



Photo Credit: Women for Women International, July 2022.

“No One Hears Our Voices”

A One Year Update: Situational assessment and recommended actions based on the perspectives and experiences of Afghan women

Introduction

In the year since the Taliban takeover of Kabul and withdrawal of US and NATO forces, Afghanistan has continued its descent into an economic, human rights, and humanitarian crisis and Afghan women have struggled against growing restrictions on their right to movement, education, food, sustainable livelihoods, and security.

In March 2022, Women for Women International released a report titled “No One Hears Our Voices” based on surveys and interviews conducted between November 2021 and February 2022 with women who were current or former participants in our *Stronger Women, Stronger Nations* program. Afghan women were reeling from the shock of the takeover, the suspension of services and economic activity, and the uncertainty of the country’s future. At the time, Afghan women told us they were scared, isolated, and suffering and they pleaded for the world to hear their voices and for action and solidarity from the international community. A year later, their fears of a bleak future are closer to being realized and their hopes for action are dwindling.

The international community has a responsibility to support Afghan women and Afghan people in addressing the humanitarian, human rights, and women’s rights crisis in their country. Over the past year, this responsibility has not been met and promises of action have not been delivered.

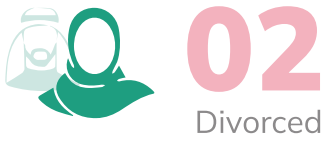
In July 2022, Women for Women International conducted a follow-up survey with 204 women and 8 focus group discussions (FGDs) with groups of 10-12 women each across three provinces - Nangarhar, Kunar, and Parwan - where we currently work. This report provides an update to the situational assessment conducted as part of the “No One Hears Our Voices” report in March 2022. Overall, women report that their economic situations have worsened day by day, and that their hopes for their future grow darker as their freedoms are restricted and their daughters stay out of secondary school.

We also followed up on our interviews with Afghan women’s rights organizations (WROs) conducted in March 2022 to interview 15 women working with 15 different human and women’s rights organizations to understand the evolving challenges of continuing their operations within Afghanistan.

This report also revisits the policy recommendations that were derived from the experiences that Afghan women shared with us in March 2022 – in terms of whether Afghan women feel substantive progress has been made against those recommendations, whether the recommendations still resonate with women in Afghanistan, and what Afghan women would like to tell the international community today.

