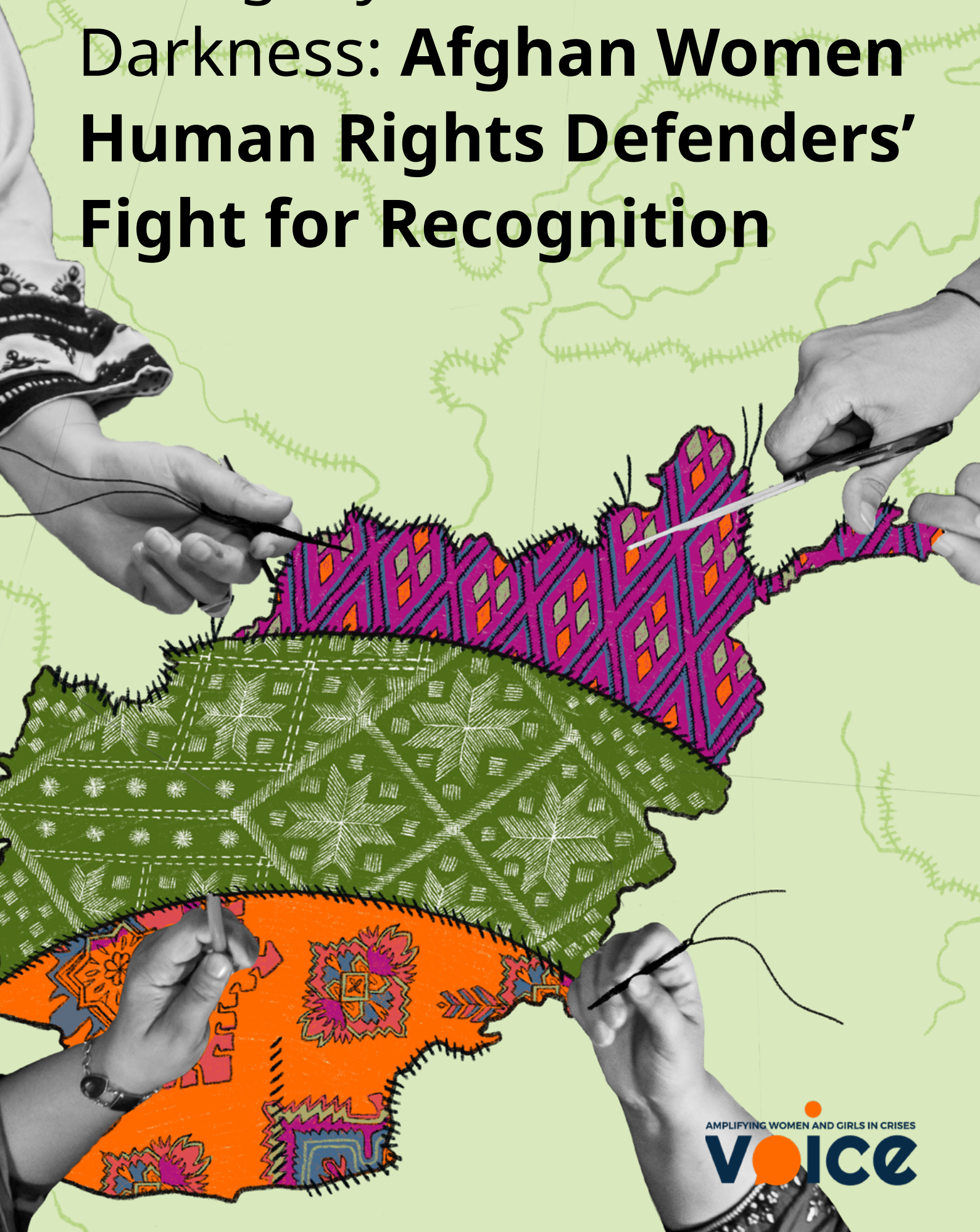


Taking Myself out of the Darkness: Afghan Women Human Rights Defenders' Fight for Recognition



Acknowledgements

We are inspired daily by Afghan Women's Rights Defenders. The world will be a different place when it learns from the risks you take and the sacrifices you make to realize a world where all women and girls can live lives free of violence.

We thank the Afghan women leaders who contributed insights, hopes, and lived experiences through this assessment. We dedicate this report to your commitment and perseverance in the face of this crisis, and we hope that we have represented your perspectives and realities faithfully, and with the deepest respect and love. We stand with you in solidarity and rage as we imagine the new future that we all must own for women and girls around the world.

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Acronyms

CSO	Civil society organization
EVAW	Elimination of violence against women
GBV	Gender-based violence
INGO	International non-governmental organization
IPV	Intimate partner violence
KII	Key informant interview
LGBTI	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or intersex
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
U.S.	United States
VAWG	Violence against women and girls
WHO	World Health Organization
WHRDs	Women human rights defenders
WLO	Women-led organizations
WRO	Women's rights organization

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Executive Summary

Since the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban in August 2021, millions of women have been displaced within Afghanistan and forced to flee to other countries as they face an enormous roll-back of their most basic human rights. Afghan women have long mobilized for their rights, and women human rights defenders (WHRDs) inside and outside of the country continue to resist the oppressive rule of the Taliban, even while their activism brings grave risks to themselves and their families.

The situation for Afghan WHRDs is shocking. They face intimidation, harassment, arbitrary detention, and the threat of “disappearance” as a consequence of their work. Many have been forced to flee their homes, joining other displaced Afghan women and girls and facing heightened risks of exploitation, discrimination, violence against women and girls (VAWG), and lack of support and protection. Numerous prominent women’s rights defenders were evacuated from Afghanistan and are in various stages of resettlement, often in uncertain and stressful circumstances in unfamiliar countries.

For twenty years prior to August 2021, the women of Afghanistan worked alongside the international community as partners as they sought to re-establish their rights and achieve equality in all facets of life in Afghanistan. Today, however, a sharp decrease in international support for women’s rights work within Afghanistan has resulted in the closure of essential women-led organizations, the erasure of vital resources, and the shutdown of critical services for women and girls, leaving women’s rights activists feeling largely abandoned by the international community.

Despite this dire lack of support and the threat of detention and violence from the Taliban, women continue to protest, organize, and fight for the rights of women, girls, and other oppressed groups. They have emerged as the most prominent and peaceful civic force currently resisting Taliban rule.

In August 2022, VOICE undertook an assessment to shine a light on the experiences and needs of Afghan WHRDs following the 2021 Taliban takeover. Using a participatory methodology rooted in feminist and anti-colonial values and ethics, the assessment utilized key informant interviews and arts-based approaches to collect data and to support women to build networks and use their voices toward advocacy and change. A total of 86 interviews were undertaken with WHRDs across 20 countries, including those living within Afghanistan as well as those displaced in neighboring and other countries around the world in various stages of displacement and resettlement.

This report presents the findings from the assessment and illuminates the myriad ways that Afghan WHRDs experience threats and risks to their safety, security, protection, and other basic human rights. The findings confirm that current international responses to protect WHRDs’

safety, well-being, and rights—including their rights to healthcare, affordable housing, education, and a sustainable income—are woefully inadequate. So too are resettlement processes, leaving many in limbo. The findings also draw attention to the ongoing resistance, resilience, and activism of Afghan WHRDs, despite the incredible challenges and hardships they face.

As part of the assessment, WHRDs provided recommendations on how to improve the current situation. These form the basis of the following recommendations—summarized below and detailed in much greater depth in the following report—to promote and protect the safety, security, and rights of Afghan WHRDs and support their continued activism, both within and outside of the country. While recognizing the extraordinary political and logistical challenges of the situation, as well as the limited efforts already underway, this report urges the international community to significantly step up their action to match their rhetoric in support of Afghan women and girls. Throughout the following recommendations, **it is essential that all actors center the voices, experiences, and leadership of Afghan WHRDs and meaningfully engage them in the design, delivery, and monitoring of all programming.**

- 1. Exert political pressure on the Taliban to recognize and respect the rights of Afghan women and girls.**
- 2. Prioritize humanitarian and development programming that promotes women’s safety, security, and rights and centers women as partners.**
- 3. Ensure safe access to essential services and basic rights for all WHRDs displaced from Afghanistan.**
- 4. Provide opportunities for ongoing education and sustainable livelihoods for displaced WHRDs.**
- 5. Prioritize and urgently expedite resettlement for Afghan WHRDs.**
- 6. Support Afghan women’s and girls’ ongoing activism.**

VOICE urges all actors to fulfill their responsibilities and obligations to protect Afghan women’s rights, including by creating an enabling environment for their continued activism. We hope this report will not only help Afghan women speak truth to power, but provide Afghan WHRDs with an advocacy tool, hope, and sustenance, knowing VOICE and other feminist organizations throughout the world stand with them as they fight for their rights, humanity, and futures.

Background



A. History of women's rights in Afghanistan (1900-2021)

Since the beginning of the 20th century, Afghan women have continuously mobilized for greater rights.¹ Women in Afghanistan were granted the right to vote in 1919,² roughly a year earlier than women in the United States (U.S.). Over the next 50 years, women's rights and roles in public life increased.³ In 1960, a new constitution was adopted, increasing gender equality and women's political and economic participation.⁴

In the early 1990s, Afghan women's and girls' rights were increasingly rolled back under the oppressive and discriminatory rule of the Taliban, who were committed to enforcing their extremist version of Islamic Sharia law.⁵ In 1994, the Taliban began to restrict the rights of women and girls to work, attend school, leave the house without a male chaperone, show skin in public, access healthcare from male doctors, hold political positions, or speak publicly.⁶ Violence against women and girls (VAWG) rapidly increased, and the punishments for disobeying the discriminatory laws put in place by the Taliban were incredibly harsh.

Concerns about Taliban rule and accusations of their human rights abuses grew among the international community,⁷ especially as the Taliban were seen to harbor members of the international terrorist group al-Qaeda. Beginning in the late 1990s, the U.S. began to impose

¹ Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan, "Afghan Women in History: The 20th Century" (n.d.).

² Amnesty International UK, "Women in Afghanistan: the back story," 27 July 2022.

³ Amnesty International UK, "Women in Afghanistan."

⁴ Amnesty International UK, "Women in Afghanistan," and Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan, "Afghan Women in History."

⁵ Hannah Bogaert, "History Repeating Itself: The Resurgence of the Taliban and the Abandonment of Afghan Women." *Immigration and Human Rights Law Review*, Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 3 (2022).

⁶ Bogaert, "History Repeating Itself," p. 10.

⁷ The precise meaning of the term 'international community' is hard to discern. It is often used to refer to Western countries such as the U.S., Canada, countries of the European Union, the United Kingdom, and other countries with international influence.

sanctions on the country.⁸ Following the attacks against the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, the U.S. sought to ensure Afghanistan would not become a safe haven for al-Qaeda.⁹ With the support of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and 40 other countries, the U.S. led a “war on terror” and invaded Afghanistan; by the end of the year, the Taliban were ousted from power.¹⁰

Over the next 20 years, Afghan women spearheaded efforts to restore women’s and girls’ rights.¹¹ Girls returned to school;¹² the Afghan Ministry of Women’s Affairs was created in late 2001; a 2003 constitution was adopted recognizing women’s rights; and in 2009, the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) law was enacted by presidential decree.¹³ Several steps were taken to ensure women’s participation in public and political life,¹⁴ and in 2015, Afghanistan adopted its first National Action Plan for the period 2015-2018 and 2019-2022.¹⁵ Afghan women’s movements have been central to these efforts and have made significant progress, despite facing overwhelming challenges. In the 2000s, there were nearly 800 women-led organizations operating in the country to support and uplift the rights of women and girls, with thousands of activists bravely continuing their fight.¹⁶

Despite this progress, these reforms were mostly visible in the relatively liberal city of Kabul, especially among the capital elites. In contrast, the rural population of the country—consisting of over 70% of Afghans¹⁷—has long been suffering the consequences of conflict, unrest, and severe poverty, leaving a deep divide between Kabul and the provinces. While many political advances for women’s rights have been gained, the majority of women and girls—even those living only a few kilometers away from the center of Kabul—continue to live under a great deal of suppression, where political advances have not yet reached their day-to-day lives.

VAWG is especially widespread in Afghanistan, ranging from physical violence to sexual, psychological, and economic violence. Domestic violence is especially common, with 87% of

⁸ Clayton Thomas, *Taliban Government in Afghanistan: Background and Issues for Congress*. Congressional Research Service (2 November, 2021).

⁹ Lindsay Maizland, “The Taliban in Afghanistan,” Council on Foreign Relations, 17 August 2022.

¹⁰ Maizland, “The Taliban in Afghanistan.”

¹¹ Bogaert, “History Repeating Itself.”

