to the specific needs of women and girls, such as pre-, ante- and post-natal care. Designing and implementing this customised assistance requires consulting them at every stage of programming, since they know their needs and the needs of their household best.
- In the absence of women aid workers in several places, draw on existing local resources to engage with women and girls. This might include:
 - allocating trusted members of the community to collect aid on women's behalf;
 - selecting trusted or elected women representatives from within the community to be liaisons between women and aid organisations;
 - liaising with local women's civil society organisations;
 - engaging with community leaders, men, and women to identify vulnerable women.
- Rely on women to select the most vulnerable women in their community. To do so, pair younger, educated women with older women in the community. Both men and women support this approach and highlight the importance of women's inclusion in the selection process, as they better understand other women's needs and vulnerabilities.

"The women know who the poor women are; the men don't think about women or know who is deserving and who is not. Only a woman can understand another woman; she knows a woman's heart. Women are best placed to establish which women are poor. The women from our community know this." – Woman, Faryab

- Tailor feedback mechanisms to each targeted community to ensure people can provide feedback in a way that is safe, accessible, and culturally appropriate to them. Do not expect people, especially women, to have phones in rural communities.
 - For rural communities:
 - Allocate resources for systematic face-to-face conversations with affected people.
 - Identify women community representatives to collect feedback from women.
 - Provide mobile phones to trusted community members who can identify women who receive or need aid; entrust this community member with setting up feedback calls to ensure women's inclusion.

These recommendations reflect community pragmatism and are rooted in current societal rules and norms. We respect that communities are well-placed to advise on how aid programming should adapt to their current situation and be provided in a way that ensures their safety and security.

What is gender-responsiveness?



Gender-responsive aid provision means that humanitarian workers intentionally employ gender considerations in the design, implementation and outcome of programmes and policies. Gender-responsive programmes reflect girls' and women's contextual experiences, realities, and needs. This means paying attention to the unique needs of women and girls and valuing their perspectives, respecting these experiences and understanding the differences they experience compared with men and boys.

⁴ Ground Truth Solutions and Salma Consulting. February 2023. "[Against the odds: strengthening accountability to women and girls in Afghanistan](#)".

- For urban communities:
 - Rely less on collecting feedback through informal mechanisms, such as personal networks.
 - Allocate resources for systematic face-to-face conversations with affected people.
 - Ensure people can contact aid providers by phone.
- Create work for communities so they no longer rely on aid and can support themselves and their families. In the meantime, involve communities in aid provision and delivery, to create a source of income; or establish cash for work projects to create assets in the community.

Recommendations for coordination groups and their members

- Establish and operationalise guidelines and policies that recognise and account for the differences between men and women in order to provide more equitable and culturally appropriate aid. This could include:
 - Training all staff on providing aid in a way that understands and addresses differences between men and women;
 - Implementing policies, codes of conduct, and guidelines that consider and address gender differences that build on existing materials but are contextualised to the unique situation in Afghanistan;
 - Mandating the use of gender-responsive indicators⁵ in the design and monitoring of programmes.
- Continue to advocate for local exemptions to ensure that women be included in training, capacity building, and professional growth opportunities in the workplace, despite the ban. This could include:
 - Supporting women through online learning;
 - Ensuring women have the resources to work from home;
 - Continuing to include women in all decisions, discussions, and operations (even if they are joining remotely, see [this section](#));
 - Using indicators and reporting as a means to hold organisational leadership and men staff accountable for including women staff in all operations.

Recommendations for donors

- Use international status to engage with the de facto authorities to advocate for principled aid that will increase donor confidence.
- Use funding obligations, indicators, and reporting as a means to hold organisational leadership and men staff accountable for including women staff in all operations.
- Mandate the inclusion of women's voices and participation in all studies, research, and monitoring and evaluation efforts. Continue to provide organisations with flexibility over how they collect the information.
- Include the requirement of gender-responsive guidelines, practices, and policies in proposals to hold organisations accountable for strengthening their own internal approaches to gender mainstreaming.

⁵ UNDP. January 2020. "[Gender-responsive indicators](#)".

Introduction

Since Afghanistan's regime change in August 2021, humanitarian and development actors have frequently reported its impact on women. These reports focus on women's jobs, access to basic services, and their involvement in civil society. The reports have shown some common trends, but they have also caused confusion about how humanitarian and development organisations should continue their work to support women.⁶

The Afghanistan Analyst Network's recent research on the ban on women aid workers summarises the current conditions for women working in humanitarian aid and explains the conflict between the de facto authorities and humanitarian organisations:

"Anyone who lived in Afghanistan during the first Islamic Emirate will find the current stand-off between the Taliban and NGOs (including the UN) over the issue of women working familiar. There is the same clashing of principles: the Emirates' position that women must largely be kept inside the home to avoid the risk of social disorder and sin, and the humanitarians' that the equitable and effective delivery of aid is impossible without women workers. The choices on the humanitarian side also feel familiar, and all unattractive: comply, boycott or fudge."⁷

The discussion of how humanitarian workers should provide aid in the current context is heated. The Afghanistan Analyst Network outlines four rather unattractive options for NGOs to deal with the ban on women aid workers:

- Comply and use an all-men workforce;
- Establish informal exemptions through local networks and communities;
- Continue working with women, irrespective of the ban;
- Boycott and do not provide aid at all.

However, in the media and online, people often oversimplify the discussion by promoting a binary choice of either complying or suspending all programmes. The camps are quick to judge each other. Complying with the ban raises concerns that it could become a long-term norm,⁸ while suspending aid would leave Afghans without necessary assistance.⁹



This puts pressure on NGOs to make compromises and negotiate access with de facto authorities to provide aid in a way they can justify to communities and the aid community. Some organisations have explored integrating their work into the education and public health sectors as a way to involve women. While this may be beneficial in some cases, it can also strain the education and public health sectors and put them under the risk of forces closure if they are expected to extend their reach beyond their capacities.

Who we talked to




1,855 people through face-to-face quantitative surveys and 40 people in nine focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs).

Quantitative sample (n=1,855)



Gender

-  **857** (46%) women
-  **998** (54%) men



Age

-  **711** (38%) 18-34 years old
-  **545** (30%) 35-44 years old
-  **599** (32%) 45+ years old





Aid received

-  **1,080** (58%) yes
-  **775** (42%) no




Disability status

-  **359** (19%) persons with disabilities
-  **1,496** (81%) no disability




Status

-  **1,434** (77%) host community
-  **286** (16%) IDPs
-  **56** (3%) refugees
-  **76** (4%) returnees

Qualitative sample (n=9)

-  **3** women-only FGDs
-  **3** men-only FGDs
-  **3** community leader IDIs

Location

-  Paktia
-  Faryab
-  Logar

⁶ See page 4 of this report for a definition of gender-responsive aid provision.

⁷ Afghanistan Analyst Network. April 2023. "Bans on Women Working Then and Now: The Dilemmas of Delivering Humanitarian Aid During the First and Second Islamic Emirates".

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

Gaps in research themes

There are gaps in the research conducted so far. While valuable insight has been gathered about women working in civil society, the focus has been disproportionate. Most recent research has relied on phone interviews, interviews with women working for NGOs, and interviews with representatives of women's civil society organisations. These sources may not provide a representative overview of what the Afghan population as a whole thinks about the current situation. One significant gap is the lack of qualitative narratives from families, particularly women, girls, and marginalised groups like housewives, widows, small business owners, ethnic minorities, and women with disabilities. The voices of these individuals, including controversially, men, are crucial for making decisions about women, but they have been somewhat excluded from existing studies.

To address these gaps, Ground Truth Solutions and Salma Consulting set out to gain a better understanding of the implications of the ban on women in NGOs and how the prolonged humanitarian crisis specifically affects women and girls.

Contextual analysis

The far-reaching consequences of the regime change: impact on women, NGOs, and civil society in Afghanistan

Impact of the regime change on women and girls

The GiHA Working Group, UN Women, and CARE found in their rapid gender analysis that 91% of women surveyed in October 2022 felt their lives had changed since the regime change in 2021. Women were particularly vocal about the harmful social norms that regulated women's opportunities, autonomy, and rights to basic services, confirming that the regime change disproportionately affected women.¹⁰ Women have lost access to secondary education,^{11,12,13} university and civil service employment, they are less mobile as they are now required to be accompanied by a male "guardian", a mahram, during longer journeys, and it is more difficult for vulnerable women and girls to access aid.¹⁴

Impact of the regime change on NGOs and civil society

To understand how the ban has impacted NGOs and civil society, it is important to consider that civil society in Afghanistan is highly diverse. It includes small, national grassroots organisations and associations, those borne from social solidarity during the previous Taliban regime and life with Soviet occupation and mujahideen, and large multinational organisations for whom Afghanistan is just one of many portfolios.

The regime change has impacted organisations in many ways. Some had to close operations due to the focus of their work. There have been sector-specific operational restrictions, including on gender-based violence prevention, psychosocial and protection services for women, human rights advocacy (particularly around women), and education and vocational training for women and girls.^{15,16,17,18} Other organisations have closed operations because they could not access communities or lacked leadership: many senior employees left the country after the de facto authorities took over.¹⁹

Women-led NGOs face administrative difficulties,²⁰ including problems getting their licences renewed. A lack of funding since the regime change has restricted organisational operations, including those focused on sensitive topics such as women's rights, human rights, and gender-related interventions.²¹ Women fear mistreatment and are mostly reluctant to engage with the de facto authorities. Those who try to engage with the de facto authorities face resistance too, with the de facto authorities refusing to speak to women directly.

Directives introduced by the de facto authorities since the regime change:²²

December 2021

- Accompaniment of a mahram for women when travelling distances over 77 km from home
- Decree in support of women's access to bride money and inheritance; prohibition of forced marriage for women and girls; prohibition of exchange of girls between families to resolve disputes

March 2022

- Suspension of secondary school for girls
- Announcement of separate days for men and women to attend parks
- Requirement for women to be accompanied by a mahram when flying domestically or internationally

May 2022

- Requirement of women to wear prescribed forms of dress and cover their faces in public
- Ordering women on television to cover their faces when on air

November 2022

- Banning women from public parks and gyms

¹⁰ UN Women. October 2022. "Priorities and Recommendations of Afghan Women inside Afghanistan".

¹¹ International Crisis Group. February 2023. "Taliban Restrictions on Women's Rights Deepen Afghanistan's Crisis".

¹² GiHA. November 2022. "Afghanistan Inter Agency Rapid Gender Analysis".

¹³ Afghanistan Analyst Network. April 2023. "Bans on Women Working Then and Now: The Dilemmas of Delivering Humanitarian Aid During the First and Second Islamic Emirates".

¹⁴ GiHA. November 2022. "Afghanistan Inter Agency Rapid Gender Analysis".

¹⁵ GiHA. 2022. "Promoting Recruitment and Retention of Women Humanitarian Workers in Afghanistan".

¹⁶ GiHA. November 2022. "Afghanistan Inter Agency Rapid Gender Analysis".

¹⁷ International Crisis Group. February 2023. "Taliban Restrictions on Women's Rights Deepen Afghanistan's Crisis".

¹⁸ Afghanistan Analyst Network. April 2023. "Bans on Women Working Then and Now: The Dilemmas of Delivering Humanitarian Aid During the First and Second Islamic Emirates".

¹⁹ Lee Rasheed and ACBAR. 2022. EU Civil Society Report, closed document.

²⁰ Other examples include having to change their organisational name (removing words such as 'human rights', 'women's rights', 'democracy') and having to change the composition of the board and management team from women to men.

²¹ GiHA. November 2023. "Afghanistan Inter-Agency Rapid Gender Analysis".

²² Ibid.

Impact of the ban on women in NGOs and UN in Afghanistan

Since December 2022, most articles have fittingly focused on the ban's impact on women's participation in civil society – most importantly within NGOs.^{23,24,25,26} Although the ban is another blow to women's rights, it was hardly a surprise given the general restrictions on women and girls since the regime change.

Prior to the ban on women in NGOs, women's mobility was considerably restricted, including through the requirement to wear a hijab and be accompanied by a mahram, with some local authorities applying the mandates more stringently than others.²⁷ The challenge has intensified since women are completely banned from NGO work, with minor exceptions for public health and education. The de facto authorities reported a lack of adherence to Islamic dress codes among women NGO staff as the predominate reason for the ban, and that it was a priority to "preserve the dignity and chastity of women in Afghanistan". They also mentioned their concern that "these institutions were not under the control of the Emirate" and that "the risk to women was particularly high".²⁸

Three months after the de facto authorities ordered NGOs to stop employing Afghan women, they extended the ban to cover women working for the United Nations. On 11 April, the UN ordered an operational review, and asked women employed by the UN not to come to the office, but to continue working from home.²⁹ The ban on Afghan women working in NGOs created more specific challenges, which the GiHA Working Group has tracked through monthly online surveys with NGOs.³⁰ As of January 2023, only 17% of 87 NGOs surveyed remained fully operational, 68% were partially operational, and 15% had closed. Follow-up surveys found that no big shifts had been made. Of the organisations that had managed to at least partially resume activities, some had restarted after negotiations with local authorities, others started after community leaders negotiated on their behalf, a few continued after deciding to work only with men, and others took advantage of exemptions for education and public health workers.³¹

Challenges for NGOs and civil society actors since the regime change:

- Limited movement of women;
- Intimidation and bureaucratic constraints;
- Lack of funding;
- Increased violence and disrespect towards women;
- Sector-specific operational restrictions for women.

²³ GiHA. November 2023. "[Afghanistan Inter Agency Rapid Gender Analysis](#)".

²⁴ GiHA. March 2022. "[Research on challenges, barriers and opportunities for women-led CSOs in the Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis](#)".

²⁵ GiHA. HAG. May 2023. "[Tracking impact report on the ban on women working with NGOs, INGOs and UN in Afghanistan \(fifth snapshot\)](#)".

²⁶ Afghanistan Analyst Network. April 2023. "[Bans on Women Working Then and Now: The Dilemmas of Delivering Humanitarian Aid During the First and Second Islamic Emirates](#)".

²⁷ GiHA. March 2022. "[Research on challenges, barriers and opportunities for women-led CSOs in the Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis](#)".

²⁸ BBC Persian. December 2022. "[Mujahid: The decree banning women's work was issued to 'preserve dignity and chastity'](#)".

²⁹ The Guardian. April 2023. "[UN tells Afghan staff to stay home after Taliban ban on female workers](#)"; UN agencies ordered their women staff to work from home until the 5th of May, after which some UN agencies allowed women to work from the office again, some from the community, and others were asked to stay at home to ensure their safety.

³⁰ GiHA. HAG. May 2023. "[Tracking impact report on the ban on women working with NGOs, INGOs and UN in Afghanistan \(fifth snapshot\)](#)".

³¹ Afghanistan Analyst Network. April 2023. "[Bans on Women Working Then and Now: The Dilemmas of Delivering Humanitarian Aid During the First and Second Islamic Emirates](#)".

Satisfaction with aid: how has the ban on women aid workers impacted aid delivery?

To understand how people experience a humanitarian response, it helps to know their initial expectations, as well as their perceived reality. This allows us to identify how aid delivery can be improved and to set priorities.