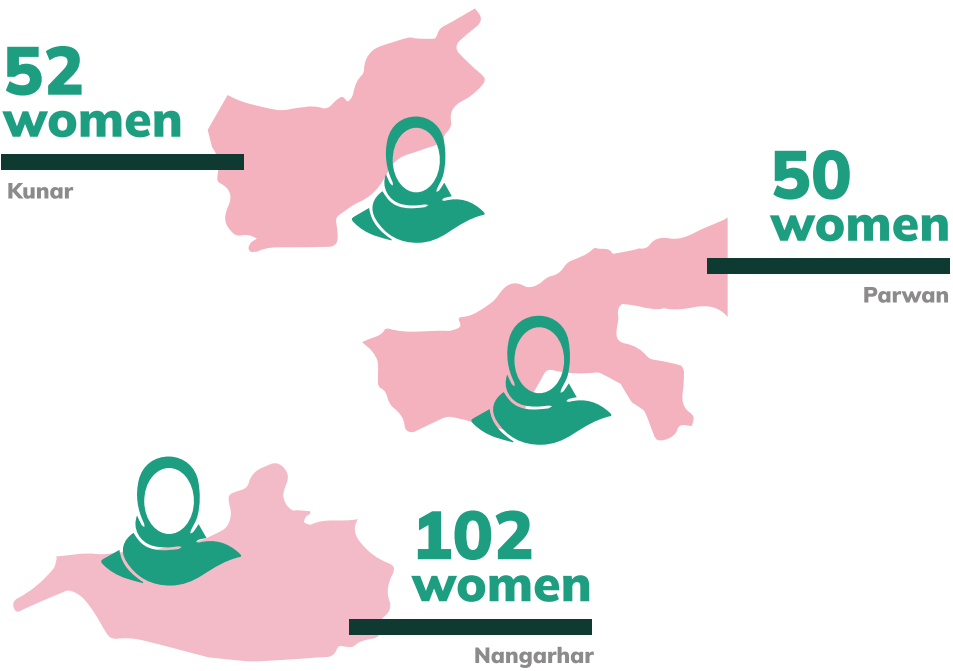
Situational Assessment Findings

Who we asked

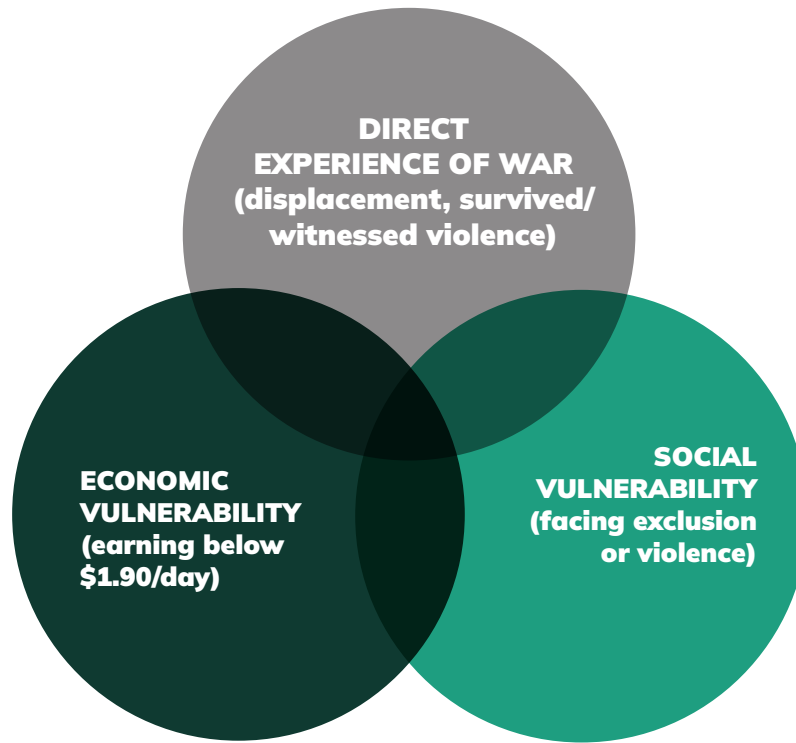


62
out of
204
women participated
in the first survey
conducted in
November 2021

3 provinces



Women for Women International prioritizes reaching the most marginalized – and often under-represented and under-served – women survivors of war in its approach to both programming and in amplifying needs and experiences to decisionmakers. As a result, the women who responded to this survey meet Women for Women International’s standard program eligibility criteria, which specifically targets women facing multiple, often overlapping vulnerabilities including:



Headlines: Top Changes, Challenges, and Needs

Changes

| Response | Frequency |
|--|------------|
| Economic and joblessness situation, including increased price of goods | 113 (60%) |
| Restriction on women, women’s rights, and freedom | 29 (15%) |
| Education and schools shut down for secondary school age girls | 25 (13%) |
| Psychological issues | 16 (8%) |
| I do not know | 7 (4%) |
| TOTAL | 190 |

Table 1 What are the biggest changes you have experienced personally over the past year?

Out of 190 responses received, over half of the responses included economic challenges – particularly the lack of jobs and rising prices of goods - as a significant change to their personal situation following the Taliban takeover of Kabul. Other responses described shifts in restrictions on women’s rights, the closing of schools, and the onset of mental health and psychosocial issues.

Challenges

| Response | Frequency |
|---------------------------------------|------------|
| Restriction on women and freedom | 80 (42%) |
| Economic situation and joblessness | 41 (22%) |
| I do not know | 18 (9%) |
| Security and safety issues | 12 (6%) |
| School shut down and no education | 11 (6%) |
| Internal displacement and immigration | 7 (4%) |
| Domestic violence | 5 (3%) |
| TOTAL | 190 |

Table 2: What are the current greatest challenges within your communities?

When asked about the current greatest challenges within their communities, the economic situation also emerged as a frequent response. However, in contrast to the responses about key ‘changes’, this set of responses on ‘challenges’ cited restrictions on women’s freedoms as many times as all the other challenges combined. Other specific challenges raised by respondents were a lack of water for drinking and irrigation, personal security and safety issues, domestic violence, and internal displacement. Compared to surveys conducted in March 2022, Afghan women cited more infrastructure challenges such as healthcare and water access in July 2022. The inclusion of these new challenges may reflect the inclusion of a broader geographic sample than the one used in our March research, but the findings from the follow-up surveys conducted in July 2022 align with the findings outlined in other reports that forewarned and tracked the deterioration Afghanistan’s infrastructure over the past year. ^{1,2,3,4}

Needs

| Responses | Frequency |
|--|------------|
| Economic and job opportunities | 92 (48%) |
| Education and access to school for girls | 41 (22%) |
| Women’s rights and freedom | 30 (16%) |
| Emergency and financial assistance | 15 (8%) |
| Security and safety | 12 (6%) |
| TOTAL | 190 |

Table 3: What are or have been the most important needs of you and your family during this time since August 2021?

Respondents indicated that within the context of these changes and challenges, their greatest needs over the past year have also been economic. Afghan women noted that they need a job and some source of income. The economic challenges are interrelated with many of the other challenges raised – for example, respondents described how the emergency and financial assistance or having a job would help them support their children to go to school or to afford the rising prices of basic goods.

Additionally, access to education and school for girls and alleviation of restrictions on women's rights were cited as important needs – needs which are also interrelated to many of the challenges faced. Afghan women described their desire to participate in social activities and income-generating activities,

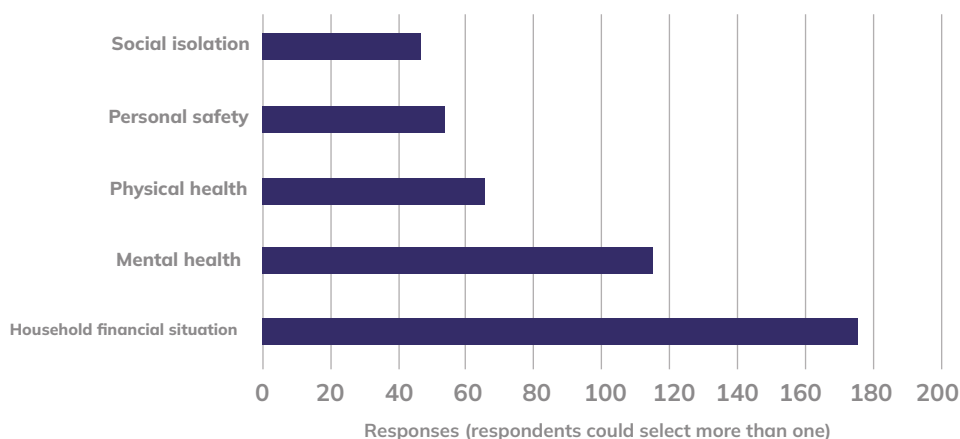
and to travel freely between villages and markets to conduct business or sell products. Women for Women International's program coordinators also described how these restrictions pose challenges for women in converting the vocational training they receive through our curriculum to actual income-generating activities. The economic challenges that currently affect all Afghans in their communities also pose unique challenges for women's income-generating activities, since it is difficult for neighbors to afford the goods that they are selling and the restrictions on movement mean that women cannot always travel to other markets to access other customers.