¹² In 2003, less than 10% of girls were enrolled in elementary schools; by 2017, that figure had risen to 33%, while girls’ enrollment in secondary education increased from 6% in 2003 to 39% in 2017. For more information, see The World Bank, *Policy Note: Afghanistan’s Development Gains: Progress and challenges* (2020).

¹³ Family mediation is a common approach to resolving gender-based violence cases under EVAW, despite the risks this poses to many women. The EVAW law prohibits the use of mediation in only five kinds of offenses against women: rape, forced sex, publicizing the identity of a victim, burning or the use of chemical substances to cause harm, and forced self-immolation or suicide. “In all other cases, police and other officials can pressure the woman to have her case resolved through mediation.” Human Rights Watch, *“I Thought Our Life Might Get Better”: Implementing Afghanistan’s Elimination of Violence Against Women Law* (2021), p. 3.

¹⁴ According to Article 83 of the 2004 Constitution, 68 of the 249 total seats (27%) in the Lower House (Wolesi Jirga) are reserved for women, comprising at least two women for each of the 34 provinces of the country. For more information, see www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas/country-view/44/35.

¹⁵ Women’s Peace and Security Programme, “Afghanistan,” Women’s International League of Peace and Freedom, available at: <http://1325naps.peacewomen.org/index.php/afghanistan/> (accessed 19 October 2022).

¹⁶ Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan, “Afghan Women in History.”

¹⁷ See data from The World Bank at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS?locations=AF>.

Afghan women experiencing some form of violence at the hands of a family member.¹⁸ The Afghanistan Demographic and Health Survey looked at the lifetime rates of intimate partner violence (IPV) and found that 56% of women and girls between the ages of 15 and 49 had experienced physical, sexual, or emotional IPV at some point in their lives; in some provinces, this number was as high as 92%.¹⁹ Child and forced marriages are also common, as are other practices such as badal (exchange marriages) and baad (exchanging girls to resolve disputes). It is estimated that between 30-40% of Afghan women are married before they turn 18.²⁰ It has been well-documented that child and forced marriage and other such practices are associated with morbidities and mortality²¹ and can greatly heighten girls' and women's risk of experiencing other forms of violence, such as domestic violence.²²

B. The return of the Taliban and the response of women's movements (2021-present)

Following a peace agreement with the Taliban in 2020, the U.S. made plans to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan in 2021.²³ The withdrawal itself was chaotic and took place over a matter of days in August 2021, after which the government of Afghanistan collapsed and the Taliban reinstated control over the country.²⁴

Despite having spent 20 years in Afghanistan—often justifying their ongoing military engagement with the need to protect and advance human rights, and especially women's rights—the governments involved in the international mission failed to establish the conditions under which “enduring state structures could emerge to protect Afghans against serious human rights abuses.”²⁵ The U.S. and other Western powers have in fact been key contributors to the instability within Afghanistan, and —despite the early warnings from women in Afghanistan— upon their withdrawal they left “a power vacuum” in which the Taliban could re-establish control.²⁶ As a result, the fundamental freedoms and rights of many Afghans completely disappeared, seemingly overnight, as the de-facto Taliban authorities began to reinstate their extremist interpretation of Sharia law.²⁷

¹⁸ Diya Nijhowne and Lauryn Oates, *Living with Violence: A National Report on Domestic Abuse in Afghanistan*, Global Rights: Partners for Justice (Washington, DC, 2008).

¹⁹ Central Statistics Organization (CSO), Ministry of Public Health (MoPH), and ICF, “Afghanistan: Demographic and Health Survey, 2015” (Kabul, Afghanistan, Central Statistics Organization, 2017).

²⁰ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), *Child Marriage in Afghanistan: Changing the narrative* (2018).

²¹ Nawal Nour, “Child Marriage: A Silent Health and Human Rights Issue,” *Reviews in Obstetrics & Gynecology*, vol. 2, No. 1 (Winter 2009).

²² Nijhowne and Oates, *Living with Violence*.

²³ Bogaert, “History Repeating Itself.”

²⁴ Bogaert, “History Repeating Itself.”

²⁵ Hendrik Cremer and Catharina Hübner, *Responsibility for basic and human rights following the withdrawal from Afghanistan: On Germany's duty to protect particularly vulnerable Afghans* (Berlin, German Institute for Human Rights, 2022), p. 16.

²⁶ Bogaert, “History Repeating Itself.”

²⁷ Horia Mosadiq, Zamarey Faqiri, and Lucy van der Kroft, “State of Human Rights Defenders in Afghanistan Year 2021,” *Safety and Risk Mitigation Organization Annual Report (SRMO, 2021)*, p. 6.

These events in August 2021 completely altered the lives of Afghan women and girls, whose rights were rapidly eroded, including their right to health, education, safety, bodily integrity, and freedom of movement and association.²⁸ The Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Human Rights Council were shut down, as were most locally-based structures that were providing support to women and girls. Women were banned from working and holding office, resulting in all women being removed from the justice and security sectors and from most public institutions. Countless women and girls face intimidation, harassment, arbitrary detention, and the threat of being forcibly disappeared²⁹ and many have been forced to flee their homes entirely.³⁰ Risks are increased for women and girls who hold other identities that are also targeted by the Taliban, such as ethnic minorities (including Tajiks and Hazaras) and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or intersex (LGBTI) people.³¹

Women's rights defenders often face the greatest risk due to their profiles and activism, and thousands were forced into hiding³² as the Taliban began targeting activists from all different sectors—including civil society, government, media, and security. Protestors have been beaten, intimidated, and physically assaulted, and women activists have faced arbitrary arrest with abusive conditions of confinement, coerced confessions, and lack of due process. At times their family members are arrested with them and severely beaten or tortured.³³ It has been documented that at least 37 activists and media workers were killed in Afghanistan in targeted attacks in 2021,³⁴ and the Taliban continue to persecute and silence those who challenge them—especially women.

Immediately following the Taliban takeover, many prominent women's rights defenders were evacuated from Afghanistan. These evacuations were supported by a wide range of government and private actors, with women and their families relocated to the United States, Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, and countries across Europe. According to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), approximately 700,000 people (21% women and 59% children) were newly displaced within the country in 2021, bringing the total to 3.4 million internally displaced people as of December 2021.^{35,36} As of July 1, 2022, there were over two million registered³⁷ refugees and asylum-seekers from Afghanistan in the neighboring countries

²⁸ VOICE, "Taliban's Policies Restricting Women's Rights since August 2021," 22 June 2022. Available at: <https://voiceamplified.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/The-Talibans-restrictions-on-womens-rights-since-August-2021.pdf>

²⁹ Human Right Watch, "Afghanistan: Women Protesters Detail Taliban Abuse," 20 October 2022.

³⁰ Mosadiq and others, "State of Human Rights Defenders in Afghanistan."

³¹ U.S. Policy Advocates for Afghan Women and Girls Working Group, *Futures in the Balance: Taking Action to Ensure Afghan Women's and Girls' Rights Under Taliban Rule* (2022).

³² Farkhondeh Akbari and Jacqui True, "WPS in Afghanistan: Betrayal and Renewal," Australian Feminist Foreign Policy Coalition Issue Paper Series, Issue 4 (AFFPC, July 2022), p. 3.

³³ Human Right Watch, "Afghanistan: Women Protesters Detail Taliban Abuse."

³⁴ Mosadiq and others, "State of Human Rights Defenders in Afghanistan."

³⁵ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Afghanistan Situation Regional Response Plan (RRP) January - December 2022* (2022).

³⁶ The International Organization of Migration's Displacement Tracking Matrix offers a higher figure of 4.3 million internally displaced people within Afghanistan. See International Displacement Monitoring Center, "*Figures Analysis 2021 - Afghanistan: Displacement associated with Conflict and Violence*" (2022).

³⁷ This is likely a huge underestimate of the actual numbers within these countries, as many refugees remain unregistered.

of Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, with countless more unregistered;³⁸ of these, approximately 1.27 million (23% women and 51% children)³⁹ are thought to have arrived since August 2021.⁴⁰ According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), only 3,580 people have returned to Afghanistan in 2022,⁴¹ and only 162,413 internally displaced people have returned to their homes.⁴² Notably, data shows that women rarely fled Afghanistan without children or other dependents; less than 1,000 women fled alone to Iran or Pakistan in 2022, compared to 10,464 men.⁴³ Women continue to be evacuated by the U.S. in smaller numbers than men, as most do not qualify for the Special Immigrant Visa.⁴⁴

Women and girls are most at risk during displacement, facing violence, exploitation, discrimination, and lack of protection and support. While some women are re-establishing their lives in their new countries, others remain in limbo in transit situations.^{45,46} Meanwhile, many at-risk women's rights defenders remain in Afghanistan, facing heightened risks of VAWG, abuse, exploitation, and even death at the hands of the Taliban—and compounding already high rates of VAWG prior to displacement. Prospects for protection and safety are bleak, particularly for those who do not have passports or lack resources to leave.⁴⁷ While some are unable to leave, others have chosen to stay in the country and live under significant threat as they continue their activism, which has been forced to take new shapes.

Amidst all of this, women's rights activists, civil society activists, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and journalists have been left feeling abandoned by the international community that not only supported them before the return of the Taliban,⁴⁸ but in many cases recruited them to work on women's rights. Like other organizations working on women's rights, VOICE gets daily calls for support from Afghan women who describe how their previous work with the United Nations (UN), international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and governments (such as the U.S.) has now placed them at extreme risk at the hands of the Taliban, and yet they no longer receive any support from these entities.

³⁸ UNHCR Operational Data Portal, "Afghanistan Situation," available at: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/afghanistan> (accessed 12 October 2022).

³⁹ These percentages are based on data gathered as of December 2021; see UNHCR, UN Women and Women Count, *Afghanistan Crisis Update: Women and Girls in Displacement* (2022).

⁴⁰ UNHCR Regional Bureau for Asia and Pacific, "Afghanistan Situation Update - 01 September 2022" (2022). Available at: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/95823>

⁴¹ UNHCR Operational Data Portal, "Afghanistan Situation."

⁴² UNHCR Regional Bureau for Asia and Pacific, "Afghanistan Situation Update."

⁴³ UNHCR, UN Women and Women Count, *Afghanistan Crisis Update*.

⁴⁴ The Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) is provided by the U.S. for Afghans who were employed by or on behalf of the U.S. government. For more information, see <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/immigrate/special-immig-visa-afghans-employed-us-gov.html>

⁴⁵ Devon Cone, "Now, There is Nothing Safe": *A Roadmap for Investing in Afghan Women and Girls* (Washington, D.C., Refugees International, 2022).

⁴⁶ There are three contexts of displacement right now: 1) women and their families evacuated and resettled in countries with their asylum in process; 2) those evacuated and moved to a transit location that is not their country of asylum/resettlement but is a temporary host (i.e., Albania, Greece, Turkey, etc.); and 3) those in neighboring countries such as Iran and Pakistan. It is this last category where Afghan women are most vulnerable, as they are mostly undocumented, trying to find resettlement and sponsorship programs, and at a risk of deportation by governments.

⁴⁷ UNHCR, *Afghanistan Situation Regional Response Plan*.

⁴⁸ Mosadiq and others, "State of Human Rights Defenders in Afghanistan."

For many groups and activists, international funding for women’s rights programming has completely evaporated. While the international community continues to provide humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, women’s rights have largely been dropped from the agenda. The sharp decrease in international and developmental support has resulted in the closure and shutdown of critical services for girls and women that were being run by local organizations and funded by international aid—including VAWG programming.

By May of 2022, “only 9% of those programs targeted for GBV [gender-based violence] prevention and response activities in 2022 had been reached and as of August, only 0.3% of the GBV funding appeal was met.”⁴⁹ A study in March of 2022 found that 77% of women’s civil society organizations had no projects for the year, and those that were still operating faced significant obstacles to receiving funds outside of the country and withdrawing funds from bank accounts due to increased compliance requirements and restrictions put in place by international regulations.⁵⁰

In spite of this dire lack of support and the threat of detention and violence, women and girls in Afghanistan have continued to protest, organize, and fight for their rights, becoming one of the only prominent and peaceful civic forces resisting Taliban rule.⁵¹

⁴⁹ U.S. Policy Advocates for Afghan Women and Girls Working Group, *Futures in the Balance*.

⁵⁰ Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group, *Research on Challenges, Barriers and Opportunities for Women-led CSOs in the Afghanistan’s Humanitarian Crisis* (2022).

⁵¹ Nargis Nehan, “The Rise and Fall of Women Rights in Afghanistan,” *LSE Public Policy Review*, vol. 2, no. 3, p. 6 (2022).