Women and men both find that aid does not live up to their expectations,³² although women have a greater gap between expectations and reality. As societal norms and rules strongly dictate people's lives in Afghanistan, one might assume that women expect less engagement with aid provision than men, but that is not the case. Women view their involvement in aid provision as important and have high expectations across all dimensions. They expect that aid should cover their most urgent needs, that humanitarians consult both men and women before providing aid, that aid reaches the most vulnerable in their community, that they are informed about available aid, and that they should know how people in their community are chosen to receive aid or not. Despite the ban on women aid workers, they also expect that someone of the same gender should provide their aid – and this has not changed. Men and women consistently say that using humanitarian staff of the opposite gender (i.e., men providing to women and women providing to men) is socially inappropriate, and for women, it has numerous social risks.

Box 1: Comparison of findings

In this report, and this section in particular, we make two temporal comparisons of findings:

1. We compare between rounds of data collection. Round one of data collection was in November–December 2022 and round two in February–March 2023.
2. We compare between people surveyed in February–March 2023 who received aid before and after the ban on women NGO workers.

To understand the impact of the ban on women NGO workers, we asked people when they had last received humanitarian aid. We then disaggregated the findings to compare people who received aid before and after 24 December 2022, to understand how their perceptions of aid delivery have changed.

One might hypothesise that satisfaction with aid would have decreased after the ban. However, our data mostly disproves this hypothesis: satisfaction decreased for only two questions about aid but stayed the same for all others. This is likely due to recency bias, which means that people who received aid more recently often have more positive perceptions about it. A time analysis of the correlation between when people received aid and how satisfied they are with aid confirms this: the more recently people have received aid, the more satisfied they are. Recency bias likely obscures any potential differences people experienced because of the ban. Yet this hypothesis also assumes that the ban changed people's realities. Yet in rural areas, the presence of women NGO workers was low even before the ban, so any differences after the ban might be undetectable for them.

³² Satisfaction is measured as a composite of six dimensions, which each measure a nuanced component of aid satisfaction. The research team measured each outcome through the lens of expectations and perceptions; that is, the extent to which communities expect these outcomes, and their perceptions of whether the outcomes are realised. The methodology explains the dimensions of satisfaction.

There are no major differences in how people view aid between late 2022 and early 2023, apart from a stark increase in people's perception that their needs are not being met. We also hardly see any differences between the perceptions of people who have received aid since the ban on women aid workers of 24 December 2022,³⁵ and those who last received aid before the ban.³⁶ Women report that aid is provided by women less often, and both men and women say aid does not cover their basic needs. Women in urban areas, persons with disabilities, and those who had not received aid report more barriers to accessing information about available aid. But it is important to look beyond the ban as a blanket explanation for these changes (see box 2).

Box 2: Aid provision was not fully sensitive to nor addressing differences between men and women before the ban on women aid workers

It is important to note that aid lacked gender-responsiveness prior to the ban on women working for national and international NGOs, as our research published in 2022 and 2023 demonstrated. People's perceptions of receiving aid show little changes in satisfaction between November–December 2022 (pre-ban) and February–March 2023 (post-ban).^{33,34}

The ban on women aid workers in international and national NGOs impacted the capacity of aid organisations to provide women-adapted support across Afghanistan. An immediate assumption after the ban was that women and girls would be much more limited in their access to and use of aid. It is important to reiterate, however, that the extent to which aid work was addressing differences between men and women was limited before the ban, with most organisations relying on men staff to identify people to receive aid, distribute aid and follow up. As the team found in our round one report, gender-responsive aid has largely been inadequate, and as such, the ban's impact should be understood within this context and women and girls' experiences of aid not seen as solely contingent on the ban.

In qualitative interviews, we found that people's opinions of the ban are mostly negative. Women are overwhelmingly against the ban. They report a sense of hopelessness and depressed feelings because ever since, there has been more financial stress on their families, a lack of autonomy, on top of being disappointed because their daughters are deprived of education. Most men feel negatively too. While there are incidental mentions of support for the ban because some men see it as necessary to uphold Islamic law, most men view the ban negatively exactly for this reason. They say it is in line with Islamic law and essential for women to work in all sectors so that women do not have to interact with unfamiliar men, and women can be served by other women. Men also mention that the international community has reduced humanitarian aid in Afghanistan due to the ban on women working, even though needs are growing. They say that this has increased suffering for everyone.



I think we need women in every organisation; in the educational sector, the social sector, the medical sector [...] We live in a traditional community, and we need women doctors through whom we can treat our women. We need women teachers to educate girls [...] we have no choice but to have women workers support this community.

- Community leader,³⁷ Logar

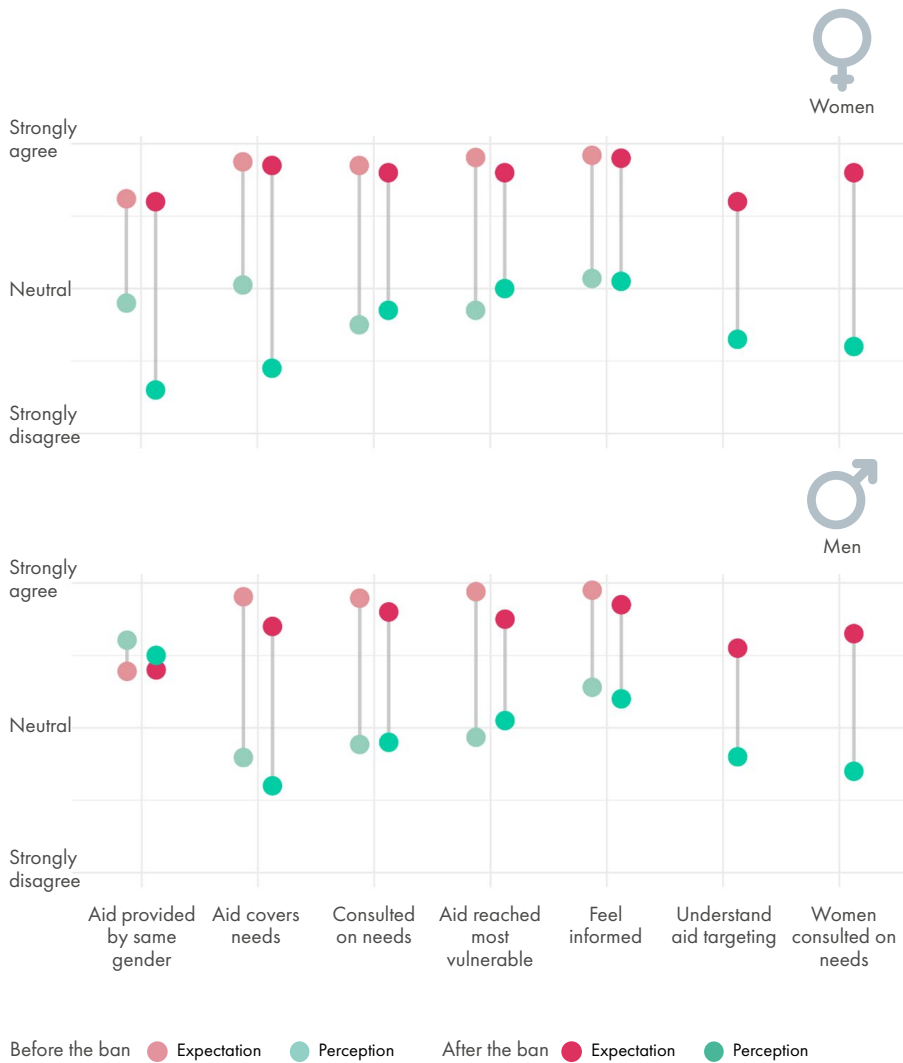
³³ Ground Truth Solutions and Salma Consulting. February 2023. "[Against the odds: Strengthening accountability to women and girls in Afghanistan](#)".

³⁴ Ground Truth Solutions. June 2022. "[Protecting and improving healthcare: community insight from Afghanistan](#)".

³⁵ Hereinafter referred to as "the ban".

³⁶ We asked people: "When was the last time you received humanitarian aid?" and split the sample into "last received aid before the ban" and "last received aid after the ban." See [Box 1](#) for more information.

³⁷ All community leaders we spoke to are men.



“

We are not comfortable receiving aid from men. They don't understand us and it's not appropriate. We really need the government to let women come back.

- Woman, Logar

To understand how people experience a humanitarian response, it helps to know their initial expectations, as well as their perceptions. We asked people about their expectations and perceptions of several dimensions of aid provision to identify where humanitarian organisations can improve and set priorities. High expectations combined with low perceptions indicate priorities for improvement.

Gap graph: Red dots indicate mean scores for expectations questions; green dots indicate responses to perception questions. We calculated the position of each dot according to the mean Likert score for each question, where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. The line in between represents the “gap” between expectations and perceptions of aid.

The dots on the left-hand side (pale red and green) of each pair show the situation before the ban on women aid workers; those on the right-hand side (bright red and green), the situation after the ban.

We introduced the two questions on targeting and consultation in our second round of data collection.

Single women among the least satisfied with aid

Beyond gender, many intersecting characteristics, such as age, place of residence, and disability status shape how people perceive aid provision. Women are less satisfied with humanitarian assistance than men; in both late 2022 and early 2023. We also found that single women – often women-headed households, and/or widows – fare worse than married people and single men.



What do persons with disabilities say?

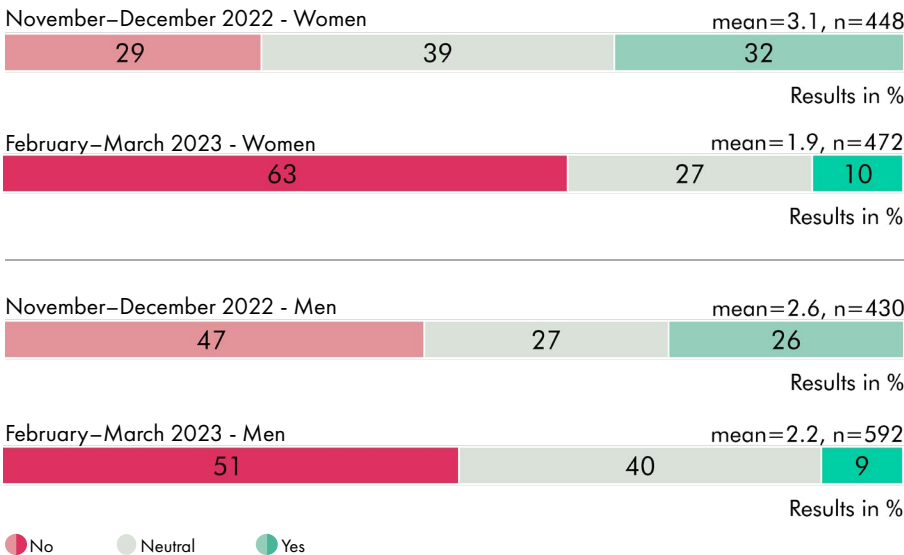
It is important to note that aid lacked gender-responsiveness prior to the ban. Among people we spoke with, 19% have a disability (as measured by the Washington Group questions). Persons with disabilities are a known vulnerable group in Afghanistan, especially if they have other intersecting vulnerabilities, such as being a woman or single.

Throughout this report, we will highlight the experiences of people, particularly women, with disabilities. Overall satisfaction with aid is lower for persons with disabilities. They have more negative perceptions of certain dimensions of aid provision than people without disabilities: they feel less consulted, less informed, and do not think aid reaches the most vulnerable.

Despite receiving aid, most basic needs are not met

Few people (10% of women and 9% of men) say their basic needs are met by humanitarian aid, a clear decline since November–December 2022. Men mention cash, food assistance, and education as their most pressing unmet needs, while women ask for non-food items as well. People explained their preference in qualitative interviews: cash allows people flexibility and gives them the ability to negotiate their own prices.

Does humanitarian assistance meet all of your most essential needs?



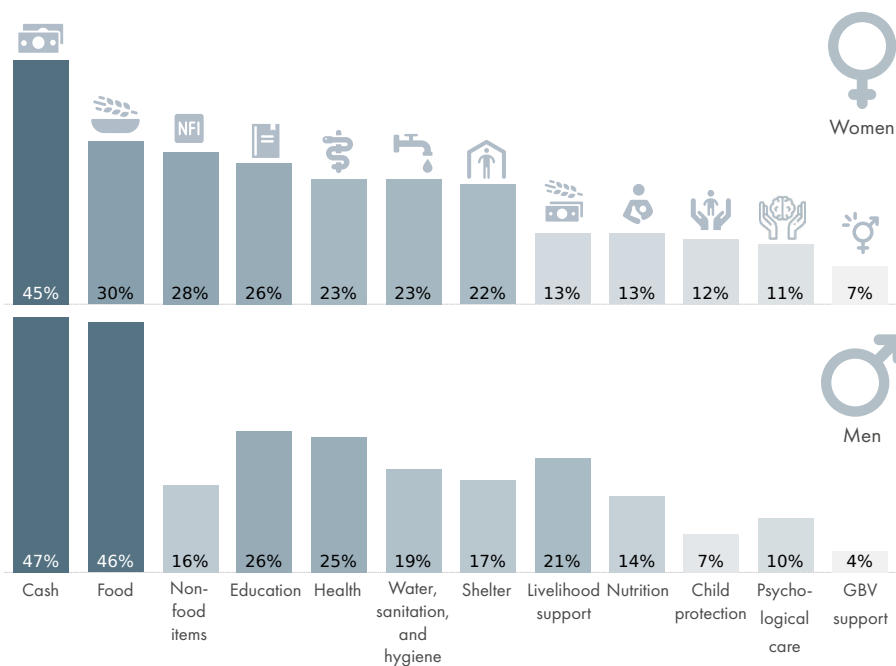
There are significant regional differences in preferred types of aid: a higher proportion of people living in the central highlands prefer cash than people in other regions. This highlights the need for ongoing engagement with communities to identify the appropriate assistance for each location.

What do persons with disabilities say?

Men and women with disabilities have similar needs to people without disabilities. They ask for cash and food assistance, and women with disabilities request non-food items and shelter support. For their health needs, men with disabilities most often need medication (46%) and need chronic care more often (39%) than men without disabilities (29%). Women with disabilities need chronic care (43% vs 28%), specialised care (39% vs 23%), medication (39% vs 23%), and psychological care (29% vs 18%) more often than women without disabilities. In line with their higher average age, women with disabilities less often need pregnancy care (25% vs 41%) and post-natal care (25% vs 36%) than women without disabilities.

What are your most important needs that are not currently met?

February–March 2023



Percentages do not total 100% because respondents could choose multiple options.

The severity of the situation differs – people in rural areas have more needs than those in urban areas. Women in rural areas more often mention unmet needs (99%) than urban women (88%). Moreover, aside from cash assistance, food and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) items, women living in rural areas express a much higher need for non-food items and a slightly higher need for psychological support.

All focus group discussion (FGDs) participants noted that aid, while welcome, was insufficient and did not meet basic household needs. The main problem is insufficient quantity. Women in Paktia and Faryab commented that while aid was supposed to be enough to last the family for one month, many households could only make it last for one or two weeks. Similar sentiments were noted in all communities with whom we held qualitative discussions, regarding all types of aid.