Other specific needs that were identified by Afghan women included electricity, physical security and safety in the communities, and access to operational health facilities and centers.

Financial Challenges

“ Previously if we were eating two times meal, now we are eating one time and also from one bread we have brought it to half bread. ”

In which of the following areas has your situation gotten worse in the year since August 2021?

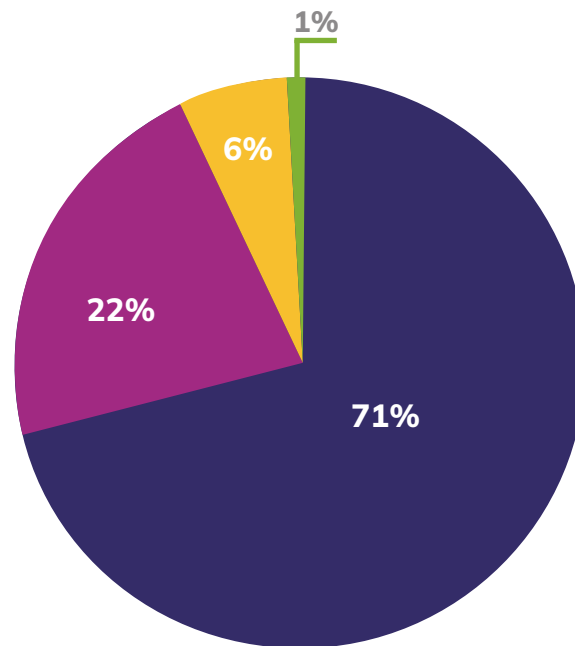


In response to open-ended questions, again the economic situation emerged as a top concern and challenge for Afghan women. The majority of women surveyed reported that their weekly household income dropped following August 2021 and has continued to drop through the course of the past year:

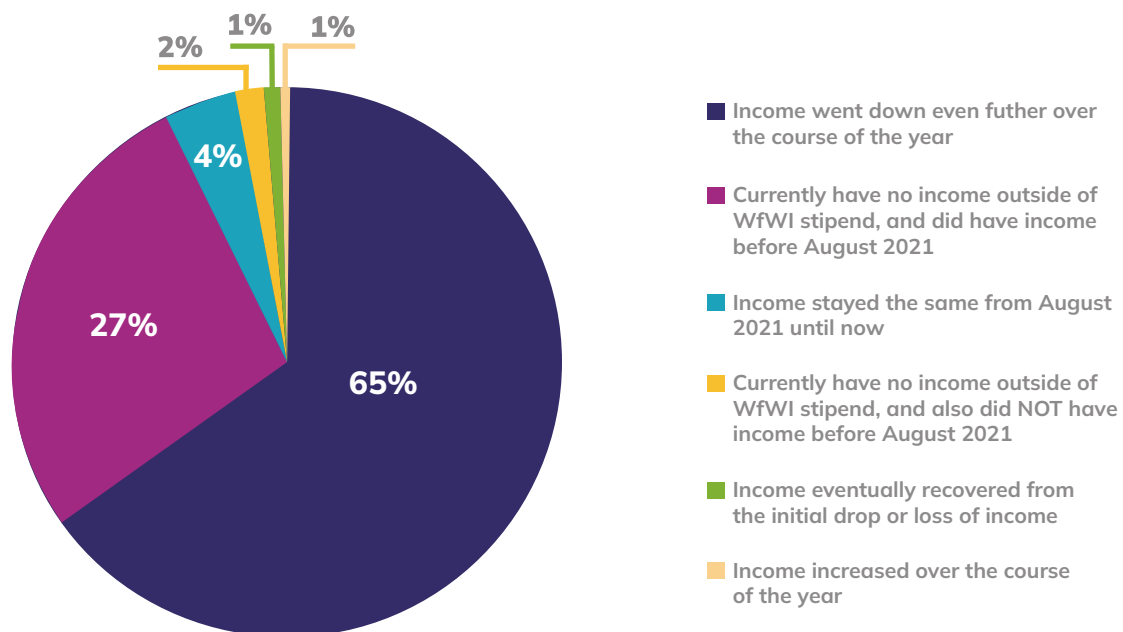
- A quarter of women reported that their income dropped to zero. Overall, 92% of women reported that over the course of the year, their income either continued to go down or dropped to and remained at zero.
- Only 4% of women reported always having enough to eat, with a little over half reporting that they often or sometimes did not have enough to eat at home.
- 33% of women reported having enough to eat but not always what they wanted
- Women shared that they are concerned about a lack of nutritious food for their children.

How did your weekly household income change immediately after the August 2021 Taliban takeover?

■ Gone down ■ No income ■ Stayed the same ■ Gone up



How has your weekly household income changed in the year since the August 2021 Taliban takeover?