Assessment framework overview



A. About VOICE

VOICE is a cutting-edge feminist organization accelerating a global revolution against systemic violence, powered by women and girls and the organizations they lead. VOICE believes that the humanitarian sector must deliver on its promise to protect women and girls—and that women and girls themselves must lead that revolution. We are confronting one of the world’s oldest and most widespread human rights abuses: violence against women and girls (VAWG). We challenge traditional, ineffectual methods of addressing VAWG in humanitarian emergencies, with a proven but chronically underused resource: the leadership of women and girls themselves.

VOICE’s approach, steeped in women’s rights practice, offers something new and necessary in the fight to end VAWG. We are working toward a world where girls and women are respected leaders in designing and implementing solutions to eradicate violence—both in their communities and within the halls of power. Ultimately, VOICE’s goal is greater direct resourcing of local women’s organizations and their solutions to address violence. VOICE supports women- and girl-led organizations, networks, and movements in a growing number of countries, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Colombia, Hungary, Iraq, Moldova, Myanmar, Pakistan, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, South Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, the United States, Venezuela, and Yemen.

B. Assessment objectives

In August 2022, VOICE undertook an assessment to shine a light on the experiences and needs of Afghan women human rights defenders (WHRDs) following the Taliban takeover in 2021. The objectives of this assessment were:

- ▶ To identify the protection needs, rights, and priorities of Afghan WHRDs in Afghanistan and across international borders, and make these priorities visible to the greater humanitarian community;
- ▶ To identify gaps and opportunities for duty-bearers to strengthen protection of women’s fundamental human rights while creating enabling environments for their continued activism; and
- ▶ To give displaced Afghan women and girl activists a platform to articulate and share their lived experiences to inform the policies and actions of governments and others accountable for their safety and protection.

Building upon the groundwork laid by VOICE earlier in 2022,⁵² the assessment focused on women’s voices and experiences—including their hopes, dreams, needs, and priorities—with the aim of using the information generated to catalyze change and challenge the injustices Afghan women and girls are experiencing.

C. Methodology and approach

Because of its expansive network and previous work with Afghan WHRDs, VOICE was able to mobilize a team of Afghan WHRDs and researchers from around the world to conduct this assessment. VOICE partnered with Afghan women leaders and women’s organizations across 20 countries to develop and implement a participatory methodology rooted in feminist and anti-colonial values and ethics. Embedded in feminist principles of care and community, non-traditional and creative methods of inquiry were used to center the lived experiences and realities of women and girls, with a focus on their well-being.

VOICE focused on four categories of WHRD respondents: those within Afghanistan; those who were displaced in border countries, both registered and unregistered; those who held formal legal status in their final destination or country of asylum; and those who remained in a transition country. The assessment involved a mixed method approach to collecting and analyzing information within and across contexts. A desk review and mapping were conducted, followed by key informant interviews (KIIs) and art-based workshops. Interviews and meetings were undertaken remotely using Zoom and WhatsApp. Afghan women in each location were engaged as co-researchers, and VOICE worked with local women’s rights organizations to identify how women wanted the assessment findings to be used to influence change at national and global levels.

⁵² This assessment builds on the work VOICE conducted in Albania earlier this year. From January to June, 2022, VOICE partnered with Vital Voices to build a comprehensive and feminist humanitarian response to the protection and VAWG needs of Afghan refugees, including many Afghan WHRDs, who were awaiting resettlement in Albania. VOICE worked collectively with implementing partners and refugee women and girls to engage them at different response levels and sectors at two refugee hosting sites. VOICE was able to build trust with the Afghan community and co-develop more dignified, better quality, and gender-sensitive services provided by implementing partners.

Key informant interviews

Over a four-week period, VOICE's research team conducted a total of 86 KIIs with WHRDs across 20 countries, including: Afghanistan, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iran, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Pakistan, Spain, Sweden, Tajikistan, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Interviews in Afghanistan were conducted in nine provinces, including: Badakhshan, Balkh, Bamyan, Herat, Kabul, Kandahar, Kunduz, Nangarhar, and Paktia.

While the women interviewed all shared a background in women's rights activism and advocacy, they came from a wide range of experiences, disciplines, and professions, including: artists, filmmakers, photographers, journalists, sportswomen, politicians, former government employees, lawyers, judges and members of the Supreme Court, doctors, mental health professionals, entrepreneurs, university students, lecturers, researchers, civil society activists, and NGO/INGO employees (including founders and executive directors). Interviewees ranged in age from 18 to 60 (five women were between the ages of 18-24; 60 between ages 25-40; and 21 between ages 41-60).

Art-based workshops

In addition to the KIIs, VOICE conducted two art-based workshops with Afghan WHRDs in Islamabad, Pakistan, and Washington, D.C., U.S. These workshops, entitled "Collaging Us Back Together," were implemented not only as part of the assessment methodology, but also as a means of supporting Afghan women to build networks among themselves and use their voices toward advocacy and change. Integrating the inquiries of the assessment with the complexities of cultural and historical contexts, VOICE provided Afghan women with a space for catharsis based in arts and storytelling.

The workshops, which had previously been piloted with Afghan women in Albania earlier in 2022, used collage and other art-based tools as a methodology to amplify self-expression while facilitating a trauma-sensitive and survivor-centered approach to storytelling and memory. Through this process, 11 Afghan WHRDs—six in Pakistan, who also participated in the KIIs, and another five in the U.S.—created collages to reflect their experiences, as well as advocacy messages directed at governments and decision-makers around the world. "Collaging Us Back Together" was created from their stories, memories, and hopes; by working with WHRDs to co-create advocacy messages focused on their needs and visions for their future, the workshops supported Afghan women in challenging the concerted effort to erase their voices.

Findings



Three core themes emerged from the interviews and workshops conducted within and outside of Afghanistan:

- A.** Concerns related to safety and security;
- B.** Challenges with resettlement; and
- C.** Barriers and possibilities around ongoing activism.

The findings indicate that WHRDs face significant threats to their safety, security, and protection, including: the profound impacts of restrictions on women within Afghanistan; pervasive risks of VAWG and other violations of human rights; lack of access to essential services such as healthcare, affordable housing, education, and sustainable income, both for women within Afghanistan as well as women displaced outside of the country; and the consequences of inaction or insufficient action by the international community. Many WHRDs specifically reported that the lack of coordination involved in the West's withdrawal from Afghanistan put many women at greater risk from the start of this crisis. Whether within Afghanistan, in transit countries, or in final destination countries, WHRDs remain in urgent need of substantial assistance.

A. Safety and security

Four key themes emerged related to the safety and security of WHRDs:

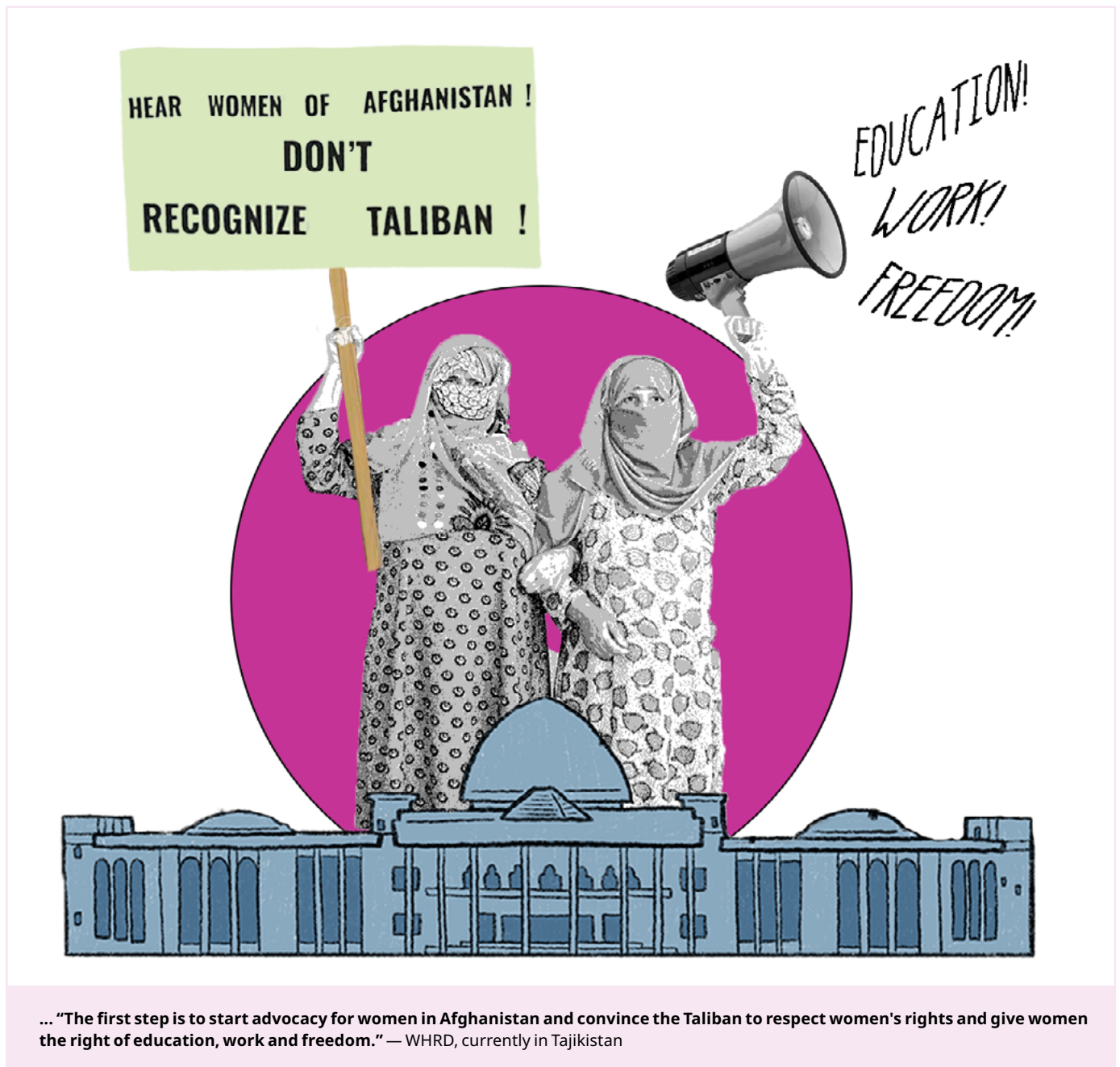
1. restrictions on women's rights within Afghanistan;
2. violence against women and girls;
3. access to available services; and
4. action, or inaction, by the international community

These findings are described below.

1. Restrictions on women's rights within Afghanistan

"After the collapse of the previous government, the restrictions imposed on women by the new regime are severe, to say the least."

— WHRD, Afghanistan



... "The first step is to start advocacy for women in Afghanistan and convince the Taliban to respect women's rights and give women the right of education, work and freedom." — WHRD, currently in Tajikistan

The collages take imagery from art-based workshops conducted in Albania, the U.S. and Pakistan with Afghan WHRDs. Chiara Pirovano collaborated with the artist, Pearl D'Souza, to create the visuals for this report.

“Insecurity, hunger, poverty, discrimination, and the lack of a legitimate government are taking Afghanistan decades back.”

— Former public sector worker, currently in Spain

Since August 2021, the progress made by Afghan women in the past 20 years has been destroyed. Women are banned from attending school, holding jobs, and participating in politics, and they cannot move freely without a male chaperone, or mahram.⁵³ Multiple WHRDs noted that civic activities without explicit approval by the Taliban are completely banned within Afghanistan.

“Civic activities have decreased significantly, I can say from hundred to zero, and a very limited number of women’s organizations have managed to survive but we do not know till when.”

— WHRD, Afghanistan

These concerns and restrictions extend across the country. Similar stories were shared by WHRDs in all nine of the provinces the VOICE team conducted research in:

“Girls are banned from schools, women civil servants are instructed to send a male member of their families to work instead of them, and women are not allowed to go anywhere without mahram. All these are imposed in the name of religion, while we have no restriction on women’s education, work, movement and business in Islam.”

— Former public sector worker, currently in Turkey

Such restrictions have significant economic impacts on women and girls, especially female heads of households, who are unable to earn income to provide for their families. As a former public sector worker in Turkey described: *“We had two million women responsible as heads of families. They are imprisoned in homes while there is no mechanism to even provide them with bread.”*

Interviewees noted that the Taliban’s restrictions on women and girls extend beyond gender and also pose a risk to marginalized ethnic minorities, such as the Hazaras, Hindus, Sikhs, Tajiks, and others. Fighters linked to the Islamic State (ISIS) have repeatedly and brutally attacked ethnic and religious minorities since the rise of the Taliban—including in their schools and mosques—and the Taliban have done little to prevent or respond to these attacks.⁵⁴

As one media and communications worker currently in the UK explained, *“We can’t only say that the Taliban are only an anti-women’s movement because they are also trying to eliminate other ethnic groups.”* As a result, some WHRDs face multidimensional risks. Nearly 15% of WHRDs reported being doubly discriminated against for their gender as well as for their ethnicity, putting them at greater personal risk and also jeopardizing their continued activism.