The aid is not enough to live on. For example, we might receive one bag of flour a month. This is not enough; it lasts maybe two weeks and we use as little as possible.

- Woman, Faryab



For six months, we received flour, oil and chickpeas, and we received cash for two months. We do benefit from these donations, but they are not enough because many women here belong to eight- or nine-member families, and one bag of flour is not enough.

- Woman, Faryab



Some people in our community used to receive 17,000 AFN [...] but now they only get 4,000. Why is there such a change in the amount? It was hard for families before, but now with so much less, what can they do?

- Community leader, Logar

Communities offered two explanations for why their meets are not met. First, they sense that aid quantities have dropped since 2022. Second, the type of aid they receive does not support them long-term. Communities want support that helps them earn an income, and enables them to better manage their household, health, education, and other family needs.

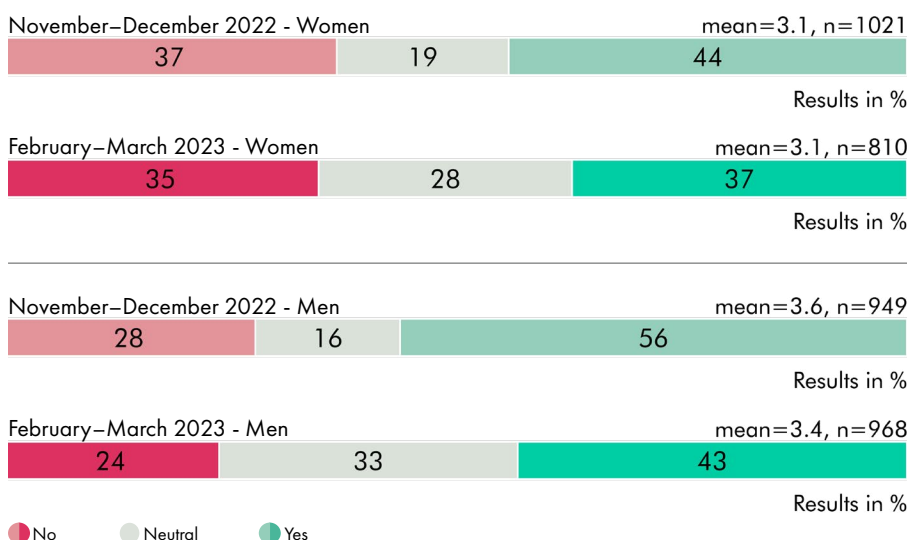
The rise in unmet needs could also be explained by the survey’s timing – shortly after the harsh winter. After the ban on women working for NGOs, a handful of large international NGOs and UN agencies paused some programmes, but this did not impact aid delivery significantly. What is more likely is that people feel the consequences of the increasing funding gap.^{38,39,40} Humanitarian personnel note that the ban on women aid workers has had big implications on funding and resource mobilisation.^{41,42}

One in four women think that women are generally excluded from aid

Men and women expect to be informed about what aid is available to them and want to know how humanitarian organisations target people for aid. But they feel less informed on both fronts than they felt in November 2022. People need information about aid distributions (times, dates, and frequency), types of aid available to them, and eligibility criteria.

Women in rural areas feel more informed about what aid is available to them than women in urban areas. This might be because women in rural areas have more extensive or stronger social networks and information is often transferred through these networks. An important caveat, however, is that this does not mean that rural women have direct engagement with women in humanitarian organisations. It could be related to them exerting greater influence on their husbands and male family members to obtain information.

Do you feel informed about the humanitarian assistance available to you?



People want to earn money for themselves. Organisations who want to help women should help them earn an income. This could be through carpet weaving or other training. The most vulnerable households could then address some of their problems.

- Community leader, Faryab

³⁸ Only 14.4% of the response has been funded as of 19 June 2023 and in their most recent snapshot, GiHA and the Humanitarian Access Group found as first reason for NGOs to suspend their activities was a lack of funding.

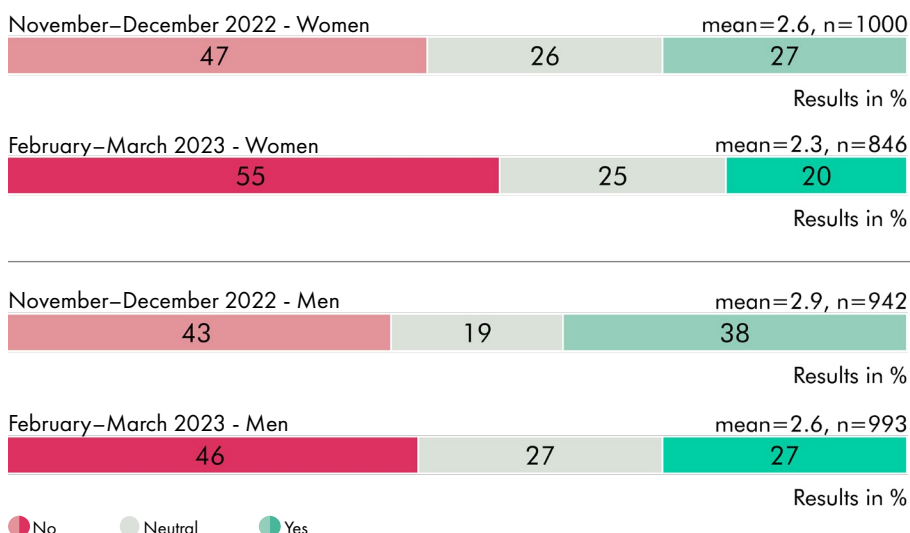
³⁹ OCHA. 2023. "Afghanistan country page".

⁴⁰ GiHA, HAG. May 2023. "Tracking Impact Report on the ban on women working with NGOs, INGOs and UN in Afghanistan - Fifth Snapshot".

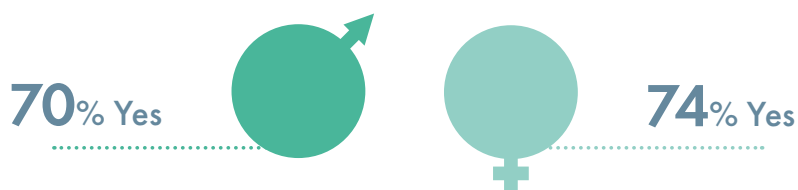
⁴¹ VOA News. March 2023. "UN Launches \$4.6B Appeal for Afghanistan, Warns of Drop in Funding".

⁴² We discussed explanations for some findings with humanitarian workers in an analysis workshop in May 2023.

Do you know how humanitarian organisations decide who receives humanitarian assistance and who doesn't?

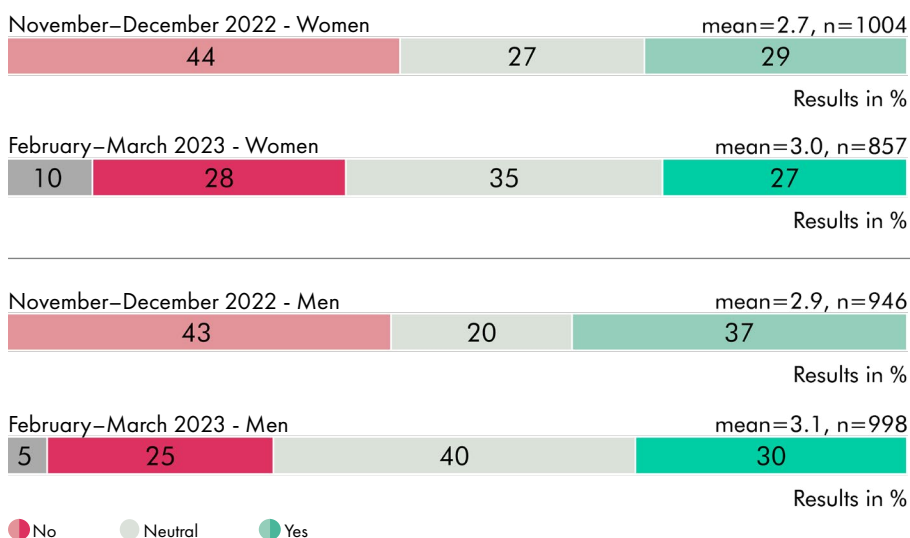


Is it important to you to understand how humanitarian organisations decide who receives humanitarian assistance and who doesn't?*



People want to know how humanitarians select recipients of aid and there is a strong sense that aid does not reach the most vulnerable. In qualitative discussions, people voiced concerns about how people are selected to receive aid. They mentioned organisations using inappropriate selection procedures to identify the most vulnerable, as well as corruption, and preferential treatment when engaging with community leaders. Women also mentioned that humanitarian organisations do not consult with women in communities to help identify other vulnerable women and that this was a missed opportunity.

Do you think humanitarian assistance is provided to the most vulnerable in your community?



Aid organisations are not capable of identifying the neediest people. We have no influence on them and they play the key role in identifying the neediest people. Aid organisations only help 15 households in the community. Of course, vulnerable people are always going to miss out.

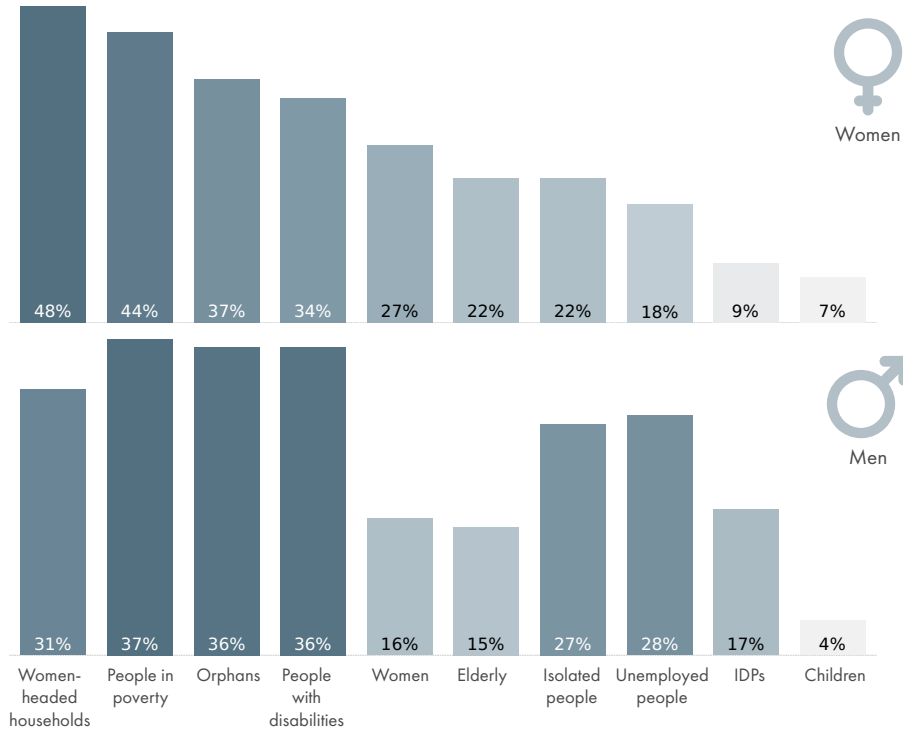
- Man, Logar

Consistent with previous findings, people mention women-headed households and people living in poverty as those most often excluded from aid provision. Focus group discussion participants explained this by saying that targeting is often done through community leaders or that NGO staff make assumptions about vulnerabilities instead of conducting actual assessments. Women more often mention women and women-headed households as left out of aid, compared to men.

One in four women think that women are generally excluded from aid, a sharp increase since November 2022, when less than 10% of women said this.

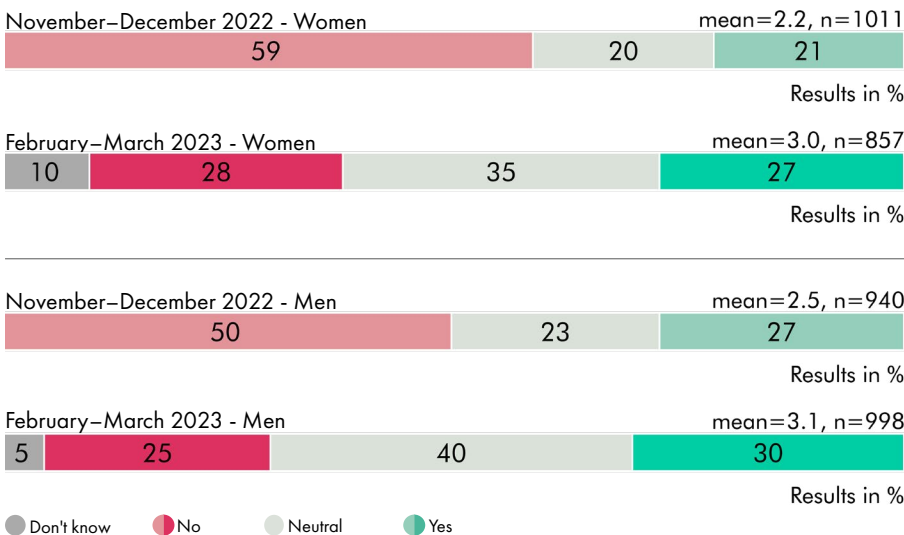
Who are the most vulnerable people in your community that you think are not receiving aid?

February–March 2023



Percentages do not total 100% because respondents could choose multiple options.

Does humanitarian assistance reach the most vulnerable women and girls in your community?



Those with big houses are ignored when the family is starving inside.

- Man, Faryab



Satisfaction with aid: key findings

Change in satisfaction since the ban

- Most people view the ban on women working for NGOs negatively. They find women working in all sectors essential to avoid unwanted interactions between men and women.
- Women and men both find that aid does not live up to their expectations.
- Women want to be involved in aid provision but they do not feel they can.
- Single women are among the least satisfied with aid.

People's needs remain unmet

- More people say that aid does not meet their basic needs compared to autumn last year.
- People's most pressing unmet needs are cash and food.

Information and transparency

- People expect to be informed about available aid, but less than half of our respondents feel informed.
- People want to understand the selection process, but they do not — this leads them to think that aid is not distributed fairly.
- People are worried about the involvement of community leaders in the selection of potential aid recipients, because some see them as corrupt.

Fairness

- Only a third of respondents think aid is going to the most vulnerable. They see women-headed households, people living in poverty, orphans, and people with disabilities as the most vulnerable in their community.

Men providing assistance to women causes anxiety

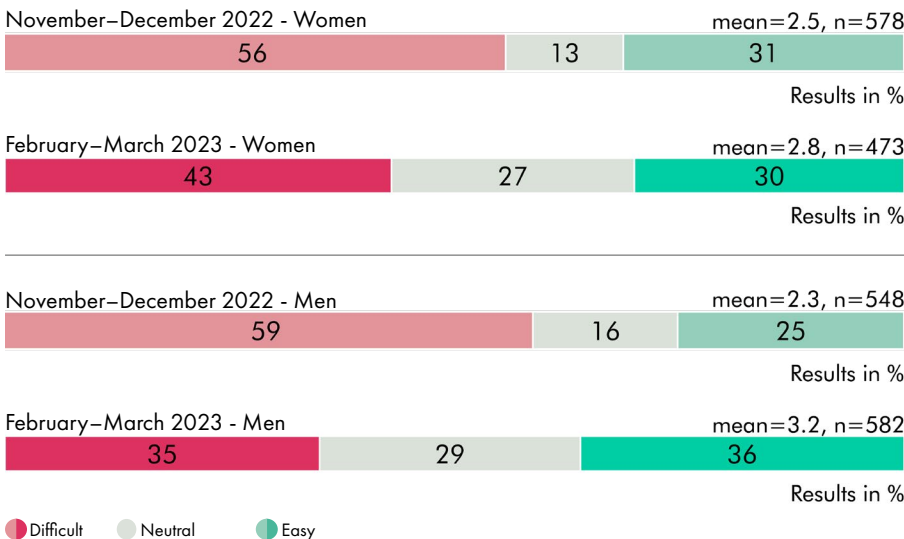
“It was a horrible experience; men just don’t understand women or how to behave toward us.”