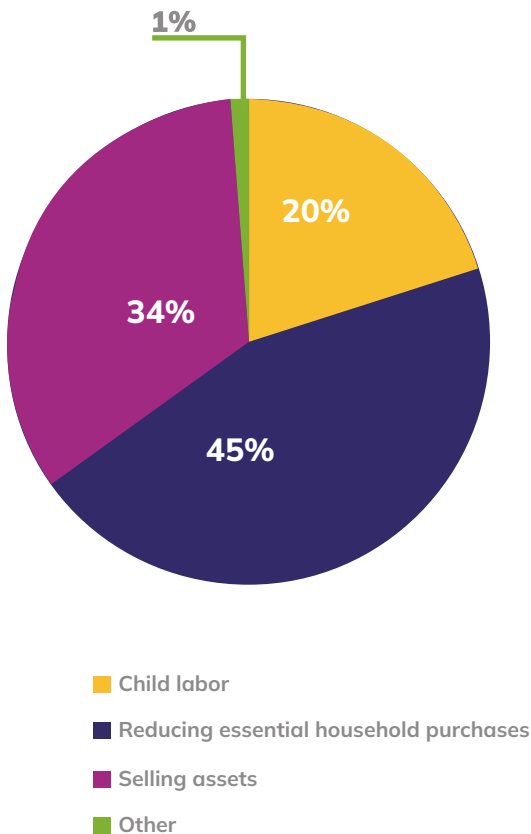
As of July 2022, a high percentage of Afghan women were still resorting to negative coping mechanisms, and the types of coping mechanisms cited have broadened since March 2022 to include child marriage and selling children. Child marriage and selling children had been mentioned in the UN Gender Alert for Afghanistan and in other media prior to July 2022, but were not explicitly mentioned by the Afghan women that Women for Women International interviewed in March 2022.⁵

Have you felt the need to resort to any negative coping strategies during this time of the de facto authorities?

What negative coping strategies have you applied?