⁵³ A mahram is a male chaperone, typically a male family member. Zahra Nader and Nargis Amini, “The Taliban are Harming Afghan Women’s Health,” *Foreign Policy*, 2 March 2022.

⁵⁴ Human Right Watch, “Afghanistan: ISIS Group Targets Religious Minorities,” 6 September 2022.

A prominent WHRD explained how the province of Bamyan, for example, has suffered from ethnic and religious discrimination for years, both under previous governments and now under the Taliban as well. WHRDs from Kunduz also talked about the ethnic cleansing of non-Pashtuns, which brings severe concerns to Tajik and Uzbek women active in the province.

“We always have to fight for the very basic rights for our province...The Taliban has committed a lot of crimes in Afghanistan, including mass killing of Hazaras. People are really scared in Bamyan and have no safety, protection from anyone. Women are even more vulnerable.”

— WHRD, Afghanistan

2. Violence against women and girls

There is ample evidence that VAWG spikes during humanitarian emergencies.⁵⁵ Unsurprisingly, interviewees noted that women’s and girls’ vulnerability to VAWG increased rapidly in Afghanistan when the Taliban took over in August 2021, as was the case in former periods of Taliban rule as well. A UN Women report found that the Taliban takeover in 2021 led to women’s increased vulnerability to VAWG due to several factors, chief among them being women’s decreased access to comprehensive and quality VAWG services.⁵⁶ In light of the Taliban’s growing restrictions, women became confined to their homes, lost their livelihoods, struggled to afford basic necessities as poverty levels rose, and sometimes faced multiple displacements, all of which greatly increased their risk of violence.

WHRDs reported increased instances of domestic violence, child and forced marriage among Afghan minors, and other forms of VAWG. Domestic violence was indeed one of the highest concerns among interviewees within Afghanistan due to the increased restrictions on women’s movements outside of the home, the requirement of mahram, and the Taliban’s encouragement of men to exercise power. Multiple WHRDs in Afghanistan reported feeling unsafe within their homes as a result of rising Islamic extremism and pro-Taliban sentiments, both in the country and within their families:

“Honestly speaking I do not feel safe anymore, neither in society nor in my family. I can see radicalism in my family growing quite rapidly.”

— WHRD, Afghanistan

⁵⁵ For more information, see www.gbvguidelines.org

⁵⁶ UNWomen, “Gender Alert No. 1: Women’s Rights in Afghanistan: Where are we now?” (2021).

“The Taliban do not see us as human beings and want to control us even inside our houses by brainwashing and radicalizing our men.”

— Former public sector worker, currently in Turkey

A health worker in Afghanistan spoke of various kinds of psychological distress Afghan women face as a result of domestic violence, in addition to the stress of instability, violation of their rights, fear of persecution, and harassment. Interviewees noted that in some provinces, a few networks, organizations, and individual activists are still active (in most instances underground) and working to provide survivors of VAWG with legal aid and reporting assistance. Others are engaging in advocacy and awareness raising activities for those affected by VAWG. In some provinces such as Paktia, however, the provision of support is incredibly risky as the province, as described by a health worker in Afghanistan, is *“highly conservative and... most of our men are supporters of Haqqani Network”*.⁵⁷

“When the Taliban took over Afghanistan, the city felt like a graveyard. Women activists like me were afraid for their lives, we felt unprotected. It was a situation where we wanted to emigrate from Afghanistan to a safer country where we can breathe.”

— WHRD, currently in Pakistan

Because of the high rates of VAWG within Afghanistan, a large number of those women who have fled Afghanistan are survivors of VAWG; however, many have very limited access to safe and effective VAWG or gender-based violence (GBV) services. In addition, some interviewees reported increased risks of instances of VAWG during their transit and evacuation experience:

“Women are at high risk of sexual harrasment and exploitation while on the way to Iran, Pakistan and Tajikistan.”

— WHRD, currently in Tajikistan

It is well-documented that risks of VAWG are heightened for displaced, refugee, and asylum-seeking women and girls. Research has shown that approximately 20% of displaced or refugee women experience sexual violence in humanitarian settings, and it is likely that this number is even higher due to widespread underreporting and barriers to disclosure.⁵⁸

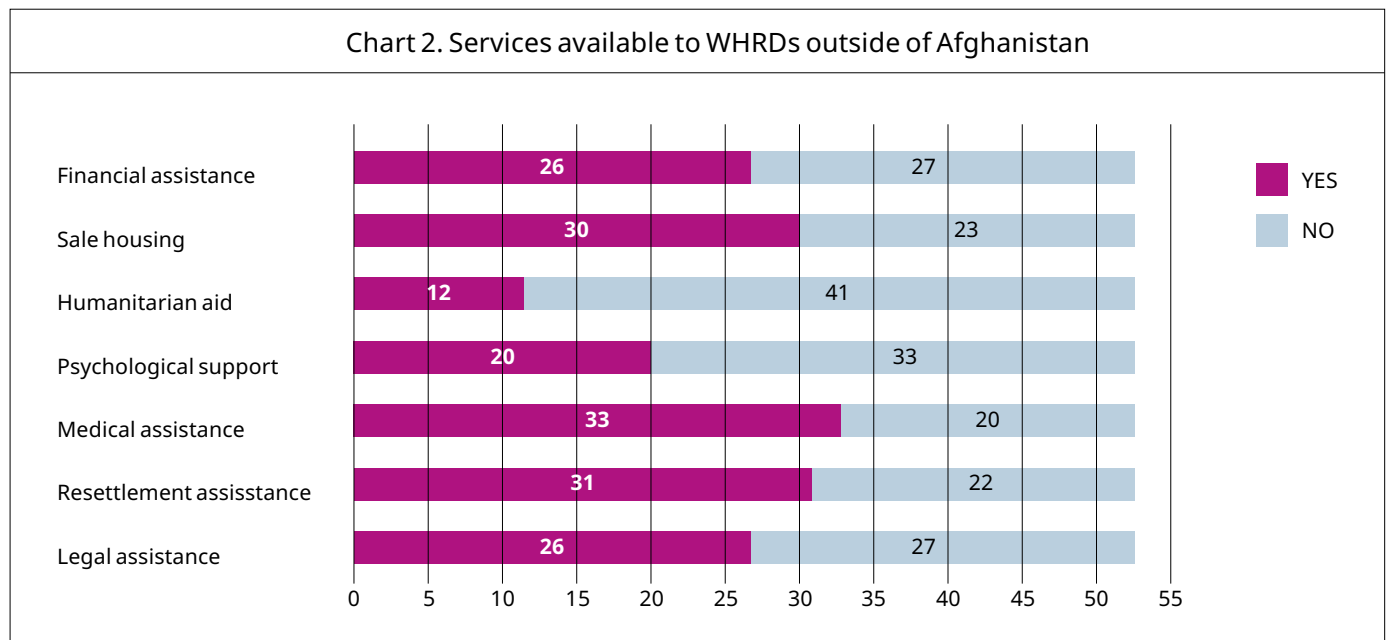
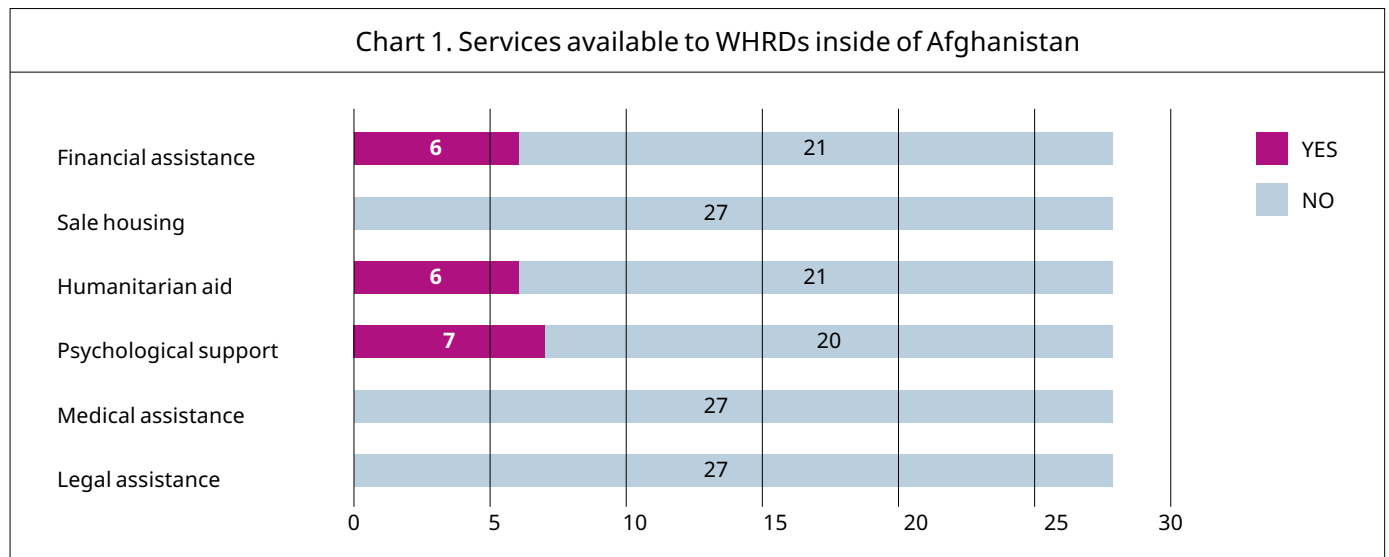
A study of the current refugee situation in Europe found multiple gender-specific forms of violence and insecurity, and highlighted the ways in which new and old forms of violence—such as domestic violence—were created or exacerbated by the conditions by which

⁵⁷ The Haqqani Network is a Sunni Islamist militant organization that was founded by Jalaluddin Haqqani; Haqqani allied with the Taliban in the mid 1990s, with the alliance becoming firmly cemented in 2015.

⁵⁸ Alexander Vu et. al., “The Prevalence of Sexual Violence among Female Refugees in Complex Humanitarian Emergencies: a Systematic Review and Meta-analysis,” PLoS Curr. (18 March 2014).

refugees are received.⁵⁹ Rising rates of intimate partner violence and domestic violence during humanitarian emergencies, along with decreased access to social services and supports, further heighten women’s and girls’ risks during displacement.⁶⁰ Several WHRDs spoke of the heightened risk of VAWG during border crossings, including kidnapping by the Taliban who are seeking to prevent people from crossing the border.

3. Access to available services



⁵⁹ Jane Freedman, “Sexual and gender-based violence against refugee women: a hidden aspect of the refugee "crisis",” *Reproductive Health Matters*, vol. 24, no. 47, pp. 18-26 (2016).

⁶⁰ Katie Lauve-Moon and Regardt J. Ferreira, “An exploratory investigation: Post-disaster predictors of intimate partner violence,” *Clinical Social Work Journal*, vol. 45, no. 2, pp. 124–135 (2017).

Of the 86 KIIs VOICE conducted, 27 interviewees discussed the availability of services within Afghanistan, while 53 described those available outside of the country.⁶¹

As seen above, access to services and necessary support systems—including financial assistance, safe housing, humanitarian aid, psychosocial support, medical assistance, legal assistance, and resettlement assistance—varied drastically if a woman was evacuated from Afghanistan and was in a transit or final destination country, versus if she was still inside of Afghanistan. While necessary and life-saving services are more readily accessible for WHRDs outside of Afghanistan, very few services are available to WHRDs in Afghanistan.

A WHRD in Afghanistan commented that although the international community is allocating resources for humanitarian aid within Afghanistan, *“these resources are not managed professionally by NGOs, and in fact the most affected women are not able to have access to them.”* She went on to explain that in many cases, resources are either misused, are not distributed fairly (leading to bribery and corrupt practices of distribution), or are not sufficiently allocated to reach the number of women in need. The Taliban’s restrictions on women’s right to work, including as aid workers, has also negatively impacted women’s ability to access humanitarian aid.

Only approximately one out of four WHRDs who remain in Afghanistan reported having access to any type of financial assistance, humanitarian aid, or psychosocial support; most had not received any support in accessing safe housing, or legal assistance.

While still facing a myriad of challenges, the situation was somewhat better for women evacuated from Afghanistan.

49%

49% of WHRDs outside of Afghanistan reported having access to financial and legal assistance.

>50%

More than half reported access to safe housing (57%), medical assistance (62%), and resettlement assistance (58%).

38%

38% reported access to psychosocial support.

23%

23% reported access to humanitarian aid.