A primary concern for humanitarian actors is the extent to which they can effectively access and meaningfully support the most vulnerable populations with humanitarian aid. The question of how they can access the most vulnerable is paramount. Does their access enable equitable aid that addresses gender differences, and can they successfully navigate the fluid conditions within Afghanistan?

Distance to distribution sites remains a critical barrier for women

According to men, aid has been somewhat easier to access in recent months. Women, despite the ban, do not find it harder to access aid either. However, women with intersectional vulnerabilities, such as single women, women in large households, and those with disabilities, report significantly greater difficulty accessing aid. Barriers hindering women from receiving aid include distance to distribution sites, a lack of information, and household responsibilities. Men see the lack of information and distance as most important barriers too.

How easy or difficult do you find it to access humanitarian assistance?

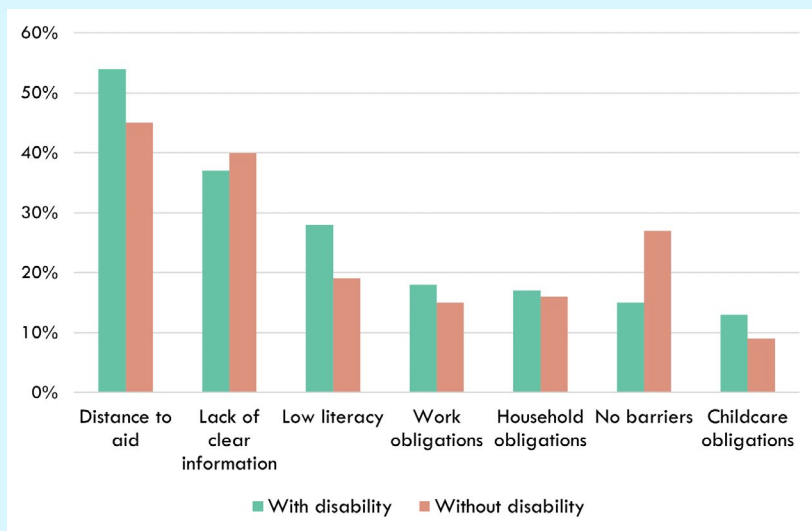


What do persons with disabilities say?

The share of persons with disabilities in our sample who received aid decreased. In November–December 2022, 12% of aid recipients said they had a disability, compared to 4% in March 2023. People with disabilities experience similar barriers as people without disabilities. Humanitarian actors mentioned no clear explanation for the lower share of people with disabilities who received aid, except that it could be that women are more often caregivers of persons with disabilities, and their access barriers could indirectly impact the people they care for too.

What are the barriers to accessing humanitarian assistance?

February–March 2023



Percentages do not total 100% because respondents could choose multiple options.

Although surveyed people paint quite a positive picture on feelings of safety when accessing aid, women interviewees report facing challenges in physically accessing aid in the current context. They have concerns about distances, physical transportation, and associated costs, as already reported in November–December 2022. They now have additional concerns about the absence of women at aid distributions, which increases stress and anxiety. During focus group discussions in Faryab, Logar, and Paktia provinces, women described having travelled to distribution sites where they were required to follow standard procedures such as providing proof of selection, fingerprints, and where they received either cash or food assistance. Women in all provinces felt uncomfortable and were stressed, which might indicate that they experienced protection or safety concerns.

In Faryab province, women described how they were mistreated by male distributors.

“We are not comfortable with men distributing aid. With women, at least we do not need to be completely covered, and we can speak to them. At my distribution, the men just pushed all the women to the side, so they didn’t have to see them; two women fainted and the men did nothing.” – Woman, Faryab

Women are also worried about the social implications that receiving aid from a man could have for their image.

“It is unfair to ask us to receive aid from men. People use negative words for such women, and it just causes bigger problems with our families and neighbours.” – Woman, Paktia



There were only male distributors at the distribution site. It was the only option available. It would have been better to receive the aid from a woman. We are not comfortable with male distributors; it is not something we are used to and does not fit with our culture.

- Woman, Logar



It was very crowded and there was no space for women. My hand was broken at the time and the male distributor took my materials from my hand, threw them on the ground, and told me to get out. It was a horrible experience; men just don’t understand women or know how to speak and behave with us.

- Woman, Faryab



Some women in our community use negative words about women who receive aid from men. It really would make our lives easier if they just allowed women to give us the packages.

- Woman, Logar

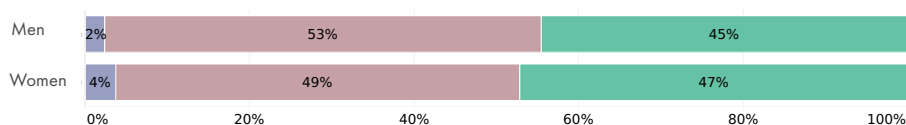
Men and community leaders are concerned about women being excluded because it is not socially appropriate for men to engage with women. All respondents argued that women staff should be reinstated, because vulnerable women will otherwise be excluded from aid. They mentioned that asking women to collect aid from men was “against [their] traditions and religion”.

People see a decrease in equal access

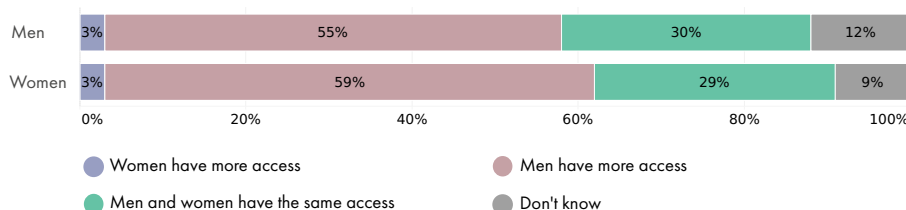
People in Afghanistan want the most vulnerable people in their community to receive aid, and they mention women in particular among this category. But most respondents feel aid is not allocated equitably, with many of the most vulnerable women excluded. These conditions have worsened: 29% of women and 30% of men in March 2023 think men and women have equal access, compared to 47% of women and 45% of men in November–December 2022. According to 35% of women, a lack of information about aid availability contributes to unequal access. This has gotten worse since December 2022,⁴³ when only 20% of women suggested a lack of information as a factor.

Do you think women and men have the same access to humanitarian assistance provided by NGOs?

November–December 2022



February–March 2023



Men and women struggle to access health services and do not think all people have equal access to them. Why access is difficult and who people think are left behind depends on their place of residence. People in rural areas have less access overall, because of the low availability of health services. They have to travel greater distances, they lack means of transportation, and women are often hindered because they need a mahram to travel with them. Women living in rural areas think women-headed households have less access to health services, while urban women overwhelmingly think it is people living in poverty that have less access.

“

Men from organisations cannot speak to women in the community. In the end, these vulnerable women are not spoken to and will be left out.

- Community leader, Faryab

“

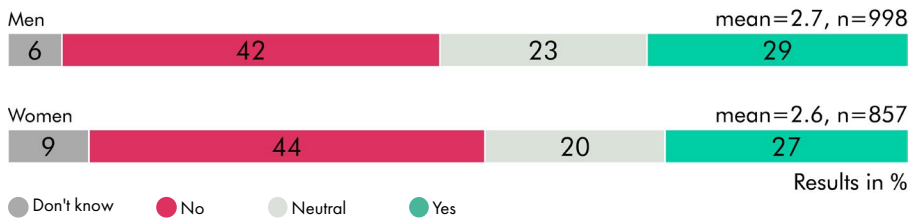
If a widow becomes eligible, she goes to the aid distribution, but there are no women employees. The employees are male; and to receive the aid, this woman has to establish a relationship with the man. This will cause her a lot of trouble.

- Man, Faryab

⁴³ Unless otherwise specified, “significant” means a p-value of <0.01.

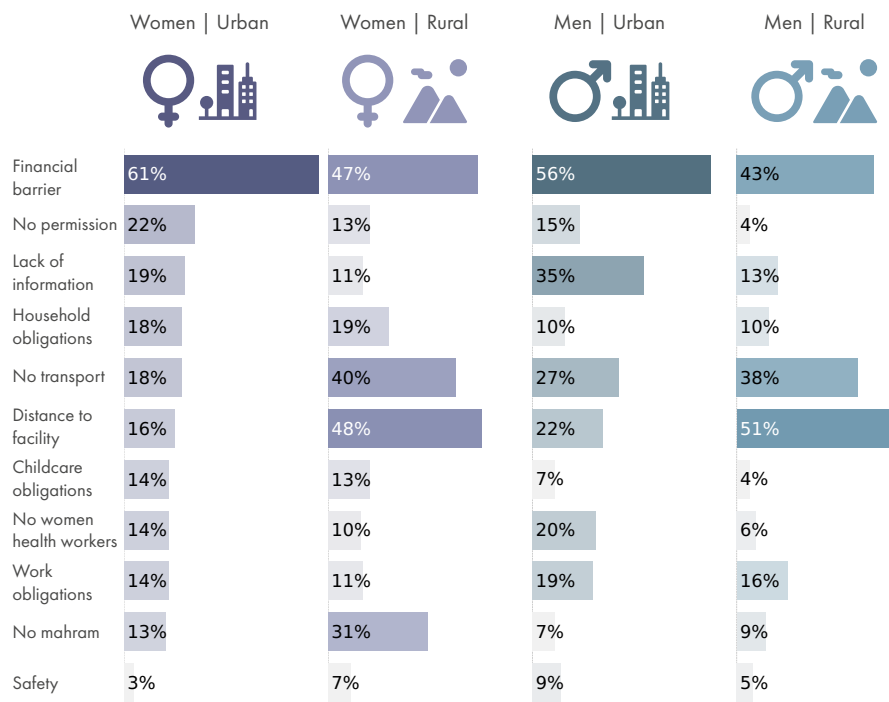
Do you think that all people in your community have equal access to health services?⁴⁴

February–March 2023



What are the most common barriers to accessing health services?⁴⁵

February–March 2023



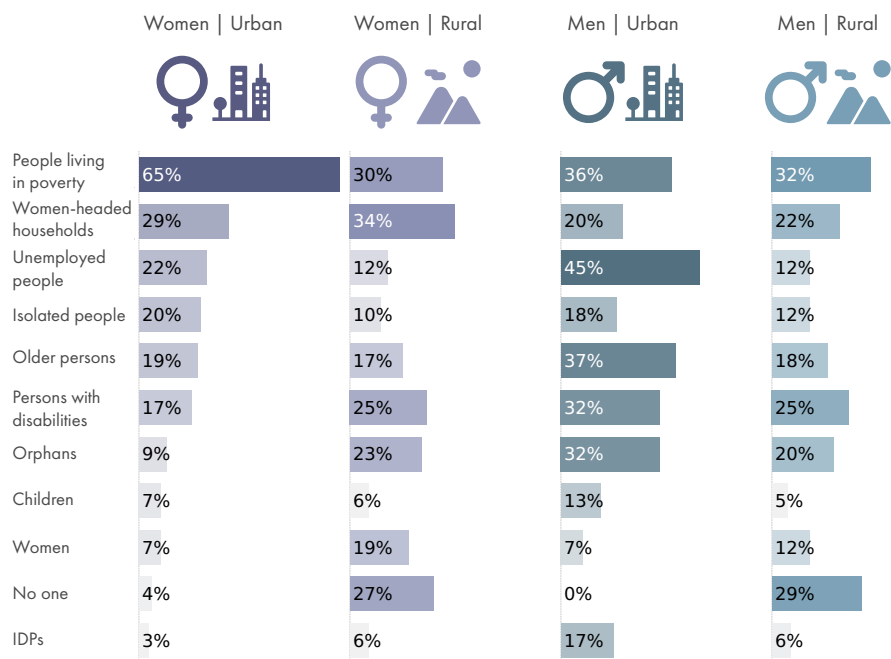
Percentages do not total 100% because respondents could choose multiple options.

⁴⁴ We introduced this question in March 2023 in our second round of data collection.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Thinking about people in your community, which people have less access to health services?⁴⁶

February–March 2023



Percentages do not total 100% because respondents could choose multiple options.

Qualitative discussions reflect the findings on who is most vulnerable. Consistently across Faryab, Logar, and Paktia, men, women, and community leaders highlighted that not just women-headed households are left out, but also widows within large joint families, young women in joint families, and women in general.

An additional group that was mentioned to be excluded are households who have lost their income due to worsened economic conditions since the regime change. Families in Paktia and Faryab explained that prior to the ban, many had sufficient incomes to meet their basic needs; but since the regime change, many have lost their incomes. Some families live in large houses, which make them appear financially stable, when in reality their houses are their only remaining asset. Participants felt that the size of these houses means the families inside are regularly ignored and excluded from the selection processes for aid.

Aid is not appropriately reaching the most vulnerable, whether women or other vulnerable groups. People consider the reach of aid largely insufficient, as only small numbers of vulnerable households receive assistance.

“

I think widows are the most vulnerable. They are not really supported. They can't come to receive aid. Married women can send their husbands. Only 40% of widows might receive aid, and those who need it most are normally left out.

- Community leader, Faryab

“

Those who visit the community to identify families do not identify the neediest people. These social mobilisers are not capable of identifying the neediest people and the local leaders are corrupt. They just chose their own families and relatives. They really miss the most vulnerable people.

- Community leader, Logar

“

There are people in this community with beautiful houses and poor financial situations. They built their houses under the previous regime when they were employed and now they have nothing. We also have families without beautiful houses but who are still employed with a sustainable income. Organisations should not judge people's situation based on their home; instead, they should visit each household and speak to more people to understand those who are struggling the most.

- Man, Paktia

“

We feel pleased that at least 50 families have received aid, but there are 500 households in our community, and aid for only 50 means nothing. Aid needs to be increased to at least 250 families.

- Man, Paktia

⁴⁶ We introduced this question in February-March 2023 in our second round of data collection.

Men feel less safe accessing aid than before

Although women feel less safe accessing aid than men, 60% of women felt safe accessing aid in November–December 2022, compared to 56% in March 2023. Access here refers largely to the travel required to access aid at distribution points, rather than the physical experience of receiving aid. Women consistently highlight security concerns when travelling to distribution sites, and potential safety concerns using transportation and travelling with children. Given that the travel conditions for women have not changed since December 2022, it is not surprising that there is little difference in perceptions of safety. The conditions remain the same for women, irrespective of the ban on women in NGOs.

How safe do you feel accessing humanitarian assistance (travelling to, accessing distribution sites)?