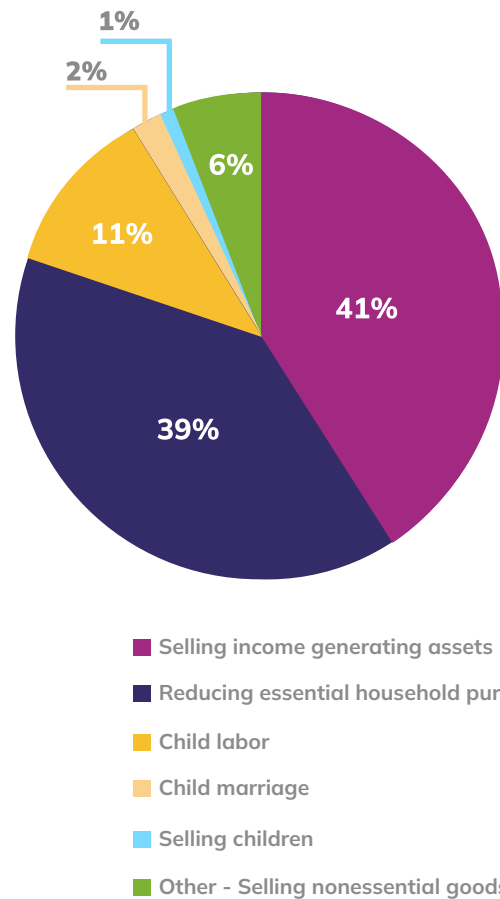
MARCH 2022

98% of women reported resorting to negative coping strategies

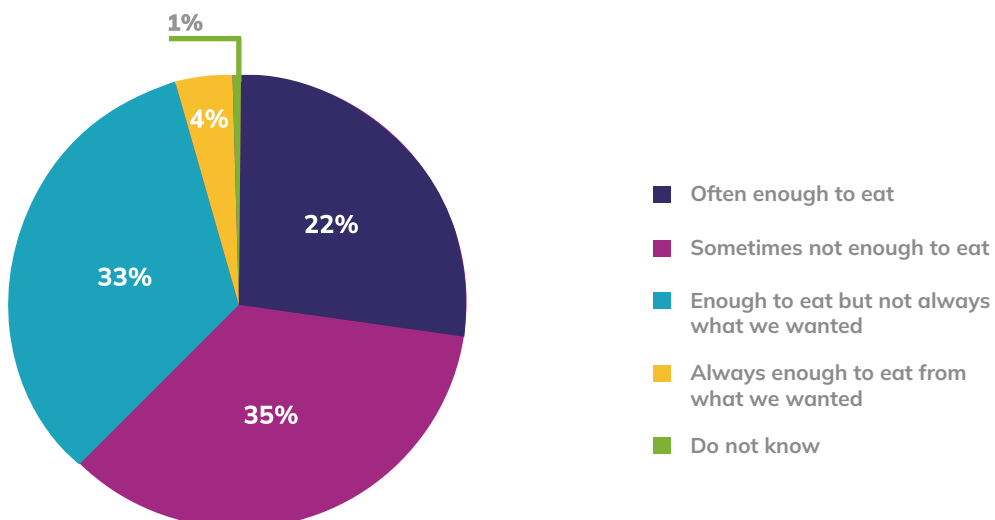


JULY 2022

84% of women reported resorting to negative coping strategies

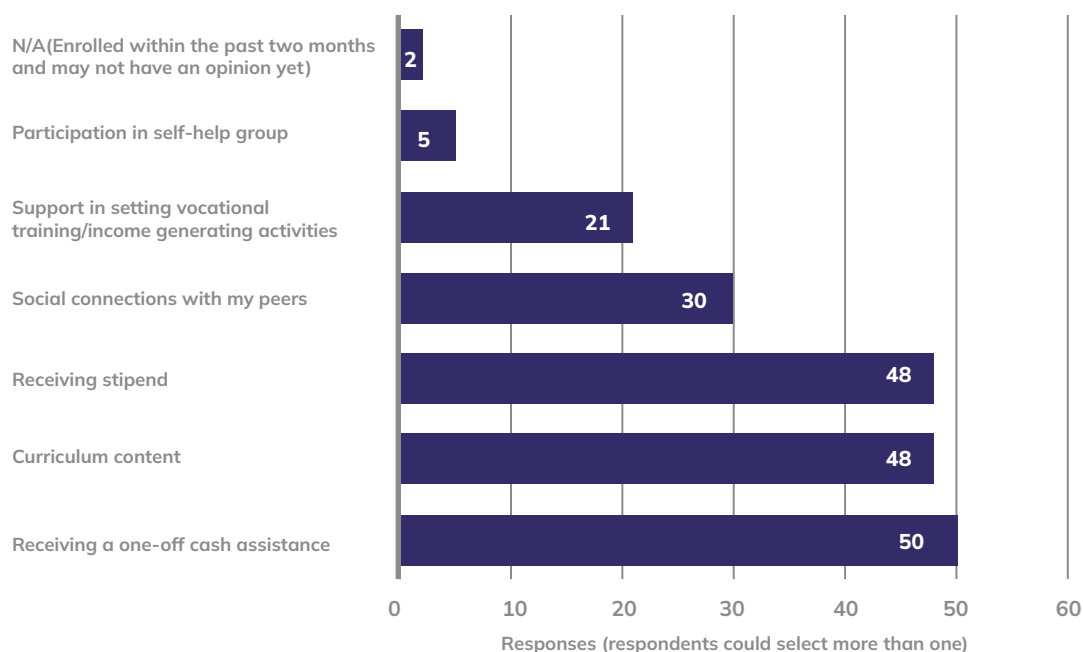


Which of the following best describes your household's situation right now?



Afghan women reported that the cash assistance, stipend, and curriculum content were the most highly valued components of the programs that Women for Women International is administering. In our March 2022 interviews, the social connection with peers emerged as the most important component of the program. The initial emphasis on the value of social connection was likely linked to the fact that women had been largely in hiding due to safety and security risks, as well as the lack of initial clarity around the restrictions that the de facto authorities would impose on women. The increased value of the stipends and the curriculum may also reflect the worsening economic crisis, lack of alternative support from other actors, and the suspension of other education and learning opportunities for women.

What components of WFWI's program do you value the most?



Freedom of Movement and Participation

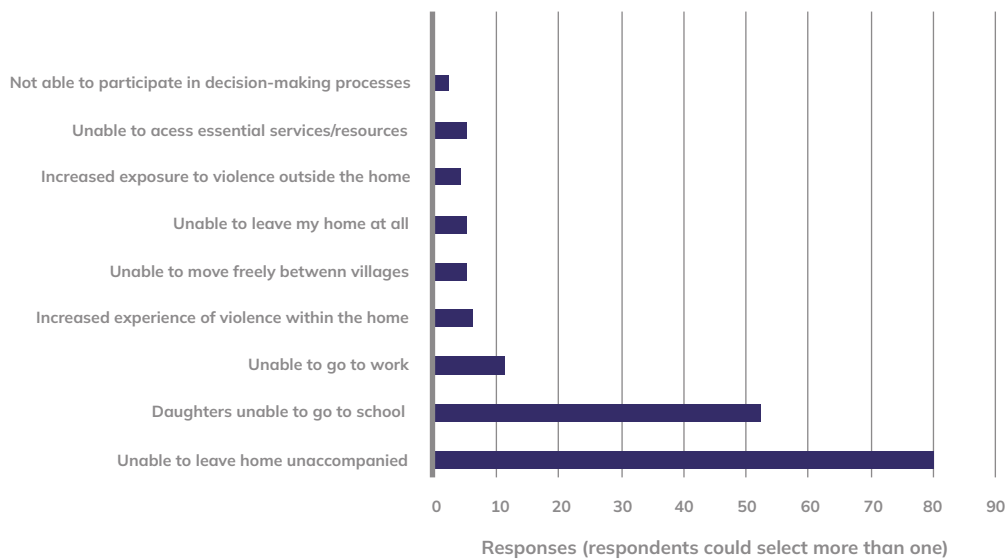
“ Day by day, Taliban are passing new rules which shorten the circle of our life. ”

Of the women interviewed, 83% reported an increase in restrictions on freedoms and rights under the de facto authorities compared to the period before August 2021. Afghan women described being unable to leave the home unaccompanied or at all, and restrictions on participation or attendance in school, work, or free movement across villages.

More women reported that it is not at all safe or less safe than before to leave home in the July 2022 surveys compared to surveys conducted in December 2021. 46% of women also reported that it has become increasingly difficult to fully participate in Women for Women International's program. Program staff have elaborated that the challenges women face in participating in programs are often related to

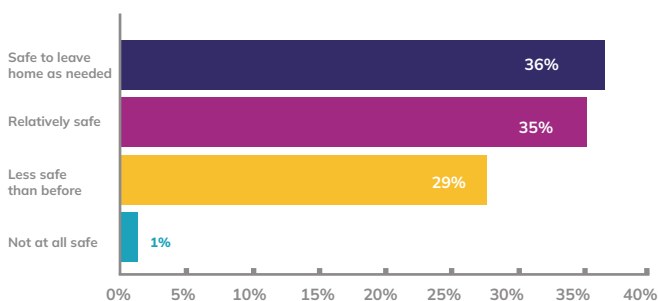
security concerns and restrictions in movement, which also affect their ability to translate vocational training skill to income generation. We mitigate these challenges by finding spaces that are less public to conduct trainings and by providing vocational training skills that are specific to the opportunities and market available within each community and which have a dual purpose as a subsistence food source such as agriculture or poultry kits.

What types of restrictions have you faced?



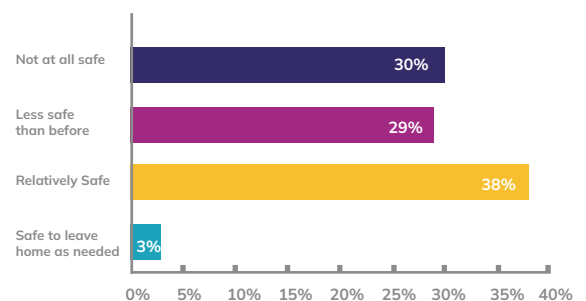
March 2022

How safe is it for you to leave home?