WHRDs outside of Afghanistan reported an overall lack of formal support networks and that they instead received a great deal of their support from family members, friends, and other activists who were already living in host communities. For example, one WHRD in Germany noted, *“I came here five months ago, I didn’t go to a camp because a German friend of mine offered to let me stay at his place.”*

⁶¹ Six interviews had invalid responses to this question and consequently were not included in the above charts.

Another WHRD in Brazil described how a friend of her husband arrived in the country before they did and was able to support them. In Pakistan, the majority of Afghan women were supported by individuals through various informal networks of women from across the world. These individuals have helped them to find housing, register SIMcards for their phones, and access medical services in private hospitals, among other things.

Members of VOICE have been called in to support on multiple occasions where there are no formal networks or organizations available. While these informal networks can be greatly supportive to refugees and asylum-seekers, the situation risks placing an undue burden on individuals to provide financial, emotional, and resource assistance to displaced Afghan WHRDs and their immediate families. In countries such as Pakistan where civil society and women's rights organizations face heightened surveillance and restrictions, such informal support can also place individual women at risk.

Access to basic healthcare and reproductive health services

Prior to August 2021, Human Rights Watch reported women's and girls' difficulty accessing adequate healthcare services in Afghanistan.⁶² **In VOICE's interviews, not a single woman in Afghanistan reported having access to basic healthcare or reproductive health services.**

Women within the country are not allowed to travel without mahram and, as such, often face difficulty traveling to receive healthcare. In addition, there are many instances in which a woman would not feel comfortable discussing certain needs in front of her male guardian. Even if women are able to travel, a shortage of medical professionals further compounds the problem; according to the World Health Organization (WHO), Afghanistan faced a shortage of medical professionals even before the Taliban came to power,⁶³ with women comprising only 22% of doctors and 21% of nurses in 2016.⁶⁴

The Taliban's subsequent restrictions on education for girls and women has further exacerbated this shortage.⁶⁵ As of 2021, Afghanistan was reported to have only 4.6 medical professionals per 10,000 people —far below what WHO classifies as the "critical shortage" threshold of 23 per 10,000 people. This severe lack of access to healthcare drives many Afghans to seek medical care in Pakistan, India, and other neighboring countries.⁶⁶

⁶² Human Rights Watch, *"I Would Like Four Kids—If We Stay Alive": Women's Access to Health Care in Afghanistan (2021)*.

⁶³ Human Rights Watch, *"I would Like Four Kids—If We Stay Alive."*

⁶⁴ The World Health Organization (WHO), "The Ministry of Public Health and UN partners call for greater efforts to step up gender equality," WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, 9 March 2016.

⁶⁵ Human Rights Watch, *"I would Like Four Kids—If We Stay Alive."*

⁶⁶ Human Rights Watch, *"I would Like Four Kids—If We Stay Alive."*

Outside of Afghanistan, 33 of the 53 WHRDs interviewed (62%) reported having access to some sort of medical care, although many women indicated that the care was insufficient. For example, one interviewee shared:

“My life is completely shattered. I have a cyst in my uterus and my menstrual cycle has stopped for the past months which is causing excruciating pain. I’m in dire need of treatment but I can’t get it as I have no resources.”

— Former public sector worker, currently in Pakistan

A WHRD in the U.S. described that while she did technically receive medical care during her transitory living situation, it was subpar at best:

“I was pregnant during the evacuation, it was a long journey from Kabul to Doha, then Germany and then U.S. When we reached Doha it was very hot and we were put in a hanger with thousands of people. I fainted many times and started bleeding. People would stand in queues to use the toilet, I didn't go to the toilet for 24 hours. There were medical staff to look after me, but they would only respond after I experienced complications. I wish they put pregnant women in a different place and prevent issues like what I faced.”

— WHRD, currently in the U.S

Access to mental health care and psychosocial support

WHRDs both within and outside of Afghanistan reported extremely high levels of trauma since the Taliban takeover. Mental health challenges were mentioned by nearly every woman VOICE interviewed; the most common issues reported were depression, anxiety, hopelessness, nightmares, trouble sleeping, and fear for family members still in Afghanistan.

“After one year, I still have nightmares about the collapse of Kabul. Even some nights I cannot sleep, especially when I remember my family living there. After the evacuation, I think no one is mentally OK. It’s too hard for us to start a normal life. For three months, in the beginning, I couldn’t sleep or eat. I was just checking social media and crying.”

— Media and communications worker, currently in France

35%

Nearly 30 women (35% of all KIIs) described being either severely depressed or experiencing long-term depression.

19%

Sixteen women (19%) reported struggles with anxiety and/or panic attacks.

14%

Twelve women (14%) shared feelings of uselessness, helplessness, and/or hopelessness.

12%

Ten women (12%) spoke about their fears for their families still in Afghanistan.

9%

Eight women (9%) mentioned trouble sleeping or traumatizing nightmares.

Additional mental health challenges were associated with women's inability to continue their work and/or activism (8% of all KIIs), sadness associated with what is happening to women in Afghanistan (6%), mental anguish associated with becoming a refugee (5%), and survivors' guilt (2%). WHRDs inside and outside of Afghanistan described the betrayal and mental anguish they experienced as their careers and lives shattered before their eyes.

“Literally all Afghan women have mental problems. We are not treated as human beings anymore. We are treated as men’s property as the Taliban officially made men in charge of us.”

— WHRD, Afghanistan

Only 34% of all interviewees within and outside of Afghanistan reported having access to some kind of psychosocial support—which could in fact be a misleadingly high number, as this support could come in multiple forms ranging from professional services to supportive peers.

In terms of professional services, only four women (5% of all interviewees) explicitly mentioned that they had been able to see a mental health professional or were prescribed medication (with one additional woman reporting she is currently on the waiting list to see a therapist). Another six women reported being unable to see a mental health professional or being explicitly discouraged from doing so, as was the case with one WHRD in the Netherlands:

“My case worker told me not to mention my mental health or depression. She said if you have this in your case [file], you will be isolated and they will expect crime or violent acts from you. With this I suffer from severe insomnia and trauma. Overall, I feel safe from a security point of view, but my physical health and mental health is not good.”

— Health worker, currently in the Netherlands

Multiple women reported that the available mental health services were not culturally sensitive, and others shared how language barriers prevented them from building trust and asking for help. Some women described how counselors would advise something that was not only completely against Afghan culture, but could also increase a woman’s risk of domestic violence:

“The counselor treated me like an American girl. She asked me to [download] a dating app... a woman who lives in a family could be killed by a male family member [for that]. I decided not to go again.”

— WHRD, currently in the U.S.

Another interviewee was deterred from seeking counseling after feeling manipulated and lied to by a female volunteer from a resettlement agency:

“She always offered help but would ask me not to tell anyone. Once she asked me to sign a document for purchasing furniture. When I said I need to wait for my husband to read it, she put pressure on me so I signed it. Later someone from their home office told me ‘you are benefiting from two cash programs at the same time.’ When I said I have only signed one document, this volunteer said that I had forgotten about signing the second one because I ‘suffer from depression.’ With that I decided I will never tell the agency that I need a counselor because it can put me in another difficult situation.”

— WHRD, currently in the U.S.

Access to safe housing

Many displaced WHRDs linked their mental anguish with their transitory living situations. They cited distress caused by circumstances such as sharing accommodation with unknown people, having to change camps multiple times, and living in hotel rooms for months on end while waiting for more permanent housing.

A former legal professional currently in Canada who had been in Albania for over seven months explained that living in a hotel for such a long period of time caused her severe anxiety and isolation. Even when she and her husband were settled in Canada, they were only provided with 1,700 CAD (around 1,230 USD) in government assistance per month, while the rent for their apartment was over 2,000 CAD (about 1,450 USD) per month, putting them in an unsustainable situation.

Other interviewees echoed these sentiments. Although safe housing has been arranged for many WHRDs in transit and final destination countries, women's ability to maintain that housing has proven to be extremely difficult as they are unable to work or earn sustainable income (see below). One education sector worker in Brazil called on feminist organizations to *"help us with providing shelter and housing... Yes, the house rent is not high but if you have no income, any amount is high."* This was a common theme among displaced Afghans in final destinations: although they are often given at least some level of financial assistance, or safe housing is arranged for them, many lack the appropriate visas to seek employment, and the financial support they receive is insufficient to cover basic monthly costs.

"We're unemployed, with no visa and have to rent a place to live, which is why finance is a major problem for us. Giving up on your life-long journey and then starting a new life in a strange country is not easy."

— Media and communications worker, currently in Pakistan

Barriers to safe housing, however, extend beyond financial limitations. In Pakistan, for example, single women or women head of households are not permitted to rent houses without a male, placing them at increased risk of exploitation or being taken advantage of. Interviewees in Pakistan reported that as a result, Afghan women are often forced to pay higher rental prices to secure accommodations.

Within Afghanistan, as discussed earlier, many WHRDs have been displaced from their homes after the takeover of the Taliban and are living in hiding, out of fear of being targeted for their past work or activism. These women have even fewer avenues for support, as they cannot turn to local or international NGOs for safe housing. Out of 27 KIIs within Afghanistan, six interviewees noted that they had changed locations or districts within their province over the course of several weeks; 13 had changed provinces, many of them going to Kabul. Most women came back to their homes after several weeks or months. Many of the women who stayed in their homes (8) were unable to relocate due to financial constraints, or simply having nowhere else to go.

Access to employment

Most of the displaced WHRDs interviewed noted that securing safe housing would only be possible if they were permitted to work lawfully in their new countries. However, multiple barriers to safe and sustainable employment were reported, including legal restrictions, language barriers, and the unwillingness of host communities to recognize Afghan WHRDs' former employment and skills. As one interviewee shared:

"I came to this country to start a life, but there are no job opportunities here. They don't care about your knowledge and capacities. The only things that are available here for us are tailoring and heavy work."

— WHRD, currently in Iran

Many WHRDs expressed frustration with the lack of job opportunities available to them in their transit or final destination countries, especially when they are not legally able to apply for work—despite often being highly skilled and educated. In many cases, the limited jobs available do not match their skills and expertise. Other interviewees mentioned how pivotal it is for active feminist networks and organizations in host countries to welcome Afghan women and provide them with a platform to continue their work, wherever they are able: *“If women activists are not supported with some scholarships, fellowships and job opportunities, all their talent and skills will be wasted,”* expressed one legal sector worker, currently in Canada.

4. (In)action by the international community

“I think Afghan women are the loneliest women on earth who were left behind by the international community to suffer.”

— WHRD, currently in the U.S.



... “I hope the world will accept their mistake, appreciate our resilience, recognise our misery, and support us with lasting peace.” — Former public sector worker, currently in Turkey

The collages take imagery from art-based workshops conducted in Albania, the U.S. and Pakistan with Afghan WHRDs. Chiara Pirovano collaborated with the artist, Pearl D'Souza, to create the visuals for this report.

WHRDs highlighted several harmful shortcomings to the action—or inaction—taken by the international community thus far, ranging from its dealings with the Taliban to its lack of meaningful engagement with Afghan women. Several WHRDs expressed concern that humanitarian aid is not enough to support the needs of women still living in Afghanistan, nor of women who have relocated to other countries. Two interviewees specifically expressed concern that the aid is actually falling into the hands of the Taliban. Others noted the stark contrast between where aid is being distributed, noting that most INGOs are only covering the larger provinces, leaving smaller provinces and remote areas with even less support. *“There should be long-term interventions,”* expressed a former public sector worker, now in the U.S. Unfortunately, these long-term interventions seldom seem to be occurring, and many feel abandoned by the international community following the rise of the Taliban. Multiple INGOs that were active and advocating for the rights of women in Afghanistan prior to the rise of the Taliban have now disappeared, creating ripple effects in the capacity of local organizations and activists:

“After the return of the Taliban, most of the national and international NGOs who were working to support and empower women stopped their operations in Afghanistan, and it caused us to lose opportunities in serving affected women.”
— WHRD, Afghanistan

A former politician expressed feeling completely abandoned by the world and spoke of the inefficacy of current interventions, which are often singular in nature or lack a long-term focus:

“I have no hope for the current situation of women in Afghanistan... With all these small and one-time projects and dialogues, nothing will change. We need a proper change at the political level in Afghanistan. We cannot do it on our own and I hope the world will accept their mistake, appreciate our resilience, recognize our misery, and support us with lasting peace.”
— Former politician, living in a transit country

Several WHRDs spoke of the ways in which international attention on Afghanistan has shifted after Russia invaded Ukraine: *“After the war in Ukraine [began], the international community cut off their attention from Afghanistan, and the people are living in misery here,”* explained a WHRD in Afghanistan. Another WHRD currently in the Netherlands stated, *“Do not let Ukraine's war shadow on Afghanistan. Women from both countries are women.”* Unequal media coverage, the geopolitical significance for the West, and double standards, including elements of racism, influence the stark difference between the levels of assistance dedicated to Afghanistan—as well as other crises—and those dedicated to Ukraine. As a result, Afghanistan has become peripheral to U.S. and NATO member states’ interests.