November–December 2022 - Women mean=4.1, n=434



Results in %

February–March 2023 - Women mean=3.9, n=470



Results in %

November–December 2022 - Men mean=4.6, n=419



Results in %

February–March 2023 - Men mean=4.1, n=578



Results in %

● No ● Neutral ● Yes

Men, however, feel less positive since autumn last year about safety when accessing aid. In November–December 2022, 82% of men felt safe, but only 61% feel safe in March 2023. An additional 18% of men in March 2023 feel “neutral” about safety when accessing aid. Men living in the central and south-east region feel most unsafe. Quantitative data alone cannot explain why men’s sense of safety deteriorated more than women’s. The Afghan media has focused heavily on the negative impacts of the de facto authorities’ restrictions on women in NGOs, and men have wider exposure to such broadcasts, so this may negatively affect their perceptions about safety when engaging with NGOs. Another reason could be more dangerous travel situations for men. We spoke to people at the end of winter and travelling during the harsh winter is more dangerous; men travel more often than women, which could mean they are more impacted by the conditions.



Access to aid: key findings

Ease of access to aid

- Men-led distribution of aid causes stress and anxiety to women.
- Receiving aid from men increases social risks for women, through assumptions that they are behaving inappropriately and engaging with men outside of their family.
- Men are uncomfortable providing aid to women and are unfamiliar with the needs and behaviour of women.
- There are increased risks and reports of women facing harassment, health, and safeguarding issues at distribution sites as locations are no longer gender segregated.

Equitable aid

- Communities continue to perceive aid to be inequitably distributed and not going to the most vulnerable.
- Insufficient aid reaches recipient households to cover their basic needs, irrespective of type of aid.
- Current selection processes fail to appropriately identify and support the most vulnerable households.

Safety

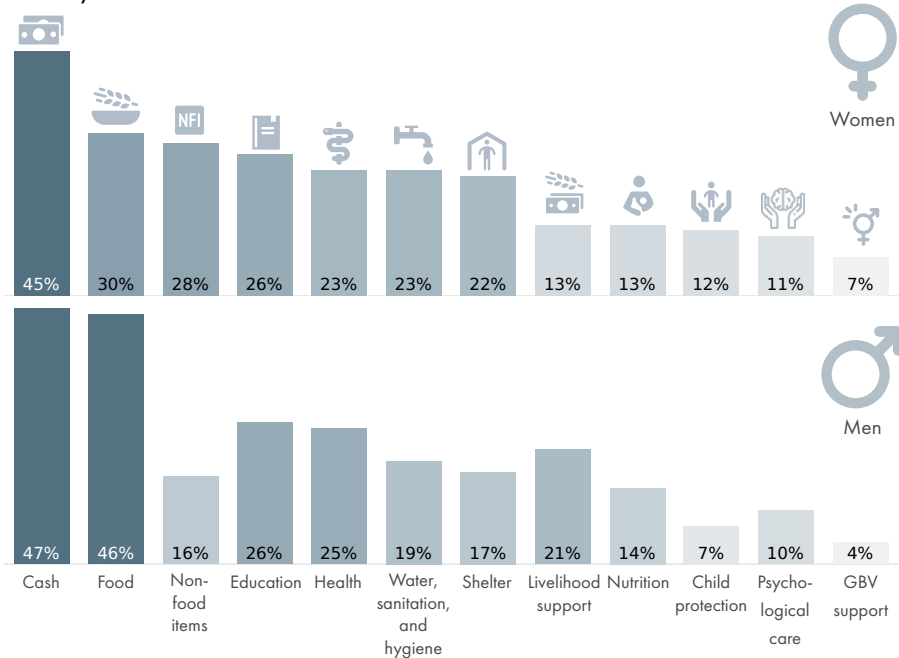
- Women's sense of security remains largely the same as before the ban, given that conditions travelling to distribution points have not changed.
- Men feel more neutral about their security accessing distribution points than before the ban, which may be associated with anxiety around the media spotlight on the de facto authorities' restrictions on NGOs.

Women have more diverse needs than men and want to be asked about them

“Most of the time, humanitarian actors just give us the same things, like food and clothes. They don’t ask us about the things we [women] most need.”

What are your most important needs that are not currently met?

February–March 2023

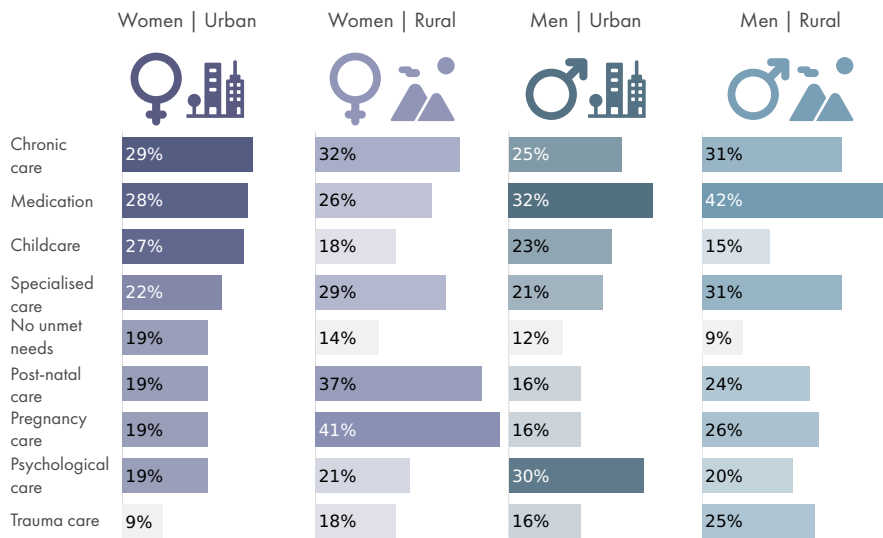


Percentages do not total 100% because respondents could choose multiple options.

Men list slightly less diverse needs than women. As mentioned earlier, men most often mention cash and food assistance as their most important needs, while women ask for non-food items as well, in line with their traditional roles as household caregivers. Women’s health needs reflect this too – they express greater need than men for almost all listed health needs. Their priority health needs, especially for those in rural areas, are pregnancy- and delivery-related care.

What are your most urgent unmet health needs?⁴⁷

February–March 2023



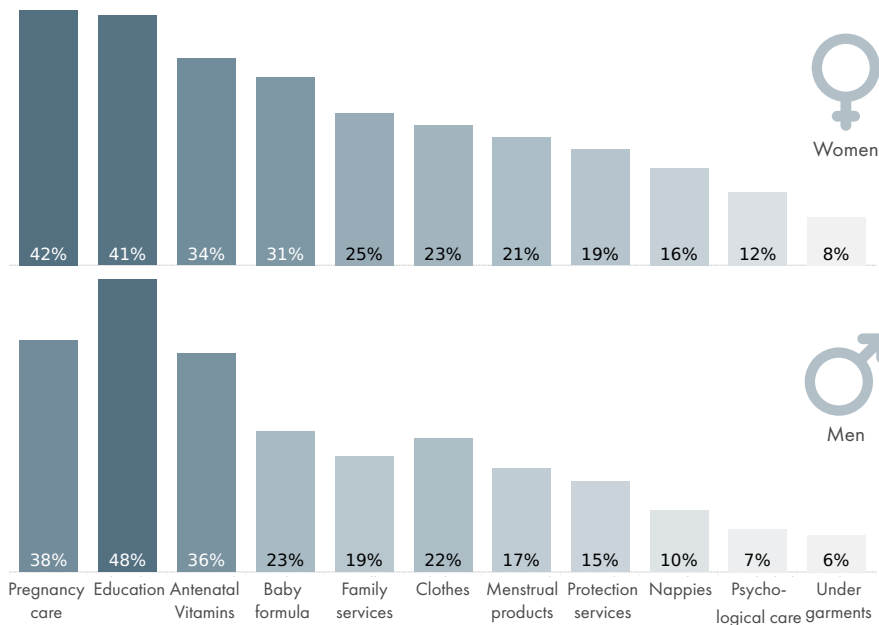
Percentages do not total 100% because respondents could choose multiple options.

⁴⁷ We introduced this question in February-March 2023 in our second round of data collection.

There is a long list of women-specific needs. These include pregnancy-related support – pregnancy care (42%), antenatal vitamins (34%), post-pregnancy care – and child-care support: baby formula (31%), clothes (23%), and nappies (16%). Other needs include menstrual hygiene products (21%), mental health care (21%), and protection support (19%). Men suggest the same needs for women, with a slightly higher number of men suggesting that education is an important resource for women (48%).

Thinking about the needs of a woman, what support would be especially important to women?

February–March 2023



Percentages do not total 100% because respondents could choose multiple options.

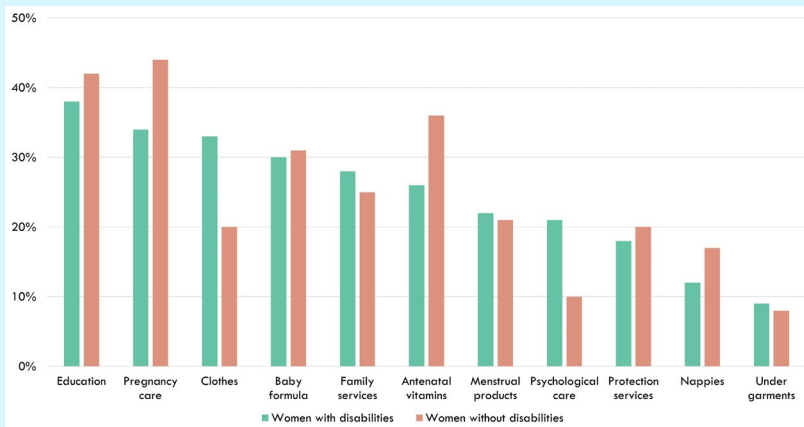
Women in rural areas mention antenatal vitamins (37% vs 19%), menstrual products (23% vs 14%), and pregnancy care (43% vs 33%) more often than those in urban areas. But rural women less frequently mention mental health/psychosocial support services (8% vs 29%). This is probably due to the lack of accessible health services for women in rural areas, as demonstrated in [this section](#).

What do women with disabilities say?

Women with disabilities more often need childcare (26% vs 18%), chronic care (43% vs 28%), medication (39% vs 23%) and less often post-natal and pregnancy care than women without disabilities, which is explained by their higher average age. They also more often need clothes (33% vs 20%) and mental health services (21% vs 10%) than women without disabilities.

Thinking about the needs of a woman, what support would be especially important to women?

February–March 2023



Percentages do not total 100% because respondents could choose multiple options.

Qualitative feedback from women highlights their intersectional and gendered needs. Women prioritise child nutrition, pregnancy care and assistance which supports the general health and well-being of mothers and young children. Women in Faryab, Paktia, and Logar all say that women-targeted goods would be a valuable addition to aid packages.

Another woman in Faryab commented that receiving more “women-specific aid” would improve her emotional well-being and allow her to better support her family. Another woman said that she had received some gender-specific support and welcomed it.

When households cannot meet their specific needs, it is often seen as the woman’s responsibility to find alternatives or identify coping mechanisms to meet household needs. This includes substituting food types, using plastic bags as nappies, using normal milk instead of formula for babies, dressing children in clothes from alternative material (not pre-made clothes) and finding alternative ways to maintain menstrual hygiene health, such as using cloths.



Many things would help us, like sewing machines, milk, medicine, nappies for babies and sanitary items for women. We are not capable of buying these things ourselves. We are currently feeding our children potatoes instead of milk; we use plastic bags for nappies; and we just can’t address our health issues.

- Woman, Paktia



Providing nappies, milk, medicine, and hygiene products would make me very happy. When we have these things, we can be confident in our health, and we are spiritually and mentally calmer. In the winter, if our children are cold and our babies don’t have milk, they get sick, and they are unhappy, which makes us unhappy. In winter, there was nothing we could do.

- Woman, Faryab



Yes, I received some nappies, toothpaste, a brush, and some other necessities for women’s hygiene; these were very helpful, and we felt very good about them.

- Women, Logar

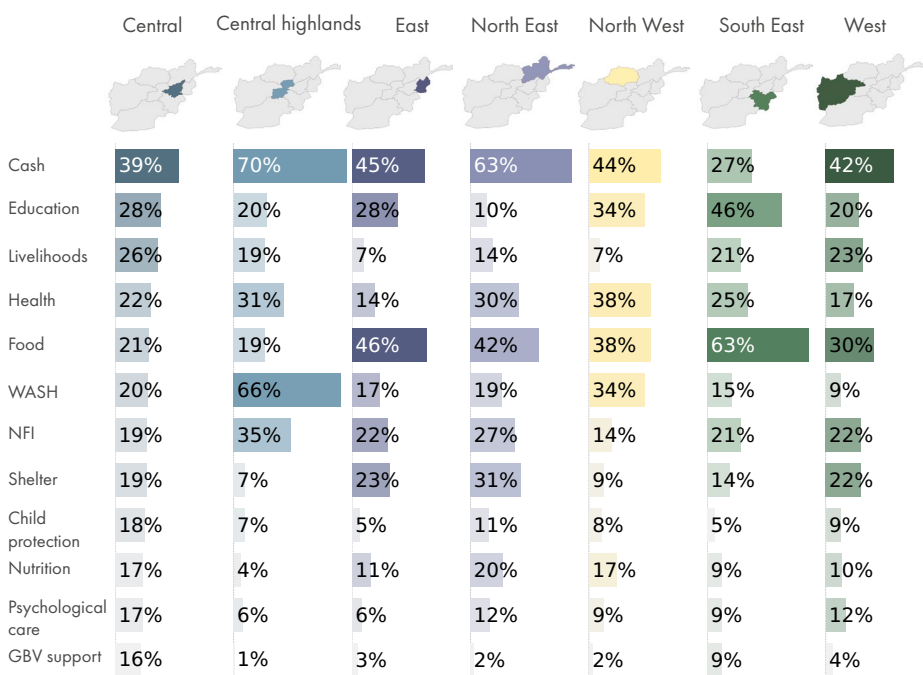


I have to find ways to help my children when we lack money and food. They come to me when they are hungry and cold. I have to find ways to help them.

- Woman, Logar

What are your most important needs that are not currently met?