July 2022

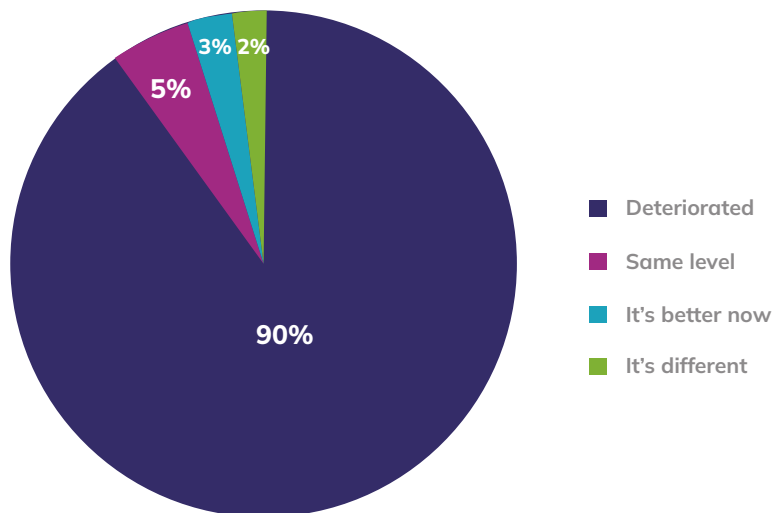
How safe is it for you to leave home?



“ After a lot of struggle, we are not able to fulfill the need of our family which created psychological problems for us. ”

A high majority of Afghan women surveyed – 90% – also report a deterioration in household happiness and life satisfaction. Afghan women shared that the past year has impacted family relationships negatively, particularly between spouses. Afghan women shared with interviewers that there had been an increased incidence of intimate partner violence, which women attribute to the financial challenges currently straining their relationships. Further, Afghan women describe a negative mental and psychological impact on families and children due to the ambient stress of leaving the household into uncertain security environments in areas where the news of nearby clashes with the de facto authorities causes stress for the men in the family.

How has the past year affected your household's level of happiness and life satisfaction?



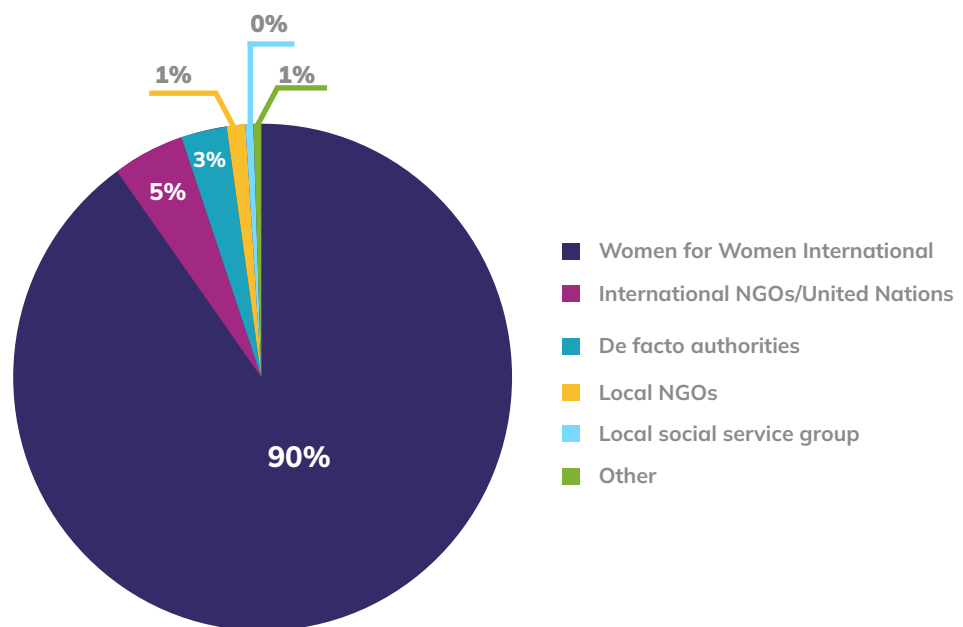
51% of women also report a greater need for psychosocial support, compared to 91% of the women interviewed in December 2021. The lower percentage of women self-identifying a need for psychosocial support may reflect the fact that Women for Women International has already integrated mental health modules and self-help groups into its programming and curriculum for women enrolled in our program, which means that some psychosocial support is already available to the women who participated in this survey.

Resources and Support Available

In view of these challenges facing Afghan women and communities and the aid thus far delivered to Afghanistan by the international community, Women for Women International asked Afghan women about the assistance they might be receiving and what was most useful for them.

85% of Afghan women surveyed reported receiving external assistance. However, of this group who have received assistance, most of them indicated that they received this support through Women for Women International and in a few cases through other international NGOs. Some of the Afghan women surveyed mentioned a World Food Programme distribution made in the winter of 2021-2022. However, it seems that most of them have fallen beyond the reach of direct humanitarian aid assistance.

Who provided the assistance you have received?



What type of assistance have you received?