The majority of WHRDs agreed that the most important responsibilities of the international community should be: (1) to refuse to recognize or negotiate with the Taliban; and (2) to listen to WHRDs’ voices and consult with them on actions and strategies to reinstate Afghan women’s rights.

“No one should recognize the Taliban”

Nearly every woman VOICE interviewed pleaded for the international community and world governments to withhold recognition of the Taliban as the official government of Afghanistan. One WHRD described the country as being “taken hostage by a terrorist group” and called on international actors to respond as such:

“My main concern is no one is seriously helping Afghan women. We are tired of all these empty promises and statements. We need action. What is the responsibility of UN and NATO towards an ally when it is taken hostage by a terrorist group?”

— Former public sector worker, currently in Turkey

Several interviewees spoke of the international community’s responsibility to take an active stance and put pressure on the Taliban to recognize and respect women’s rights; this includes opening schools for girls, providing women with job opportunities, and recognizing women’s rights to safety, movement, and freedom.

“The international community should understand they made a mistake by abandoning Afghanistan and should support Afghans with a political solution.”

— Civil society sector worker, currently in Tajikistan

“Listen to Afghan women”

VOICE’s interview did not directly ask whether WHRDs had been consulted by the international community in the design or implementation of services or in the strategies that guide the international community’s response. However, nearly 15% of interviewees explicitly spoke about not being meaningfully consulted by relevant stakeholders (including service providers, NGOs, INGOs, or government officials) and/or expressed a desire for the international community to commit to consulting with them more regularly.

There was consensus among WHRDs on the importance of being listened to, rather than having international actors speak for them. Several emphasized the importance of lifting up the voices of women on the ground; as one former public sector worker, currently in the U.S., stated: *“Women inside Afghanistan should define what aspect of the crisis impacts them the most and how to address that.”*

Others expressed the need for consultations to be meaningful and to include follow-through on actions and commitments by international actors. To highlight this need, one interviewee in Afghanistan described the “artificial” nature of the consultations she had had:

“I had meetings with UN and UNAMA offices, they listened to us but didn’t take any actions to support our activities. A local organization such as [ours] is completely on its own and never received any financial support or even protection for its members. Most of these consultation meetings are artificial.”

— WHRD, Afghanistan

Afghan WHRDs from all locations agreed that if host governments and the international community were to consult them, they could be a part of the political process to put more pressure on the Taliban. These women know the situation in Afghanistan very well, and their natural expertise and experience could be incredibly effective in implementing better programs, strategies, and approaches.

“Listen to us and use the organizations and structures we have built in the last 20 years for consulting and supporting us to facilitate women’s consultation and mobilization, but do not take away our jobs. Let us and help us to present our needs instead of representing us.”

— WHRD, Afghanistan

B. Resettlement

For the majority of displaced WHRDs interviewed, the process of fleeing Afghanistan and attempting to start a new life elsewhere has been fraught with challenges. For many, this has not been their first experience of displacement:

“When the Taliban took over in 1996 and we had to move to Pakistan, we couldn’t take anything. I used to see how my mother was suffering. Then we moved back to Kabul, [and] again she started from zero. I made a life for myself after I got married, [and now] I left it behind. I now feel what my mother was going through.”

— Participant in art-based workshop, U.S.

WHRDs reported chaotic evacuation experiences, lack of resettlement assistance, months spent in limbo and uncertainty, and discrimination within countries of transit and resettlement.

1. Evacuation and transit experiences

Despite U.S. plans to evacuate its military by September 2021, the Taliban's swift takeover of Kabul on August 14th sowed immediate chaos, confusion, and fear, with thousands attempting to flee the country in a matter of days. While some Afghan journalists and employees of international organizations—including some WHRDs—were placed on evacuation lists of “high-risk individuals,” the process of gaining permission to enter the airport and leave the country was largely ad-hoc, with no systematic assessment of risk or need.⁶⁷ Several interviewees spoke of how the hectic and disorganized evacuation was biased against them from the start. Nepotism and favoritism were rampant and seemed to determine who would be prioritized for evacuation, which left many of the most at-risk women to fend for themselves. In many cases, people gained access to the airport based on who they knew, how well connected they were, and what resources they had at their disposal.⁶⁸

“When the Taliban took over everybody wanted to move out of Afghanistan. Many people died, and some fell off the plane but their only hope was to get out of Afghanistan to save themselves from the cruelty of the Taliban. Some couldn't make it and some did.”

— Participant in art-based workshop, Pakistan



... “Their only hope was to get out of Afghanistan to save themselves from the cruelty of the Taliban. Some couldn't make it and some did.” — Participant in the art-based workshop in Pakistan

The collages take imagery from art-based workshops conducted in Albania, the U.S. and Pakistan with Afghan WHRDs. Chiara Pirovano collaborated with the artist, Pearl D'Souza, to create the visuals for this report.

⁶⁷ Mosadiq and others, “State of Human Rights Defenders in Afghanistan.”

⁶⁸ Mosadiq and others, “State of Human Rights Defenders in Afghanistan.”

A handful of WHRDs also reported maltreatment of Afghan women by soldiers and official personnel within Kabul airport and throughout the evacuation process, including from employees and volunteers at subsequent camps, military bases, and within resettlement agencies. Cultural insensitivity by caseworkers and condescending and/or unsympathetic treatment by a breadth of actors were the most common complaints throughout the resettlement processes.

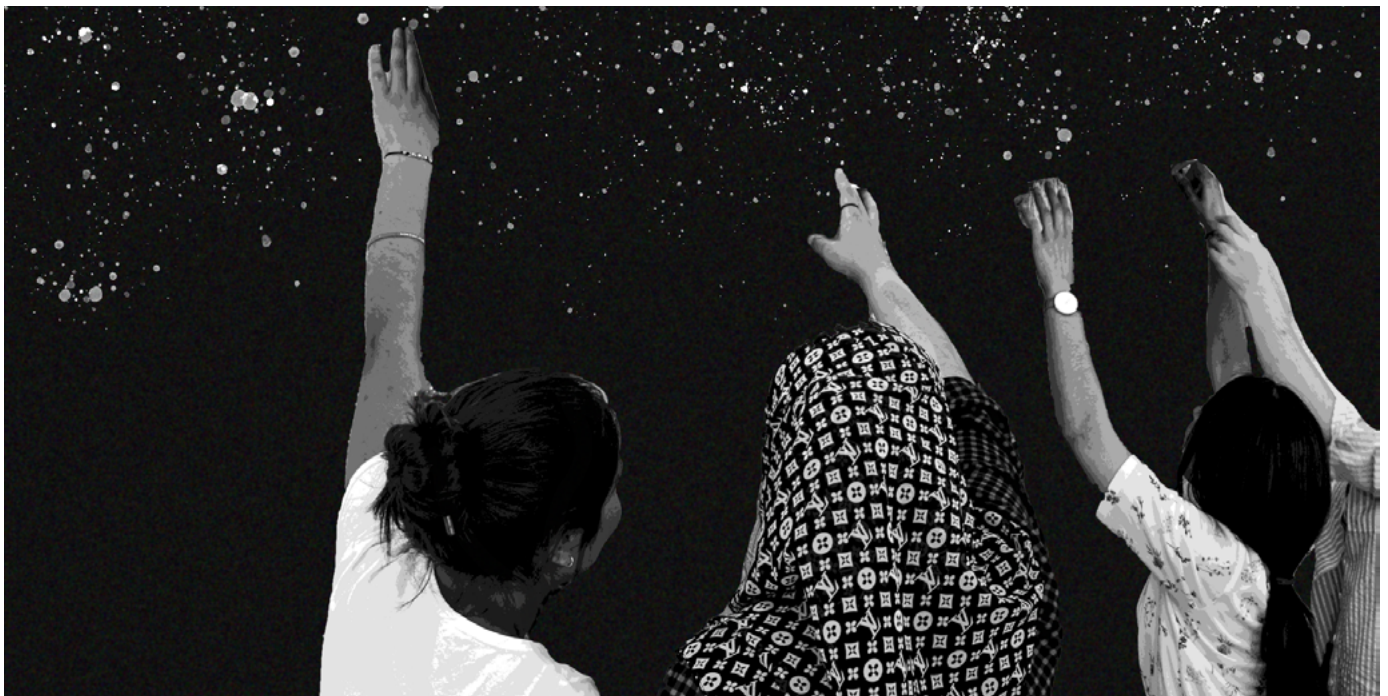
“Nobody wanted to come to the U.S. like this... Nobody wanted to face this kind of humiliation... The way that the employees of the camp looked at us was hurtful, like we are beggars. We can never forget the way we were treated in Kabul airport. If they wanted to, they could manage better.”

— WHRD, currently in the U.S.

Many who fled Afghanistan were separated from their families, compounding their struggles and fears and often contributing to their mental health challenges. Some were only able to leave with one or two family members, as they didn’t have the necessary documents or permission for all of their family members to evacuate. Others chose not to evacuate because their families could not come with them:

“While I received an evacuation offer, I decided not to leave as my sisters were in danger and I could not abandon them.”

— Media and communication sector worker, eventually evacuated with her family to Canada



... “I want to take myself out of the darkness and move towards the light.” — Participant in the art-based workshop in Pakistan

The collages take imagery from art-based workshops conducted in Albania, the U.S. and Pakistan with Afghan WHRDs. Chiara Pirovano collaborated with the artist, Pearl D’Souza, to create the visuals for this report.

2. Resettlement assistance

Reported access to resettlement assistance varied tremendously based on interviewees' location and stage of displacement. For example, while 58% of WHRDs noted that they received assistance during their initial evacuation from Afghanistan, 42% reported they had not received any basic assistance during their resettlement processes, including in both transit and final destination countries.⁶⁹

All six of the women interviewed in Pakistan noted that no government departments or non-profit organizations had offered them assistance. Following the Taliban takeover, the Pakistani government did not offer an official welcome to Afghan refugees and regularly turned away Afghans who were fleeing across the border. UNHCR was only allowed to register Afghans who had visas for health emergencies or prior employment, and only started to give refugee cards after February 2022 to those Afghans who were registered prior the Taliban takeover.⁷⁰ Few Pakistani organizations are allowed to provide support to refugees. As a result of these restrictive conditions, WHRDs reported that no attempts at assistance had been made. Several WHRDs in Pakistan referenced their inability to access healthcare, schools, or jobs because they had not been registered and were not living in camps.

“The UN was supposed to provide refugee cards, but none of the refugees received it. I managed to get an appointment after two months and they gave me a document to sign but it was in English. I asked for translation but they didn’t help... Without understanding anything in the document I signed the paper, but until now I didn’t receive a refugee card or any help from them.”

— Media and communications sector worker, currently in Pakistan

3. Lack of clarity on the resettlement process

Many of the women VOICE spoke with are still living in transit countries, waiting for possible resettlement in final destination countries. WHRDs spoke of the strain of living in limbo—particularly for prolonged periods—with insufficient financial services and support.

“Those of us in Abu Dhabi have been forgotten by local and international organizations. I think living in limbo for a year without any clear information about the process is a crisis itself. I am not being consulted for my own situation. I am totally disconnected from real life and society.”

— Former public sector worker, currently in the United Arab Emirates

⁶⁹ These percentages are detailed in Chart 2 under “A: Safety and Security” above.

⁷⁰ European Union Agency of Asylum, *Pakistan – Situation of Afghan refugees: Country of Origin Information Report* (Luxembourg, 2022).

Several interviewees spoke of their fears of not being granted asylum and what this could mean for their safety and well-being, as well as the impact it has had on their mental health. As a participant in the art-based workshop in the U.S. described: *“What if my asylum is not granted and I have to go back? Leave everything again? I am tired, I am really tired.”*

WHRDs in Pakistan face several challenges to their resettlement process. Due to the delayed response from UNHCR, many WHRDs’ visas and passports have expired; however, when they approached embassies for renewal, they have been asked for 400 USD as a passport renewal fee, which for most is unaffordable. The delay in resettlement has severely affected many WHRDs’ financial situation, as they report being left with little or no money for food, healthcare, and other basic needs. *“I want to take myself out of darkness and move towards the light,”* expressed one participant in the art-based workshop in Pakistan. *“I want to move to a country where there is peace and I can complete my studies.”* Most expressed feeling unsafe and trapped in a country where they could not continue their activism or even access basic services—as they have not been officially registered—and at the same time were unable to afford the passport renewal process.