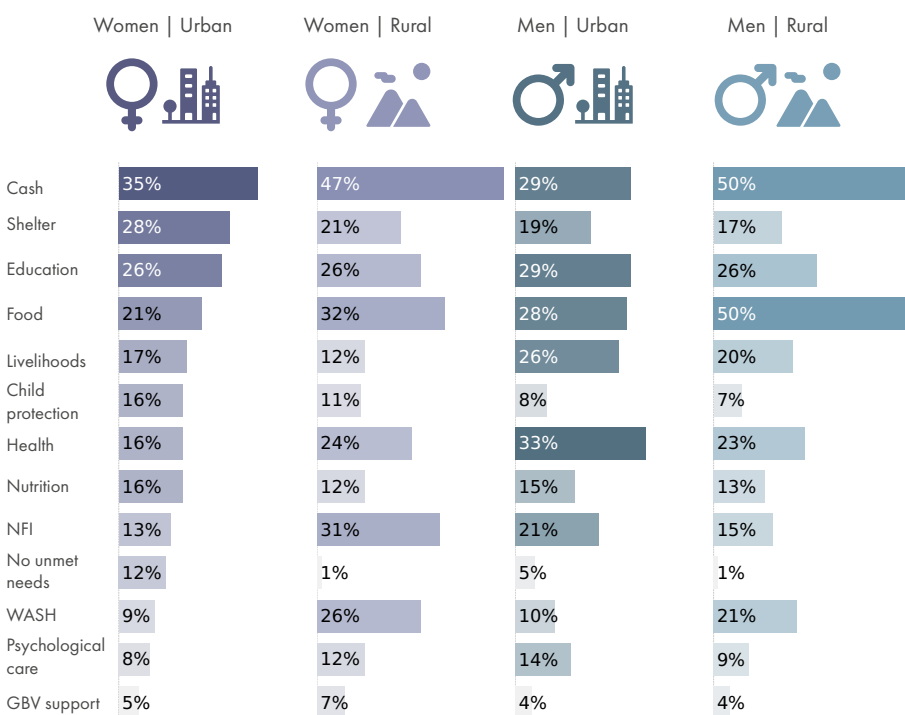
February–March 2023



Percentages do not total 100% because respondents could choose multiple options.

What are your most important needs that are not currently met?

February–March 2023



Percentages do not total 100% because respondents could choose multiple options.

Women have diverse needs that should be more readily addressed by humanitarian actors and they are often best placed to report on the variety and nuances of support their households need. Women are therefore valuable sources of information for humanitarian actors to identify households' most urgent needs, especially if cash is not being provided.

The need for education

The fact that so many people mention education as a women-specific need is somewhat to be expected given the current rights-based concerns around access to education, and the ban on girls' secondary and tertiary education. The focus among media on the social, economic, and political implications of keeping girls and women out of learning is likely to have intensified the perception that this is an important need.



We need many things to support ourselves and our families. Most of the time, humanitarian actors just give us the same things: food and clothes. They don't ask us about the things we most need.

- Woman, Faryab



Women's specific needs: key findings

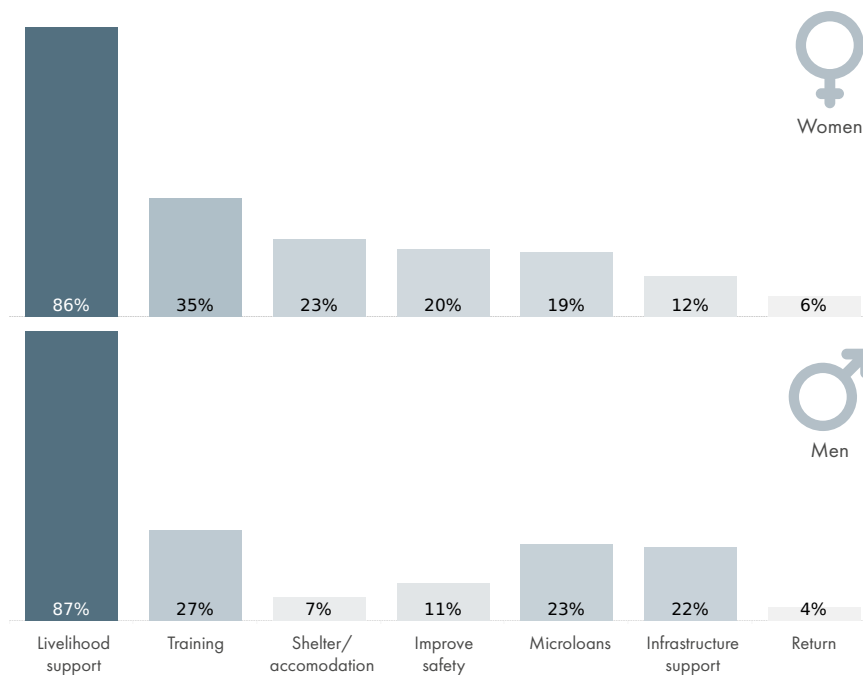
- Women have specific unmet needs which are not being addressed by humanitarian actors. Meeting such needs would support them in their roles as primary caregivers in their households and ensure better health outcomes for women.
- Women prefer cash assistance to other types of aid, as it allows them to address their gendered needs and support their household based on its individual needs.
- Women are responsible for finding alternatives if family needs cannot be met, for example by substituting food and using plastic bags for nappies.
- Women remain the most valuable source of information about which resources are the most needed and appropriate for women, children, and households. Men's awareness of the nuances of household needs is considerably lower.
- In addition to cash, non-food items, and food-based support, women continue to need psycho-social and health support (particularly ante-natal care).
- Women's needs are not homogenous; they differ based on context, location, and history.

Aid can protect against extreme coping mechanisms

Afghans adopt sometimes harmful coping mechanisms to deal with their many unmet needs. Aid provision must go beyond food and cash assistance. People in Afghanistan want long-term solutions to become independent of aid: two-thirds of women and men are seeking work opportunities, and many others want tools or training. Many more women than men mention the need for shelter or accommodation and improved safety to become independent of aid. Humanitarian assistance has limited coverage of their needs and households are often forced to find alternatives.

What would enable you to live without aid in the future?

February–March 2023

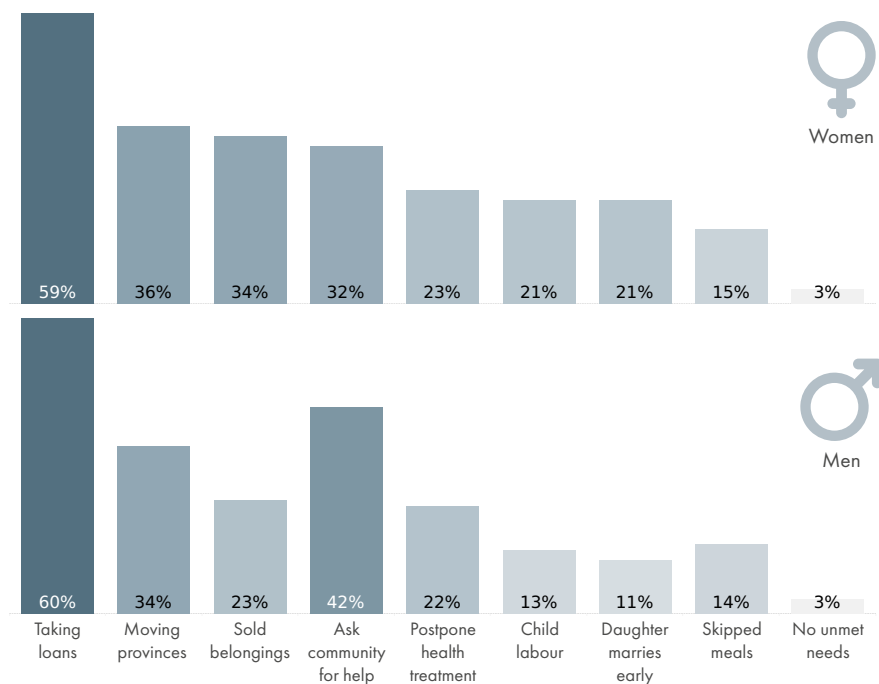


Percentages do not total 100% because respondents could choose multiple options.

The coping mechanism men and women mention most often is taking loans. Loans in Afghanistan are not always taken formally from banks or finance providers but rather from people within their personal network, such as immediate and extended family and friends. Many men move to other provinces or even abroad to earn an income (34% of households). Women often sell belongings to meet household needs (34%). People confirmed in qualitative discussions that women commonly sell items from their homes, including carpets, kitchen appliances, and jewellery.

How do you and your household cope when you are not able to meet everyone's needs in the family?⁴⁸

February–March 2023



Percentages do not total 100% because respondents could choose multiple options.

Consistent with findings from the Impact of the Food Crisis on Women and Girls in Afghanistan study,⁴⁹ women sell their mahr (the obligatory payment by the groom's family in the form of money or possessions to the bride). The mahr is a payment that is not to be used by the man and the household and remains the property of the bride to ensure independent assets. This is often in the form of jewels, so selling it thereby leaves women without any independent assets and even more dependent on their husbands.

People described even more extreme coping mechanisms, including skipping meals, delaying health treatments, and marrying daughters off earlier than planned. Humanitarian actors also highlighted that they too have seen increases in girls being married at earlier ages as a coping mechanism for poverty. This, according to one representative, was more pertinent over the winter months because of the harsh winter of 2022–2023; and it has been a means of families protecting their daughters when ensuring their honour and security is more challenging, with school closures and work opportunities reduced.

People living in the North East are five-times more likely to choose early marriage as a coping mechanism to deal with unmet needs. Women, people living in rural areas, or those of Hazara ethnicity also mention marrying daughters off early at a higher rate.

Receiving aid seems to protect families from having to marry their daughters off early as a coping mechanism: 21% of people who do not receive aid choose this option, compared with only 12% of those who have received assistance. It is important to highlight that bride payments are not legal in Afghanistan, and do not occur everywhere. Nevertheless, it remains a common practice among some communities, particularly in the north of the country, who have their own marital socio-cultural norms.

“

I sold all my jewellery because we had nothing else to sell. This was the only way to feed my family.

- Woman, Logar

“

I sold my household appliances to meet my needs. I sold my carpet and washing machine. When I don't have money, I can't send my children to school, so I sell household items.

- Woman, Faryab

“

At first, we had household goods to sell, such as teapots and a gas stove. We used the money to feed our children. Nobody gives loans now; it is very hard to live like this.

- Man, Logar

“

Early marriage is a practical solution for many now. There are no work opportunities for girls and families are resorting to marriage as a way to protect their daughters, their integrity and their honour. It can protect them from harassment and ensure their security because they become the full responsibility of their husband's household.

- Woman humanitarian worker, Afghanistan

⁴⁸ We introduced this question in February–March 2023 in our second round of data collection.

⁴⁹ CARE. November 2022. "The Impact of the Food Crisis on Women and Girls in Afghanistan".

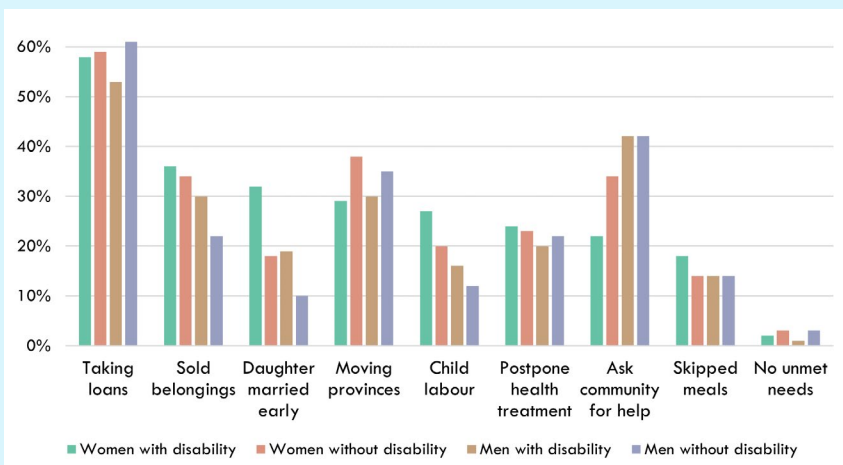
What do persons with disabilities say?

Women with disabilities mention early marriage of daughters as coping mechanisms much more often (32% vs 18%) than women without disabilities.

People with disabilities generally have more extreme coping mechanisms. They more often choose child labour and marrying daughters. Women with disabilities seek help from community members far less often, potentially indicating social isolation.

How do you and your household cope when you are not able to meet everyone's needs in the family?

February–March 2023



Percentages do not total 100% because respondents could choose multiple options.

Women-headed households more often have to resort to child labour (26% vs 13%), marrying off daughters (25% vs 13%), postponing health treatments (28% vs 23%) and skipping meals (22% vs 14%) than men-headed households. But they mention seeking loans or selling belongings less often than other women. It is considered socially inappropriate for women to request informal loans, and many women lack the documentation and financial credit to take out formal loans through banks.



Negative coping mechanisms: key findings

- Coping mechanisms are used by those who do not receive aid and those who receive aid, which many consider insufficient to meet household needs.
- Borrowing cash and selling household goods remain the most common coping mechanisms for men and women.
- Women are more likely than men to mention that they engaged their children in labour, married off their daughters earlier, and sold belongings.
- Women-headed households are more likely to adopt extreme coping mechanisms to meet basic needs, including resorting to child labour, postponing health treatment, marrying off daughters and skipping meals.

Women want to provide feedback to family members or other women

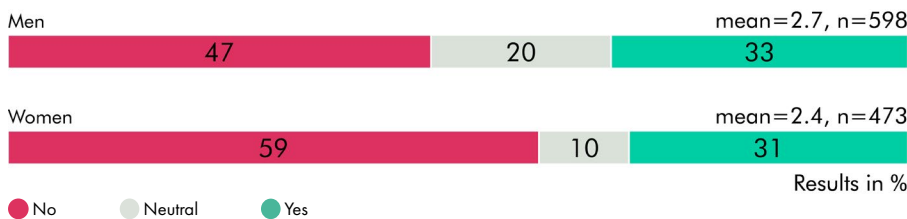
A topic of particular interest among humanitarian actors is the availability and effectiveness of feedback mechanisms that are appropriate for both women and men. Since the ban on women working for NGOs, women staff or volunteers going visit households and engaging with women has become almost impossible. Proactive feedback collection from women, therefore, becomes nearly impossible. Agencies are looking for alternative ways to engage with women and there is a consistent interest in phone-based or online mechanisms and other alternatives.

More people know how to provide feedback

More men (19% in November-December 2022 vs 33% in February-March 2023) and women (16% vs 31%) know how to provide feedback to humanitarian organisations since autumn last year. Although we could not identify apparent reasons for this increase in knowledge of feedback mechanisms, it is a positive indicator for aid agencies. The same share of people knows how to report instances of NGO staff misconduct since November last year (25% vs 36% for men; and 26% vs 30% for women).

Do you know how to make a suggestion or complaint about the humanitarian assistance received?

February–March 2023



Do you know how to report instances of NGO staff misconduct or abuse?

February–March 2023



Men prefer giving feedback directly to humanitarian organisations, followed by submitting their complaints to community leaders. Women, however, have a much stronger preference for communicating via family and friends, or community leaders, which should be understood as communication through a male counterpart rather than the women directly speaking with community leaders. Since the ban on women aid workers, women want to give feedback via family or community members more often (37% vs 23%). Religious leaders are now more favoured by both men and women (25% vs 10%).