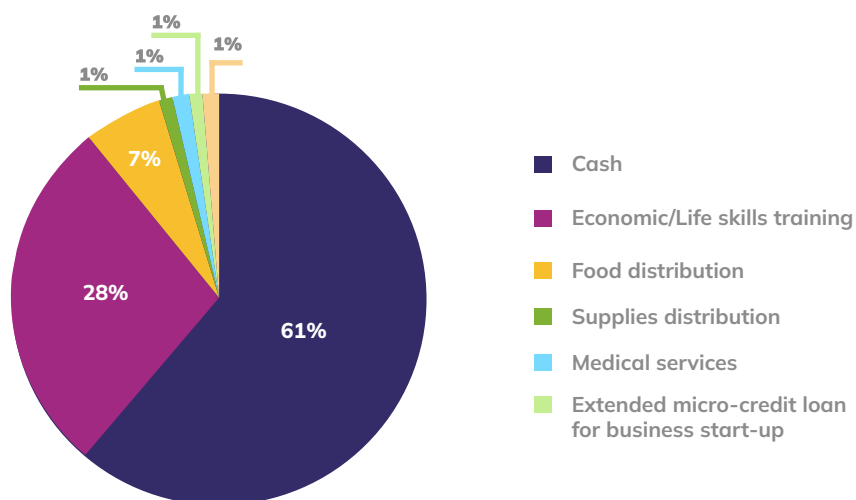




Photo Credit: Women for Women International, July 2022.

When asked about suggestions and comments on how to best support women during this time, survey respondents asked for the continuation and expansion of the Women for Women International program and for Women for Women International to continue advocating for women’s rights and job opportunities for women. Afghan women interviewed described the specific expansions they would like to see in Women for Women International’s vocational training program. In particular, they would like additional practical courses such as tailoring, poultry, and livestock management, as well as support in creating or accessing marketplaces for their products and goods in light of the restricted freedom of movement which affect their ability to travel between villages to different marketplaces to sell goods. Women also recommended increasing program stipend amounts for women and conducting more literacy and mental health programs and trainings, as they feel that the classes and trainings help them to psychologically bear the stress of their situation.

Recommendations for Action: Reflecting on the Past Year and Further Action Needed

“ The situation is getting worse and we are disappointed...in the previous government, we did not have security but instead we had jobs, we had been free to travel, our daughters went to schools and we had hopes for the futures. But, everything is vis versa now. ”

When asked about their feelings about the current situation in Afghanistan and what they want the international community to hear, Afghan women surveyed shared their frustrations with the lack of job opportunities and restricted freedom of speech – and especially restrictions on women’s voices. The majority shared that they cannot see any future if the situation stays the same with their daughters unable to go to school, the economic situation worsening day by day, heads of family jobless, rising prices of basic goods and food, and lack of access to basic nutrition and primary healthcare services in their community. In March

| Response | Frequency |
|---|------------|
| Women rights and job opportunity for women | 68 |
| Education rights to girls | 28 |
| Peace | 16 |
| Humanitarian support/emergency assistance | 15 |
| International community should continue to pressure de facto government | 12 |
| Development project and infrastructure | 7 |
| Provide health facilities to the people | 5 |
| TOTAL | 151 |

2022, Afghan women shared with us their hopes for the future – but in July 2022, their optimism is waning. Many no longer see a future in their country and hope to leave, but even this pathway is out of reach due to the associated costs of immigration and the challenges in accessing resettlement opportunities abroad.

Table 4: If you could say one thing to world leaders and the international community about the situation in Afghanistan, and what they should be doing about it, what would it be?

When asked what they would want to share with the international community, Afghan women emphasized that the freedoms of women to take part in economic and social activities – including their right to work – are their fundamental human rights. They shared the enormous negative mental health impact that the closing of schools for girls has had on young girls and their families. Following the publication of our first report, the de facto authorities reneged on their commitment to reopen schools to Afghan girls over grade six on Nowruz, Afghanistan’s New Year on March 23rd 2022. This was a significant blow and disappointment to Afghan women and girls. Afghan women want the international community to advocate for girls’ right to education as a priority, recognizing that it has already been a year that girls over grade six have not been allowed to attend school.

“ We want education to make our future, to hold positions in government to build the future of our family and country. ”

Progress against past recommendations?

Revisiting recommendations made in March 2022

| Category | Recommendation |
|--|---|
| Women’s Participation and Inclusion | <p>The international community has a responsibility to engage in dialogue advancing women’s rights with de facto government leaders while holding the position of withholding formal diplomatic recognition of the Taliban as a government without – at a minimum - their explicit commitment and adoption of national laws that allow for full equal rights for women including those relating to their education, employment, and participation in public life.</p> |
| | <p>The international community must continue asking Afghan women about their experiences, needs, and priorities as part of a meaningful consultation process for decision-making connected to any policies or programs relating to Afghanistan.</p> |
| Economic and Humanitarian Crisis | <p>The international community, particularly donor governments and international financial institutions, should develop a financial solution that balances the need to restore function to the Afghanistan Central Bank, allow Afghans to access funds in their bank accounts, and restore private economic activity.</p> |

| Category | Recommendation |
|---|---|
| <p>Sustaining the Afghan Women’s Rights Movement Within Afghanistan and Beyond</p> | <p>Donors must be led by local women’s rights organizations and provide them with flexible, adaptive funding that covers both direct and indirect costs (including salaries) and covers activities beyond humanitarian aid.</p> |
| | <p>The protection of the life and property, and the freedom of movement of the Afghan women leaders and organization staff must be guaranteed by the de facto government.</p> |
| | <p>The international community must support and enable a global movement for Afghan women’s rights led by Afghan women through funding, prioritization, and support for coordination mechanisms.</p> |
| <p>UN Commitment to Women’s Rights and Humanitarian Action</p> | <p>The UN and member states must explicitly include women’s rights, participation, and inclusion in society as a strategic objective and priority in the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) renewed mandate up for approval on 17 March 2022.</p> |
| | <p>The UN and member states must include the freedom of humanitarian operations by NGOs and humanitarian actors – including national and local NGOs - within Afghanistan as a strategic objective and priority.</p> |

Of the recommendations that Women for Women International made in March 2022 based on interviews with Afghan women and women’s rights organizations, there is broad consensus that the international community has under-delivered. Afghan women and WROs reiterated that the challenges and needs they shared ahead of our March 2022 report continued to affect them in July 2022. In fact, many of these challenges worsened in the past year since the Taliban takeover, which further supports the consensus that efforts by the international community have been insufficient.