“When the Taliban took over Afghanistan I believed it would be better for us to move to another country. However, after moving to Pakistan our life has become more challenging... We’re encountering many problems including visa issues, unemployment, financial strains... I’m living in a country where I have restrictions on working as an activist.”

— Media and communications worker, currently in Pakistan

In Tajikistan, Pakistan, and Iran,⁷¹ there have also been thousands of forced deportations of Afghans back into Afghanistan. UNHCR has confirmed that since August 16, 2022, 80 Afghan refugees and asylum seekers have been deported from Tajikistan and back to Afghanistan, with numbers increasing steadily. They also reported that Afghan refugees are being deported without identity documents or access to assistance, greatly increasing their risk level.⁷²

“Recently we do not feel safe as the government of Tajikistan has started a crackdown on Afghan refugees, deporting many families.”

— WHRD, currently in Tajikistan

⁷¹ The International Organization for Migration (IOM) reports thousands of deportations from Iran to Afghanistan in its Movement in and out Afghanistan infographics: see <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/movements-and-out-afghanistan-16-31-july-2022>

⁷² UN News, “Afghanistan: UNHCR alarm over forced refugee returns from Tajikistan.” 25 August 2022

4. Discrimination within countries of transition and resettlement

While Afghans are facing considerable obstacles in obtaining humanitarian parole in the U.S.,⁷³ Ukrainians are being prioritized—highlighting the deep structural inequalities that exist within resettlement processes. Many Afghan women reported facing discrimination from resettlement officials, from volunteers providing resettlement assistance, and from communities within transit and final destination countries. Several WHRDs charged that caseworkers were not behaving ethically; for example, as an academic in the U.S. expressed, *“They make fun of us, they don’t prioritize our work and underestimate us. We don’t deserve it.”* As a result, many WHRDs requested that caseworkers be better trained.

Discrimination and poor treatment by fellow Afghan volunteers was also reported. As a legal sector worker currently in Canada described:

“I was very shocked with the level of criticism and discrimination we received by those Afghans who were working with these organizations as translators, etc. They were thinking we do not deserve to be in Canada, why is Canada providing us [with permanent residence] so fast, and why do we get a settlement package.”

— Legal sector worker, currently in Canada

Discrimination has a range of negative impacts, ranging from mental health consequences to denial of services and opportunities that are necessary for survival. Such poor treatment further compounds the already overwhelming challenges WHRDs face in being displaced from Afghanistan.

“I still don’t feel safe, people judge us and discriminate against us. They call us names and call us non-believers. They judge our dressing as we don’t wear a veil on our heads and think that we are a burden on their country, despite us not having any access to resources, aid, or even the basic necessities.”

— WHRD, currently in Pakistan

⁷³ As of the end of August 2022, the U.S. government has approved less than 2% of Afghan applications it processed for humanitarian parole. Najib Amini and Dhruv Mehrotra, “The US Has Approved Only 123 Afghan Humanitarian Parole Applications in the Last Year,” *Reveal*, 19 August 2022.

C. Activism

WHRDs both within and outside of Afghanistan expressed a deep and enduring commitment to their work and to the women of Afghanistan. Despite facing enormous challenges in their ongoing activism—from threats to their safety to lack of funding and support—many remain tireless in seeking opportunities to learn and adapt their work and organizations in new contexts.

1. Women’s identity and meaning through work

For many Afghan women’s rights activists, their work is central to their life. The vast majority of WHRDs spoke of how important their work was to them and of the value and meaning they gained from it.

“My work means saving the lives of women. It has a lot of value to me.”
— WHRD, Afghanistan



... “Protection of human rights defenders is necessary so they can raise their voice and fight for the rights of Afghan women.” — Entrepreneur, currently in Pakistan

The collages take imagery from art-based workshops conducted in Albania, the U.S. and Pakistan with Afghan WHRDs. Chiara Pirovano collaborated with the artist, Pearl D’Souza, to create the visuals for this report.

Many WHRDs both within and outside of Afghanistan spoke of their dedication to their work and their commitment to the women of Afghanistan, despite the risks their work very often entails. One woman described her process of continuing to work while receiving death threats, even before the Taliban takeover, and refusing offers to evacuate after the Taliban regained power.

“My job is my life mission... I am fully committed to stay with my community and continue my job to serve them.”

— WHRD, Afghanistan

The deep meaning and value that WHRDs ascribed to their activism has resulted in a feeling of intense loss when they are unable to continue their work. For many, this has contributed to feelings of depression, anxiety, and other mental health concerns. As a former public sector worker, now living in Sweden, described: *“My job was vital to me, and I was breathing with that. Defending women’s rights was an important thing to me, and leaving my country has been the worst experience I have ever had.”* Another interviewee shared:

“I am still trying to help my fellow Afghans; I don’t feel good because I have to have a low profile for security reasons... It’s very difficult for me to stay here and not do anything. I feel useless and helpless. If I wasn’t a target, I would have done something.”

— Former public sector worker, currently in Australia

2. Current status of activism

Within Afghanistan

WHRDs within Afghanistan reported facing unprecedented insecurity and threats to their safety related to their activism and efforts to speak out against the Taliban’s repressive rule. Women and girls are being abducted, detained, imprisoned, tortured, forcibly disappeared, or killed as a result of engaging in protests and demonstrations for their rights.⁷⁴ In many cases, WHRDs shared that their families are also being targeted as a result of their activism, and many fear that they or their families will be identified if they continue to participate in civic activities or support women’s rights. As a result, many women’s rights organizations (WROs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) have suspended their activism and operations in the country.

“[Women’s rights defenders] raise their voices and work without any external help or financial aid... There are many women [who] are either nowhere to be found, dead or captured by Taliban. Protection of human rights defenders is necessary so they can raise their voice and fight for the rights of Afghan women.”

— Entrepreneur, currently in Pakistan

⁷⁴ Human Rights Watch, *Afghan Women Rights Protestors Detail Taliban Abuse* (2022).

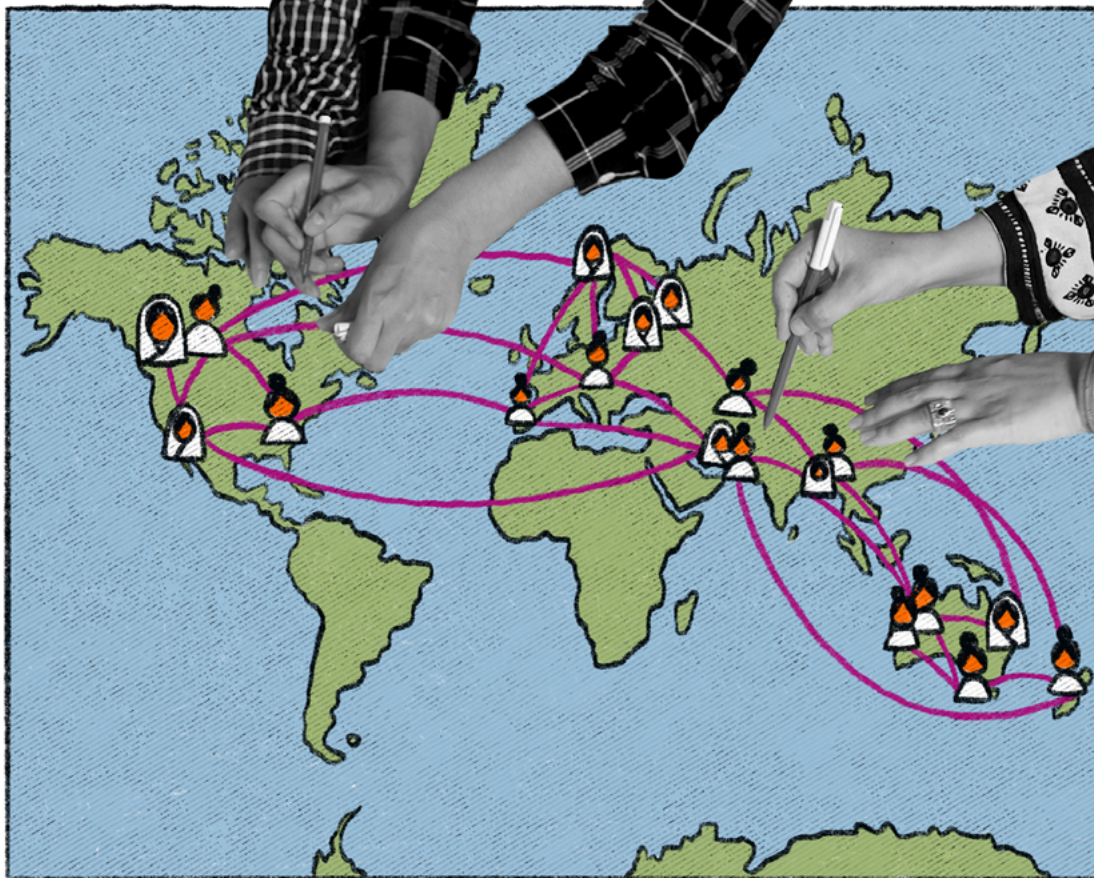
Very few WHRDs reported having access to effective support to ensure a safe environment for women to work; those networks that were still active within Afghanistan were best described as CSOs or WROs, all of which are being run discreetly by Afghan women who are at-risk themselves and face substantial obstacles. Most WRO activities occur in private or online; public protests and demonstrations are rarely held as they carry much greater risks. Continuing activities is also incredibly challenging as women are unable to leave the house unaccompanied, and some women spoke about not being able to travel to mobilize women and groups on a provincial or district level.

Women who face discrimination for both their gender and their ethnicity face even higher risks when it comes to engaging in activism, and there appears to be a link between women's ability to participate in underground activities and their level of vulnerability. As a WHRD in Afghanistan described: *"No one has the courage to hold activities as the Taliban are very brutal, especially in Bamyan because of ethnicity and religious discriminations, and people are too scared."* As a consequence, WHRDs both within and outside of Afghanistan called on the international community to provide them with protection so that they can continue fighting for Afghan women.

Despite these very real threats, WHRDs have not stayed silent. Afghan women continue to organize and resist. While protests and demonstrations carry a great deal of risk, some groups and activists have been able to resume their advocacy, research, and programmatic activities by adjusting their strategies and approach. Several women spoke of holding secret meetings to strategize how to subvert restrictions and increase their engagement in public protests. Women in small groups continue to gather in public, print posters and write messages on the streets, capture them on social media, and disappear before the Taliban notices. Several women spoke of their informal negotiations with authorities and elders in their communities, some of which have been successful in allowing them to continue their work or allowing girls to return to school.

Outside of Afghanistan

Outside of Afghanistan, WHRDs reported establishing organizations in Canada, Italy, and Tajikistan, while others in Greece, the U.S., and other countries shared their unsuccessful attempts to do so. Bureaucracy, lack of resources (such as financial support, laptops, internet, and working spaces), and language barriers were referenced as the primary challenges for creating new organizations and continuing their activism. For others, the lack of stability they experienced while in transit and the difficulties of having fellow WHRDs move on to other countries created additional barriers.



... **"I wish to build our movement inside Afghanistan and outside."** — Former public sector worker, currently in Spain

The collages take imagery from art-based workshops conducted in Albania, the U.S. and Pakistan with Afghan WHRDs. Chiara Pirovano collaborated with the artist, Pearl D'Souza, to create the visuals for this report.

"Our office in Kabul is closed but we carry our activities online. All our colleagues work without any salary since one year. I registered my organization in Canada and I really hope to raise some resources to continue my activities here as well as in Afghanistan. So far I have not received any financial support."

— Media and communications worker, currently in Canada

Still others face restrictions to their activism from their host country government itself, including its political systems and the state of civil society in the country. Many WHRDs, for example, fled to neighboring countries which have no mechanism in place to support their continued activism. Afghan WHRDs in Tajikistan, Turkey, Pakistan, and Iran repeatedly spoke of the repression and shrinking civil space in these countries, in addition to other challenges such as lack of support and inability to acquire legal status or visas. As a WHRD, currently in Turkey, described, *"The Turkish government does not allow any civic or political activity that would raise voice against the Taliban."* Another interviewee shared:

“There are very high restrictions in Tajikistan; the society is closed for civic activities... The space for women activists is limited.”

— Civil-society sector worker, currently in Tajikistan

Like those women still in Afghanistan, some WHRDs spoke of the risks their activism placed on their family members back home and the tremendous toll this takes on their mental health. As one former public sector worker, now in Australia, described: *“My main challenge is that my nephews are identified, and they are under threat. My family members are still there, and I can’t be public in raising these concerns.”* Another WHRD shared:

“Some of my family members are still stuck in Afghanistan. The Taliban searched my house and found photos of me when I was working in the media and [government]. My family had to leave the house and hide. The risk that they are facing is giving me panic attacks. I feel responsible for what they are going through.”