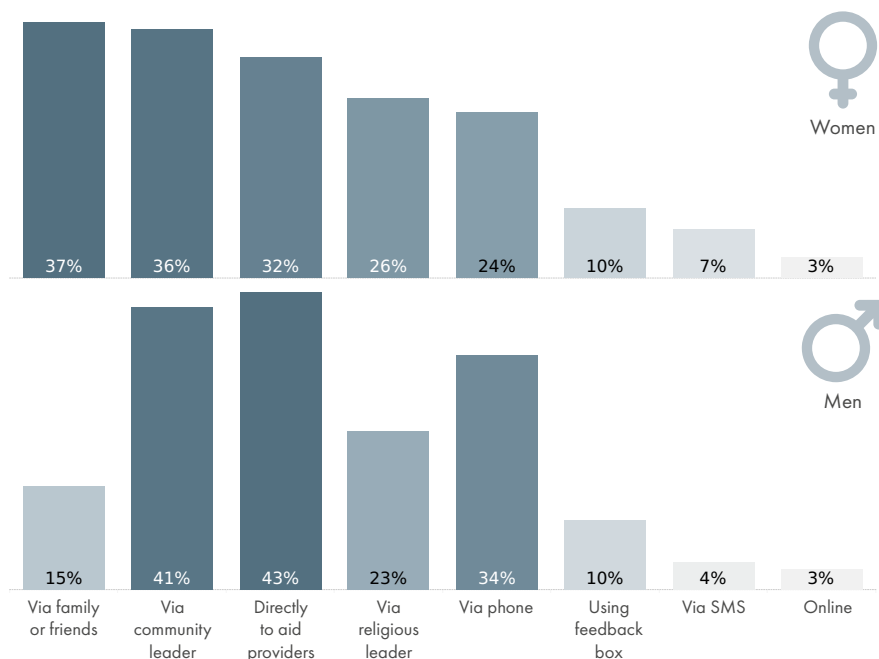
“

I would share my feedback with a local community leader or my husband, who could then tell him. I don't feel comfortable talking to men, so it would be better to tell the men from my family, to share our problems with the right people.

- Woman, Paktia

How would you like to make a complaint or provide feedback on the aid you received?

February–March 2023



Percentages do not total 100% because respondents could choose multiple options.

Male family members are the preferred feedback channel in the absence of women aid workers

To understand which feedback mechanisms are appropriate for women, from the viewpoint of men and women, we asked what channels they thought to be women appropriate. Both men and women find women reporting complaints via a male family member – who then takes the complaint to a community leader or elsewhere – the most appropriate feedback mechanism (27% men, 31% women). Women then say they prefer to speak with older women or women community leaders. There is little interest in using hotlines, speaking to community health workers or platforms such as Awaaz, especially among women.



The best option is to share our problems with local leaders and attorneys. But as women, it is not possible to talk with these people, although we could share our problems through our men.

- Woman, Paktia

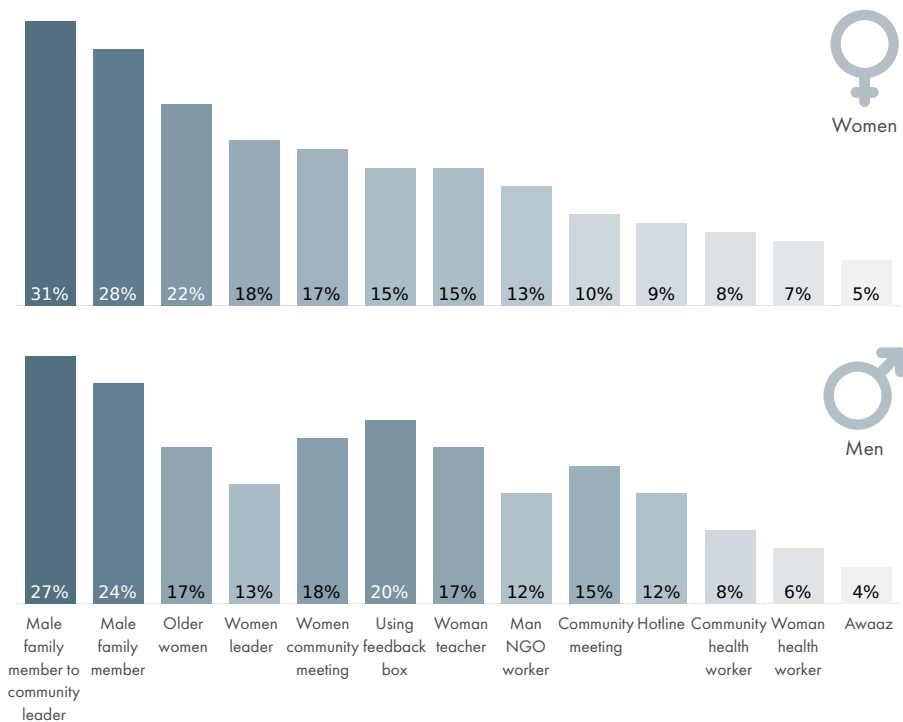


We need both women and men as representatives in the community because it is a traditional community, and aid organisations should pay attention to this. The only way is to select two women from the community, so the neediest women could share their feedback with them, and the women in turn to the organisations.

- Man, Logar

If there is no woman aid worker available, what would be appropriate channels for women and girls to provide feedback or make a complaint about humanitarian assistance?⁴⁹

February–March 2023



Percentages do not total 100% because respondents could choose multiple options.

Women in urban and rural areas have different preferences; rural women choose reporting via male family members to community leader twice as often (35% vs 16% in urban areas), again likely due to stronger social community ties in rural areas. Also, women in rural areas choose women-to-women channels more often, such as women teachers (17% vs 5% urban women), and women community meetings (18% vs 9% urban women). It is not only women who think women should provide feedback to other women. Forty-nine percent of our total sample (48% men and 50% women) prefer the women-to-women-based feedback channel, after that of male family members.

Phone-based feedback channels remain unpopular among women

Given the ban on women in NGOs, we looked more closely at the viability of phones as a means of communication with women. Consistent with opinions before the ban, phone-based feedback mechanisms are not popular, despite a slight increase in preference since the ban, potentially because women have less access to other types of feedback channels. Women in rural areas lack access to phones and the internet and are often digitally illiterate,⁵⁰ making phone-based feedback less inclusive.

Women in rural areas are the least likely to own a phone and have autonomy over when and how to use it, and the least likely to know how to use a phone. If they have a phone, it is often just used for making and receiving calls due to low literacy, owning a basic feature phone, or the lack of internet infrastructure. Women in urban areas have higher phone-usage: 70% own a phone, and only 11% cannot use a phone.

“

When employees come from the office, the women employees must come too, because it is not right for women to talk with men.

- Man, Faryab

“

I don't think phones are the best choice; it would be better to share our problems face-to-face with a formal women surveyor in the community. It is hard to use a phone for such issues.

- Woman, Logar

“

A face-to-face visit is the best method; it would definitely have positive impacts. It is hard for us to make a phone call to these organisations because we don't have mobile phones, and because this is a traditional community and such acts are viewed negatively.

- Woman, Pakita

“

I have no phone, and I do not know how to use one. I am not allowed to use the phone because my husband is against it.

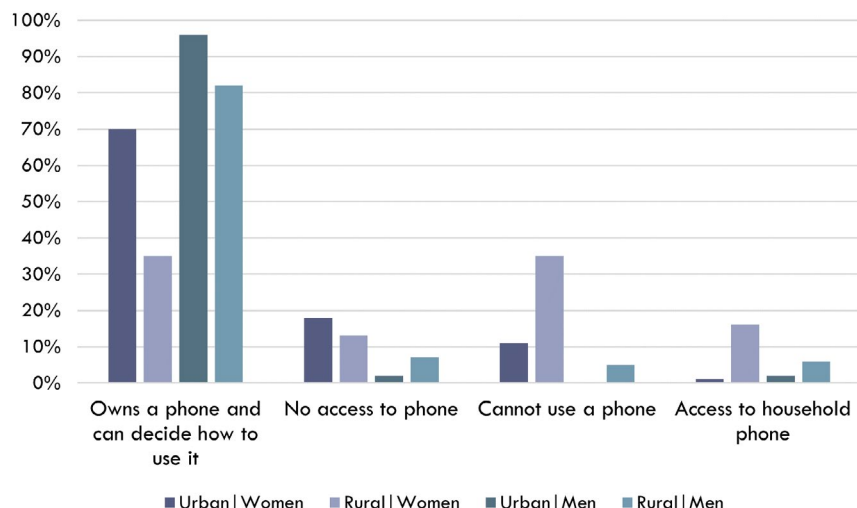
- Woman, Logar

⁵⁰ We introduced this question in February–March 2023 in our second round of data collection.

⁵¹ Ministry of Communications and IT. December 2020. “[Digitalization requires development, digital literacy, and skill](#)”.

Do you have access to a phone?

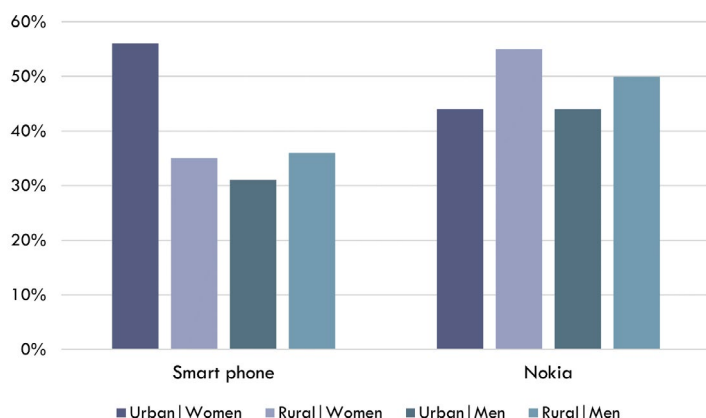
February–March 2023



Among those who own or can access phones, women in rural areas say they use basic feature mobile phones, such as a Nokia, without access to the internet. Women in urban areas often either have access to a phone or own one themselves or have a smartphone (56% urban vs 35% rural).

What type of phone do you have?

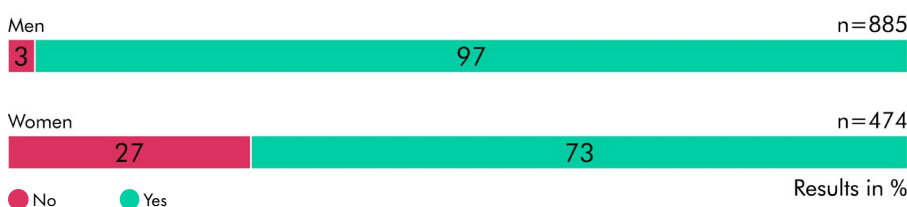
February–March 2023



Another barrier to phone-based feedback is that one out of four women indicate they cannot speak privately, and 40% of women with disabilities do not have privacy on the phone. Being unable to speak privately impacts the autonomy women have to speak freely about their experience with aid and to make recommendations specific to their needs. It is also unlikely that women will report sensitive feedback if they cannot speak privately. The presence of other family members, including other men or women, can affect the type of information and feedback provided and limit the willingness of women to provide specific details. In qualitative discussions, women said they would be uncomfortable making such calls in front of their family, and would prefer men in the family to act as interlocutors.

Can you speak privately on a phone if necessary?

February–March 2023



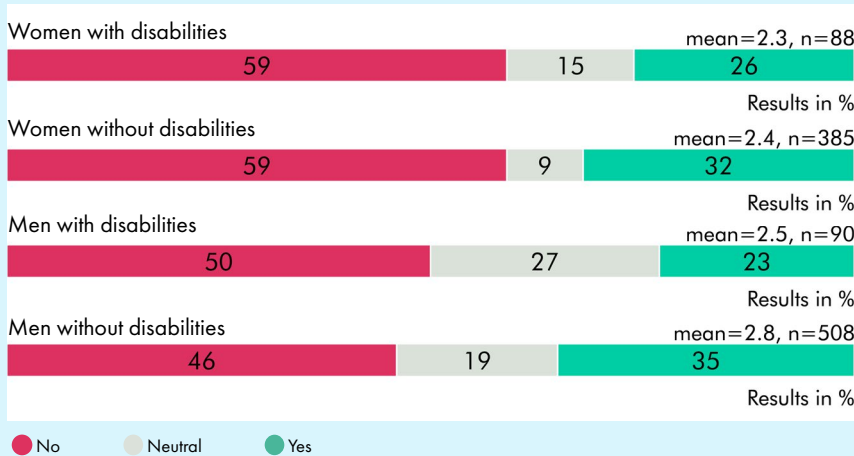


What do persons with disabilities say?

Persons with disabilities less frequently know how to share feedback about humanitarian assistance. They have less access to phones, and women are less likely to be able to speak privately if they have access. Despite these differences, their feedback preferences largely overlap with those of people without disabilities.

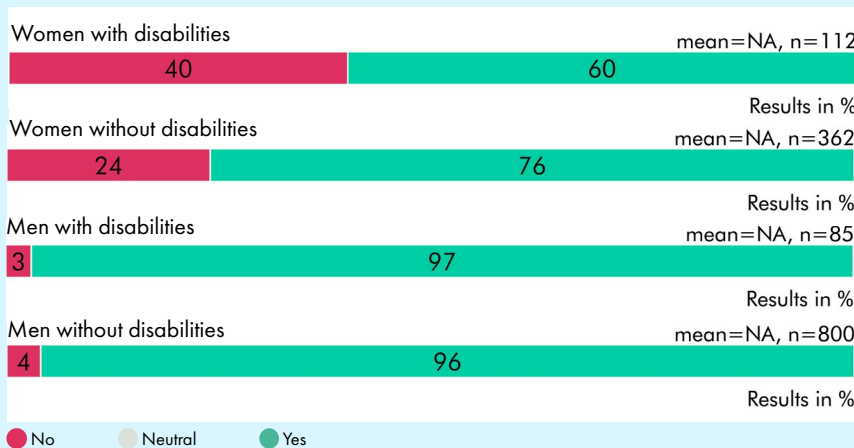
Do you know how to make a suggestion or complaint about the humanitarian assistance received?

February–March 2023



Can you speak privately on a phone if necessary?

February–March 2023



Feedback mechanisms appropriate for women and men: key findings

- Men and women still have limited understanding of how to provide feedback to humanitarian agencies, including how to report misconduct.
- Women have a strong preference for providing feedback through personal networks.
- In the absence of women aid workers, women are reliant on providing feedback through male family members.
- Face-to-face feedback is preferred among men and women.
- Phone-based feedback is particularly unpopular among rural women.

People ask to be involved in finding the most vulnerable in their community

"We request the women employees to return to work."

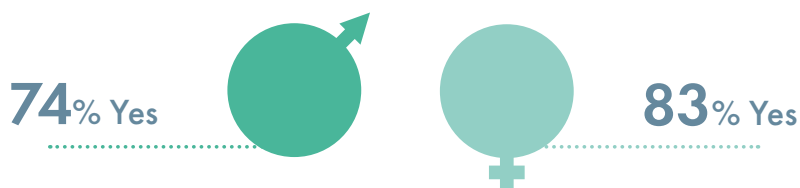
Men and women want direct consultations

A total of 86% of women and 83% of men expect to be consulted on aid provision in early 2023. This is consistent with feelings before the ban in late 2022 (91% women and 94% men). However, only 27% of men and 28% of women feel humanitarian organisations have consulted them.

Women often expect to be consulted through a male household member, and not directly. To understand direct consultations with women, we asked two questions, one about whether people feel consulted in general and the other focusing specifically on whether women are consulted. Although men have lower expectations that women should be consulted, three-quarters of men still say it is important. There is a large gap between respondents' expectations and perceived reality. Only 18% of men and women say women are consulted. Women living in rural areas have more positive perceptions: one-fifth feel consulted, as opposed to 6% in urban areas.