Women for Women International shared the recommendations with Afghan women who participated in our research in March 2022 and again with women who participated in this July 2022 assessment to see what they would continue to emphasize and whether these recommendations resonated with their experiences. In FGDs, women affirmed their agreement with these calls for action and emphasized that employment opportunities must be prioritized.

Financial Challenges

Afghan women continue to call for and emphasize long-term solutions to the critical financial challenges they face today. While short-term aid is critical in alleviating the impact of the humanitarian crisis which has affected Afghanistan in the wake of the Taliban takeover, difficult winter, and recent earthquake, nearly all of the women participating in this survey noted that they did not receive any of this aid.

The international community must make it a priority to lift the broad sanctions that currently disproportionately affect Afghan people rather than the de facto government. Lack of jobs and employment opportunities for Afghan people is a top priority for the Afghan women we spoke with who requested a restoration of normal economic activity and the restarting of development projects that offer vocational training, fund social services, and support jobs for Afghan people.

There was also an increased call for social infrastructure and services such as health centers, doctors, schools, medicine, and electricity. Many of these services were suspended after August 2021 either due to internal displacement and immigration of professionals inside and outside of Afghanistan for security reasons, or due to the freezing of Afghanistan's assets and international assistance. It is time the international community take immediate action to establish strategic, long-term solutions to the worsening economic crisis that do not render Afghan people as mere collateral damage.

Afghan WROs also reported that the financial challenges they faced in March 2022 continue to affect their ability to continue working and serving the women in their communities. They explained their frustration with international donors who are increasing their burdens on grantees – such as onerous reporting requirements, redesign of project plans, and due diligence. In an environment that requires more time to safely implement projects or obtain approvals and in which civil society organizations are constantly required to adapt, Afghan WROs ask for donors to restart their projects beyond the scope of solely humanitarian aid and that their support include:

Flexible funding requirements that do not require local registration.

Core funding for operations rather than solely project based or deliverable based support.

Longer periods of agreements and faster funding approvals.

Education

On March 23rd, 2022, shortly after the release of our first report, the de facto authorities reneged on their commitment to reopen schools for girls and women above the age of 12.⁶ Despite the de facto authorities' citation of logistical issues, it is widely believed that the restrictions on education will only increase and that the delay in allowing girls in school amidst increased enforcement of restrictions on Afghan women's freedom is intended to discourage families from sending girls to school altogether.⁷ Afghan women affirmed in surveys in March and July that secondary school education for girls is still a priority for them and that this must be emphasized in negotiations with the de facto authorities.

“Our children cannot go to school, and if our children are not in school they are sad, then how can we remain happy.”

Security and Protection

Afghan women and WROs alike report challenges with physical security in their daily activities. The international community should continue pushing for protection of civil society space and holding the de facto authorities accountable for any breaches of security, especially where it is targeted against women, including through the UNAMA mandate and the full resourcing of the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan.

Afghan women reported increased personal safety and security risks and Afghan WROs, in particular, report harassment, detainment, physical assault, and incidents of human rights violations which align with recent reports and investigations focused on this topic.^{8,9,10} However, Afghan WROs also highlight frustration with the

international community, such as UN representatives, for asking them to avoid risky activities rather than offering protection so that they can continue working or directly engaging with local authorities. They view this as hypocrisy and an indirect endorsement of the restrictions on women's rights set forth by the de facto authorities.

UN Accountability

Afghan WROs noted that it was positive that the international community has withheld formal diplomatic recognition of the de facto authorities. They were also optimistic about the inclusion of women's rights and human rights in the UNAMA mandate renewal approved on March 17th, 2022 and that it is cited as a key aspect in negotiations between the international community and de facto authorities. However, in the months since then, they have been disappointed in the lack of accountability for the funding going into the country and the lack of meaningful inclusion of Afghan women or WROs in implementing the UNAMA mandate. A common refrain among WROs is that money is going into Afghanistan, but they feel there is no transparency in how the money is being spent and that it is not being spent in a way that meaningfully supports women's rights civil society.

Afghan WROs note that this lack of transparency and lack of facilitated engagement between civil society and the de facto authorities is inadvertently reinforcing the disempowerment of Afghan women and the women's rights movement. Afghan WROs call on the UN system and members states to demonstrate greater accountability for the UNAMA mandate and transparency of spending of UN funds within Afghanistan.

ACT with Afghan Women

Nearly a year after the Taliban took over Kabul and US and NATO forces withdrew from Afghanistan, Afghan women described to us a situation that worsens day by day and shared their overwhelming disappointment with the lack of action by the international community to support them. As more time has passed, Afghan women describe a situation that has become more dire and more hopeless. Even as more people suffer and Afghan women describe the daily struggle to survive, they hold on to some hope that they might one day be able to think about living rather than mere survival.



After the Ukraine war the situation for Afghans worsened, the prices of goods are raised, humanitarian aid are pushed to Ukrainians, and we Afghan people are ignored by the international community.

The international community still has a responsibility to stand with Afghan women and all Afghan people. 88% of the Afghan women we surveyed said that they feel there are fewer opportunities for their voices to be heard by decision-makers. We must all amplify the voices of Afghan women to ensure they are heard and not forgotten. We must all stand with Afghan women to ensure that the international community continues to prioritize their livelihoods, futures, and their dreams.

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