— WHRD, currently in Turkey

Most WHRDs outside of Afghanistan reported an overall lack of functioning networks for Afghan women, although some women continued to engage with networks in Afghanistan. Several women also shared that they are now seeing the majority of (albeit limited) activities regarding Afghan women being designed, led, and implemented by international organizations, rather than by Afghan women themselves. This in some instances has prevented these WHRDs from continuing their activism while in exile.

WHRDs both within and outside of Afghanistan reported using social media and instant messaging platforms as their primary means of staying engaged with each other. The importance of having opportunities to connect with one another was highlighted through the art workshops VOICE conducted in Pakistan and the U.S. Several participants noted how meaningful it was to have space to share their experiences with others who understood and have been through a similar journey. As one U.S.-based participant—who had felt isolated for months—described, *“Today, when I am among all of you... I know that there is a group who can understand me and who have a very similar feeling to me.”*

Others spoke of the need for more support and engagement from feminist groups and other organizations outside of Afghanistan. The need for organizational, logistical, and financial support was expressed in multiple interviews, as well as collaboration and network-building with feminist groups in the West to uplift their message. Several women expressed a desire for programs that could help Afghan WHRDs continue their activism, communicate with their fellow WHRDs within Afghanistan, and build and strengthen their movements.

“We want [feminist] organizations to display the work we have done for the women in Afghanistan, and connect all those women activists who are now in Pakistan or Iran so they can share their visions about women of Afghanistan.”

— Media and communications worker, currently in Pakistan

WHRDs who have been displaced from Afghanistan play an essential role as bridges of information: they connect the rest of the world to the realities of Afghan women at home and abroad, they disseminate information received by people on the ground, and they raise awareness on social media and media outlets. Social media plays a uniquely important role in how these women are continuing their activism—as a media and communications worker now in Pakistan explained, *“I can’t continue my activism in person here; my only way is to use social media.”* For some displaced WHRDs, this focus on monitoring, advocacy, and providing information represents a significant change, whether positive or negative, as they find themselves unable to carry on the same activities they did before.

“When I was in Afghanistan, I had a say in things, but now I am only a listener, or I can only talk to local media. With 20 years of experience, it is not easy for me to accept that I can no longer play an active role.”

— Legal sector worker, currently in the Netherlands

A constant theme throughout the interviews with displaced WHRDs was their encouragement to women still in Afghanistan to stay hopeful and remain resilient. As a WHRD, now in the U.S., shared, *“I cannot tell women’s rights activists in Afghanistan to go on the streets to protest, because their lives are in danger. But I can tell them to be hopeful, the situation will change.”* Even under hugely oppressive conditions, many Afghan women expressed hope for the future, for themselves, and for their fellow women’s rights activists.

“Despite all these tragedies, I am hopeful for the future of Afghanistan because the women and young generation of my country have transformed drastically in the last two decades... They have different aspirations for Afghanistan and their future. They will never give in to oppression and give up all their rights. Inshallah this period of time shall pass and everything will change for the better.”

— Legal sector worker, currently in Greece

“My ambition is for all Afghan women to live in the same human environment and live a good life like women in other countries. Women have the freedom to study and work and live without any form of discrimination. I know it seems impossible right now, but the resilience and fight of Afghan women make me hopeful that we will achieve this.”

— WHRD, currently in Canada

Recommendations



An objective of this research was to give Afghan WHRDs a platform to articulate and share their lived experiences to better inform the policies and actions of governments and others accountable for their safety, protection, and rights.

Afghan women's rights have been used as a justification for Western military intervention in Afghanistan for the past 20 years; therefore, **the international community has a responsibility to recognize and prioritize Afghan women's needs, safety, rights, hopes, and dreams.** VOICE notes, however, that during its interviews with WHRDs, some declined to provide any recommendations for the international community. Due to the past negligence of these actors, many WHRDs did not believe any recommendations they made would be taken seriously or acted upon.

Despite the misgivings of WHRDs, nearly everyone VOICE spoke to expressed the desire to be more meaningfully engaged in determining how the international community responds to the needs of Afghan women. This is the minimum of what must be done. Therefore, **when taking up each of the following recommendations, it is essential that all actors center the voices, experiences, and leadership of Afghan women and girls. This includes establishing, reviewing, and recalibrating mechanisms to engage and support more diverse groups of WHRDs and women-led organizations—inside and outside Afghanistan—to ensure their perspectives, experiences, and advice shape all strategies and action.**


"I believe that Afghan women should lead the activities themselves. Now, for example, when an NGO organizes a program for Afghan women, I attend as a participant and do nothing... I don't think it will result in any significant changes if Afghan women leaders do not design projects, implement and take action."

— WHRD, currently in the U.S.

While VOICE recognizes that some steps have been taken toward achieving the objectives discussed below, efforts have been inconsistent at best and have fallen far short of achieving their goal. Most troubling is that many actors seem content to *say* the right thing rather than *do* it, further contributing to the hopelessness from which WHRDs suffer. VOICE urges all actors to fulfill their responsibilities and obligations to protect Afghan women’s rights, including by creating an enabling environment for their continued activism.

We hope this report will not only help Afghan women speak truth to power, but provide Afghan WHRDs with an advocacy tool, hope, and sustenance, knowing VOICE and other feminist organizations throughout the world stand with them as they fight for their rights, humanity, and futures.

Based on its research, VOICE therefore makes the following recommendations.

KEY ACTORS	
<p>Governments</p>  <p>including host country governments and resettlement offices, where indicated</p>	<p>UN Actors</p>  <p>including UNAMA, UN Women, UNOCHA, UNHCR, and the UN Security Council</p>
<p>Non-government actors</p>  <p>including international and national NGOs and others providing services and support to displaced and other Afghan women and girls inside and outside the country</p>	<p>Donors</p>  <p>including governments, UN actors, INGO funders, private foundations, feminist funders, universities, and others providing funding to Afghan women and girls</p>

KEY ACTORS



Governments



UN Actors

1. Exert political pressure on the Taliban to recognize and respect the rights of Afghan women and girls.

- Refuse to recognize the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, and exert political pressure on those governments that recognize or provide support to the Taliban.
- Use all available diplomatic tools to pressure the Taliban to change its laws, policies, and behavior and to restore women's and girls' full range of human rights—including the ability of WHRDs, civil society organizations, women's organizations, and other human rights defenders to resume their activities.
- Use existing accountability mechanisms—including the UN Security Council's travel ban, which should be extended to encompass all Taliban leaders—and all other points of leverage held by the international community to hold the Taliban accountable for their human rights violations.
- Re-constitute a strengthened and more diverse mechanism to consult Afghan women, incorporating diverse WHRDs and women-led organizations within Afghanistan to work with UNAMA and to advise governments who engage in discussions with the Taliban, in order to ensure that women's voices are central to political discussions and processes. Ensure that Afghan women within the diaspora are also engaged in key political processes and formal consultations.

"The women leaders in different sectors have worked hard in the last 20 years. They have broken so many glass ceilings while climbing the ladder. Most of them have experience of working and studying during Taliban rule in the '90s. They know all the challenges and how they should be overcome. They should be consulted based on their field of expertise. The advice and suggestion of these women can be very useful for responding to current crises, especially with a gender lens of course, if the world decides to help Afghanistan."

— WHRD, currently in Greece

KEY ACTORS



INGOs



Governments



UN Actors

2. Prioritize humanitarian and development programming that promotes women's safety, security, and rights and centers women as partners.

- Create mechanisms in which Afghan women and girls, including WHRDs within Afghanistan and within the diaspora, are recognized as experts and can directly advise on and shape the design, implementation, and monitoring of all aspects of humanitarian and development programming, including:
 - Programs to address the needs and priorities of displaced and refugee Afghan women and girls;
 - The overall evacuation and resettlement process; and
 - Decision-making processes at the global level that influence, manage, and monitor humanitarian and development funding.
- Develop longer-term strategies for Afghanistan, going beyond emergency response and focusing on programming and funding for development and long-term interventions in alignment with the humanitarian-development nexus.
- Employ Afghan women, including Hazaras and Tajiks, as staff and consultants—including in decision-making roles—across international projects in Afghanistan and in transit and resettlement countries.
- Ensure all programming within Afghanistan extends to smaller provinces, remote areas, women-headed households, women-run media outlets, civil society organizations, and entrepreneurs—and ensure all programming equally engages Hazara and Tajik women and girls.
- Identify strategies, in consultation with Afghan women leaders, to provide and fund quality education to girls and women within Afghanistan in the short-term, while strategizing on how to fully restore it in the longer-term.

KEY ACTORS



INGOs



Donors



Governments



UN Actors

3. Ensure safe access to essential services and basic rights for all WHRDs displaced from Afghanistan.

- Ensure all displaced Afghan WHRDs, regardless of their legal and resettlement status and location, have access to the following minimum essential services throughout their resettlement journey:
 - Comprehensive health care, including sexual and reproductive health care and culturally appropriate mental health care/counseling;
 - Legal and resettlement advice and support services, including safe and affordable housing; and
 - Financial assistance to meet basic needs.
- Develop culturally-appropriate, women- and girl-centered mechanisms that support survivors to confidentially and safely report instances of VAWG. Ensure those providing services supporting displaced Afghan women and girls have appropriate training and capacity to understand and respond to WHRDs' unique VAWG risks and experiences in line with best practice standards.⁷⁵
- Ensure translation and interpretation services are available so that language barriers do not prevent women from receiving support and understanding their rights and entitlement to services.

⁷⁵ Best practices include ensuring appropriate response to survivors; establishing referral mechanisms so caseworkers and others responding to VAWG disclosures can safely refer survivors to appropriate services (such as healthcare, psychosocial support services, etc.); and ensuring risk mitigation strategies are in place. For more information and guidance on GBV best practice standards in humanitarian settings, see: the Inter-Agency Standing Committee GBV Guidelines (www.gbvguidelines.org), the Interagency Gender-Based Violence Case Management Guidelines (https://gbvresponders.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Interagency-GBV-Case-Management-Guidelines_Final_2017_Low-Res.pdf), the Gender-Based Violence Disclosure Toolkit (<https://publichealth.wustl.edu/items/gbv-disclosure-toolkit/>), and the resources available through the GBV Area of Responsibility (<https://gbvaor.net/>), and the resources available through the GBV Area of Responsibility (<https://gbvaor.net/>).

KEY ACTORS



INGOs



Donors



Governments



UN Actors

4. Provide opportunities for ongoing education and sustainable livelihoods for displaced WHRDs.

- Create income generation and employment opportunities to allow displaced women to maintain their dignity, integrate into the community, earn a decent income, and leverage their expertise and talents.
- Fund and provide quality educational opportunities for displaced women, including re-training and re-certification pathways, to increase their ability to gain decent employment and integrate into the community.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ This includes assessing how to leverage skills, education, and experiences of displaced WHRDs who wish to work in exile, and tailoring employment and training programs accordingly.

KEY ACTORS



Governments



UN Actors

5. Prioritize and urgently expedite resettlement for Afghan WHRDs.

- In countries hosting displaced Afghan women—especially those where WHRDs face higher risk, such as Iran and Pakistan—expedite the process for providing displaced women with legal status to end the mental strain, poverty, and feelings of hopelessness and alienation they and their families are experiencing.
- Prioritize women and girls at greatest risk for resettlement. Add extreme personal risk as a criteria for evacuation from Afghanistan, as current criteria (such as the U.S. Special Immigrant Visa) result in men being evacuated in far greater numbers than women.
- In countries neighboring Afghanistan, improve mechanisms to process medical visas, due to the extreme challenges women face in accessing medical services in Afghanistan.

KEY ACTORS



INGOs



Donors



UN Actors

6. Support Afghan women's and girls' ongoing activism.

- Significantly advance and coordinate efforts to support WHRDs through coalition building inside and outside of Afghanistan. Provide opportunities for them to connect, network, and learn so they can take on greater advisory and leadership roles in which they can influence political discussions, humanitarian action, and development work.
- Provide consistent, transparent, trust-based, accessible, and flexible funding and capacity support for Afghan civil society organizations, women's rights organizations, feminist media outlets, and other WHRDs to ensure they can continue their advocacy for women's rights in Afghanistan.
- Ensure the allocation of resources within Afghanistan prioritizes women-led organizations and activists and extends to those in villages and rural areas as well as to ethnic minorities, such as Hazaras and Tajiks.
- Minimize time-consuming and byzantine bureaucratic reporting requirements, as they are a major barrier to accessing funding for women's civil society organizations. Identify creative, efficient, and effective ways to provide information and practical support for WHRDs to rapidly access international funding.