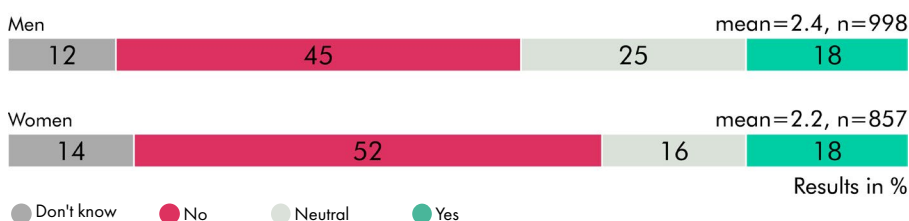
Is it important for you that NGOs consult women in your community when deciding what, where, when, and how humanitarian assistance is provided?⁵²

February–March 2023



Do NGOs consult women in your community when deciding where, when, and how humanitarian assistance is provided?⁵³

February–March 2023



Qualitative discussions echoed this. People felt that, in most instances, NGOs did not consult the majority of the community. NGOs might engage with local elders or community leaders but would rarely reach out further. Both men and women agreed that there is little-to-no direct consultation with women or more vulnerable populations during the aid selection and distribution process, and that aid organisations readily rely on feedback about the most vulnerable from community leaders and sometimes other influential men in their target communities.



The aid organisations only come and speak to a community leader. They don't talk to the rest of us about the aid they give or whom they give it to.

- Man, Paktia



I think a face-to-face visit is the best option because we would feel comfortable sharing our problems with a woman. But nobody asked us.

- Woman, Logar



If the aid package is not delivered to us by women, this is problematic. When a man calls us from the employee's office, our husbands ask, "Who called you?" We request the women employees to return to work.

- Woman, Faryab

⁵² We introduced this question in March 2023 in our second round of data collection.

⁵³ Ibid.

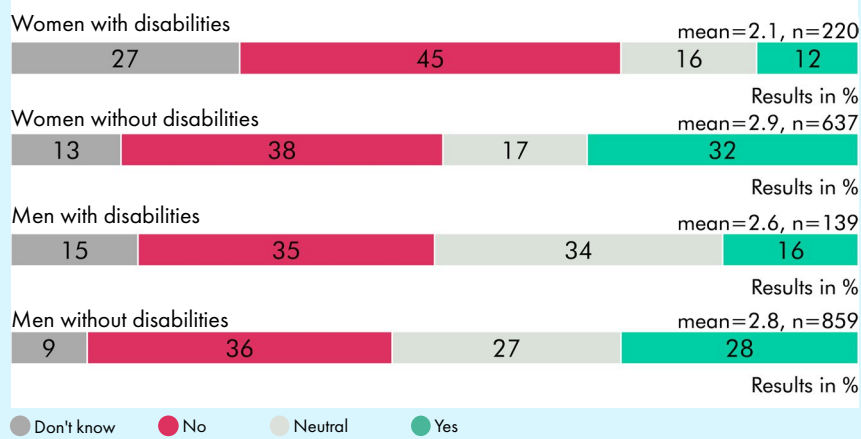


What do persons with disabilities say?

People, especially women, with disabilities feel less consulted than the wider population.

Do NGOs consult your community when deciding where, when, and how humanitarian assistance is provided?

February–March 2023



Communities want more involvement in aid targeting

We asked communities how they felt NGOs could best engage with women and girls in the current context. We presented focus group participants a series of scenarios to understand what people find appropriate formats to engage with women. Example of a scenario:

“An organisation wants to help the most vulnerable women in the community, women who might not have a husband, or whose husbands are elsewhere, such that they are the only ones in the home with their children. The organisation tries to identify these women to ensure they receive support. As they cannot bring women from the organisation into the community, they have decided to select one woman from the community who is a teacher and another woman who is considered a community elder. They have spoken with both women and asked them to go around the community and find women who have no men in their homes, or find women who have disabilities, or women they think are suffering most.”

Women and men overwhelmingly supported the suggestion to use local resources to support women’s access to aid:

“The women know who the poor women are; the men don’t think about women or know who deserves aid and who does not. Only a woman can understand another woman; she knows a woman’s heart. Women are best placed to establish which women are poor. The women from our community know this.” – Woman, Faryab

“Yes, women can best identify poor people. Because I am from the village, I could find them. Men would be happier with women from our community being involved in the selection; they would better trust what is happening. Two women in the village can identify poor women.” – Woman, Faryab

“Yes of course, this is a good option. But we need to choose the best women in the community. Local women can vote to select the women, so we know we can trust them.” – Woman, Paktia

*“I think this is a great way to identify women who are most at risk.”
– Man, Paktia*

“In my opinion, selecting women is better than using employees from the office, because they already know how to work. It is better than having no women supporting at all.” – Man, Faryab

Only in Logar province women were concerned that women might choose their relatives or friends for aid. They suggested others need to be involved in the selection process to verify if the right women were selected to receive aid. Communities said that providing salaries might make women more willing to participate and their husbands to provide permission for their participation.

Communities felt that using local resources was not only beneficial for engaging with women but also for the process of entrusting communities to make decisions and contribute to the discussion on aid allocation, thereby creating a great sense of ownership and transparency.



Participation of both women and men: key findings

- Men and women expect to be consulted about how aid is distributed, but largely feel that they are not consulted.
- The majority of the population agree that women should be consulted, but most feel women are excluded from consultations.
- Women and girls rely on men in their personal networks for information about aid, and resort to men speaking on their behalf to aid providers.
- Communities want NGOs to engage with women and to find socially appropriate mechanisms to engage with women about their individual needs.
- Communities are supportive and positive about using local resources to cover the gaps caused by the ban on women in NGOs, such as using women from the local community to support in selection, distribution, and feedback.

What next?

We will conduct another round of quantitative and qualitative data collection in the third quarter of 2023. By doing so, we aim to track people’s perceptions on gender-responsive aid provision over time and learn from good practices by humanitarian actors in engaging with women in the current context. In workshops with humanitarian workers, we will discuss these good practices and community recommendations, to allow for engagement with women in the Afghanistan humanitarian response.

Methodology

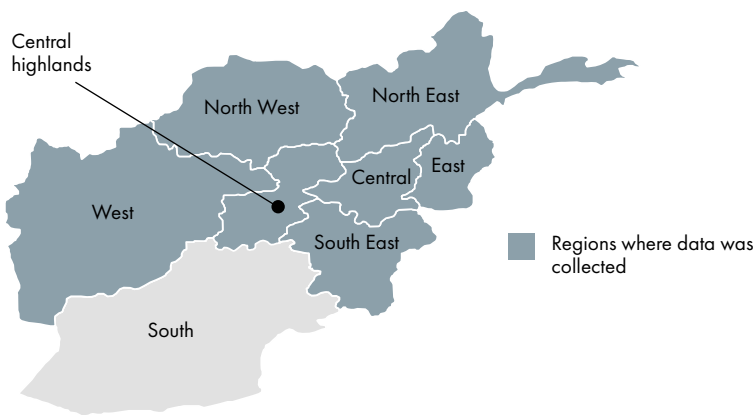
Design

The study adopted a mixed-method approach, including both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. Data were collected over two rounds. We completed the first during October and December 2022; the second from February to March 2023.

Sampling

Quantitative sampling

The data collection targeted the general Afghanistan population. However, due to difficulties faced by the enumerators in accessing certain areas and being granted access by the local administration, we decided to target the same districts covered during the survey conducted by Ground Truth Solutions in Afghanistan in 2022. This includes 21 districts across 16 provinces and seven UN regions. Having identified the coverage area of our survey, we proceeded with a two-stage sampling design.



In the first stage, we sampled 35 sites (primary survey units, PSU) with probability proportional to size (PPS) and stratifying by urbanity using [GridSample](#). We used [Worldpop](#) data for projected population estimates in Afghanistan in 2020 and [Global Human Settlement Layer – Settlement Model grid data](#) to distinguish between urban and rural areas. We reviewed the PSUs through satellite images. Moreover, foreseeing difficulties in accessing certain areas, we provided replacement locations.

In the second stage, interviewers performed a random walk within the allocated PSUs to sample the households for interviews (secondary survey units, SSU). In the second stage, we stratified our SSUs by gender.

The total planned sample size was 1,925 (with 330 and 1,595 respondents from urban and rural areas respectively). With some under- and over-sampling at some sites we reached 37 sites (two more than originally planned) and interviewed 1,855 respondents. Given the high design effect estimated in the previous round of quantitative data collection, we prioritised targeting as many sites as possible over increasing the SSU size per site.

Qualitative sampling

For the purpose of the study and to ensure effective triangulation, we sampled participants for the qualitative research from the same target community. We selected a total of three communities. Selected communities had been recipients of aid since the ban on women in NGOs in December 2022. Selection also focused on sites where women had received aid since the ban. The selection of provinces included Faryab, Logar, and Paktia.

We conducted three focus group discussions (FGDs) with men, three with women who

had received aid, and one individual interview in each community with a community leader. We selected a total of seven participants for each FGD. This ensured a sufficient number of respondents to build a valuable discussion, but not too many to create limited opportunities for participants to expand on their opinions and experiences. We completed all discussions and interviews in the local language – either Dari or Pashto.

Quantitative tools

We designed the quantitative data collection tools using the previous survey implemented by Ground Truth Solutions in Afghanistan in 2022, including our so-called core questions (see table below) that measure the quality of aid in terms of information provision, participation, transparency, fairness, relevance, and feedback mechanisms. The survey tool also included questions on gender-specific access barriers. The survey tool was shared and discussed with GiHA working group members and Accountability to Affected People (AAP) working group leads.

To measure intersectional vulnerabilities, we included Washington Group questions, and multiple demographic questions to measure socio-economic status and other demographic features of the final sample.

Dimension	Survey question
Aid provided by the same gender	<p>Expectation: Is it important to you that you can always receive humanitarian assistance from an aid worker of the same gender as you?</p> <p>Perception: When you receive aid, do you always receive humanitarian assistance from someone from the same gender as you?</p>
Consulted on how aid is provided	<p>Expectation: Is it important for you that NGOs consult your community when deciding what, where, when, and how humanitarian assistance is provided?</p> <p>Perception: Do NGOs consult your community when deciding where, when, and how humanitarian assistance is provided?</p>
Needs covered by aid	<p>Expectation: Is it important to you that humanitarian assistance meets your all your most essential needs?</p> <p>Perception: Does humanitarian assistance meet all your most essential needs?</p>
Aid reaches most vulnerable people	<p>Expectation: Is it important to you that humanitarian assistance is provided to the most vulnerable in your community?</p> <p>Perception: Do you think humanitarian assistance is provided to the most vulnerable in your community?</p>
Feeling informed about aid	<p>Expectation: Is it important for you to be informed about the humanitarian assistance available to you?</p> <p>Perception: Do you feel informed about the humanitarian assistance available to you?</p>

Qualitative tools

We designed qualitative interview guides through a thematic framework. We included a selection of themes, based on research questions, and then designed subsequent research questions to explore each area of interest in more depth.

The themes covered included:

- experience of receiving aid since the ban on women in NGOs in December 2022;
- women's gendered needs;
- opinions about the ban on women in NGOs and how to continue accessing women in communities;
- gender-appropriate feedback mechanisms;
- trust in humanitarian actors.

Within each qualitative guide, we included scenario questions as an alternative way of exploring norms and expectations around aid. The scenarios were presented to each kind of participant (women aid recipients, men, and community leaders) as a means of comparing responses and understanding the construction of gender norms in more detail.

Language

We conducted surveys and interviews using a Dari or Pashto questionnaire or interview guide. The language was chosen based on the respondent's language preference.

Analysis

Weighting

We used design weights to reflect the slightly different sample sizes per site and the selection probability when selecting the sites. The design-based weights were raked to marginal totals by age group and gender based on the demographics of population in Afghanistan, based on UN population data. The raking step ensures that the survey respondents, when weighted, represent their proper proportions in the population with respect to age group and gender.

Coverage and exclusion

During the data collection, we excluded Kohistan district because of flooding and replaced the two sites assigned to it with available rural sites in other provinces.

Due to work restrictions on women enumerators, in the district of Balkh we could only interview men respondents.

Precision of estimates

To calculate margins of error per question we used the "Survey" R package, a statistical software used in R programming, specifying our survey design and the raking adopted as specified above. Note that precision of our estimates varies from question to question, and sample size also varies per question (as some questions are follow-up questions asked to a subset of the total sample).

For questions asked at least to 90% of all respondents, margins of error range between 2.8 % and 9.6% points for Likert questions. Although binary questions were follow-up questions and therefore asked to a subset of the total sample size, estimated margins of error range from 0.5% to 8.6% points.

Intracluster correlations resulted to be the highest (about 0.4) for questions related to access, to the importance of receiving aid from aid workers of the same gender as the

respondents, and to the participation of women in decisions related to aid planning and implementation.

Limitations

Adaptation of the Likert scale from 5 point to 3 point

Given the difficulties encountered in our previous round in training the enumerators on the 1–5 point Likert scale questions, we decided to use a 3 point Likert scale with “no,” “neutral,” and “yes” as answer options. This choice somewhat reduces the nuances of our ordinal variables but does not impact our analysis and allows a more reliable comparison with the data collected in 2022.

GPS collection issues

Quality assurance practices required enumerators to collect GPS locations for all interviews completed. These GPS locations are supposed to be automatically recorded as part of the Survey CTO programme. In several instances however, the app did not collect the information, despite the enumerator and supervisor consistently demonstrating collection in previous interviews. This caused delays in terms of quality control and brought survey quality into question (for those without GPS locations). It appears, however, to have been a malfunction in the operating system of Survey CTO. Furthermore, local authorities were suspicious of enumerators collecting GPS data, so availability of GPS data was dropped as a quality criterium.

Identifying sampled locations

The Ground Truth Solutions team led the design of the sampling procedure, including the selection of sites. Using a grid-sampling approach, Google Earth and maps were needed to identify the selected so-called polygons. There were considerable challenges among the field teams in identifying the selected locations, as they were not selected based on a specific village but rather composed of geographic space which combined multiple villages.

Permission to conduct interviews with women

The current de facto authorities’ policies concerning women – specifically around mobility – have created anxiety across the population, particularly in rural communities. The team found, therefore, that attempting to identify and invite women to participate in FGDs was more difficult than before August 2021. Women and their husbands were more suspicious of our activities, with fear that information would be shared with authorities and used inappropriately. A letter of support from UN Women and buy-in from community leaders helped to ensure confidence in some instances. There were three instances, however, when the research team were unable to secure permission and had to change communities.

Permission to record interviews

Salma Consulting holds an internal policy that interviews completed in the field must be recorded. This ensures a higher quality of data available to the analysis team and reduces the loss of data that can occur through summaries of data either by translators or facilitators. This has always proved to be a difficult task. When interviews cannot be recorded, the research team is directed not to go ahead with the interview and find an alternative group of participants. For this round of data collection, the refusal for recording happened more regularly with women than men. In two instances, the team was refused the right to record. As such, interviews did not take place and replacements were completed.

Generalisability

Qualitative data was only collected among women in rural communities and therefore cannot highlight any subjective differences between urban and rural women.



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