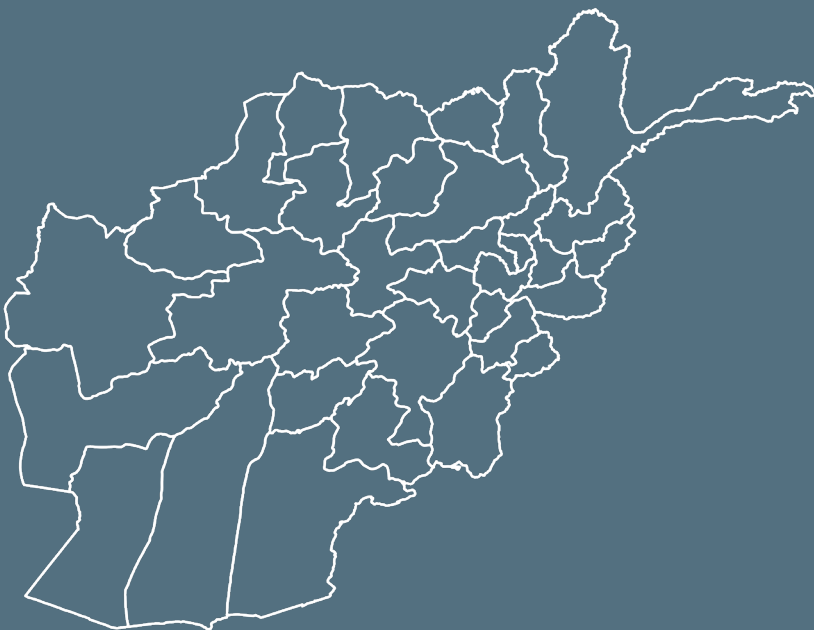


# Against the odds: Strengthening accountability to women and girls in Afghanistan

Afghanistan • February 2023



GROUND TRUTH  
SOLUTIONS

Salma:  
consulting 

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## Additional information:

For more information about our work, please contact [rieke@groundtruthsolutions.org](mailto:rieke@groundtruthsolutions.org) or [lee@salmaconsulting.com](mailto:lee@salmaconsulting.com), or visit [groundtruthsolutions.org](http://groundtruthsolutions.org) and [salmaconsulting.com](http://salmaconsulting.com)

With funding from UN Women



# Executive summary

Women and girls are increasingly being pushed out of public space in Afghanistan. Since the Taliban took over as de facto authorities (DFA), they have imposed a long list of restrictions on women's movement, activities and rights. This has made it difficult for women to engage with humanitarian aid. The recent ban on women aid workers has left many women unable to access aid at all.

Ground Truth Solutions (GTS) and Salma Consulting, supported by UN Women and the Gender in Humanitarian Action (GiHA) working group, spoke with over 2,000 women and men living in Afghanistan between November and December 2022 through household surveys and qualitative focus group discussions (FGDs). In these conversations, we collected communities' views on how aid is provided, how gender norms and restrictions are impacting access to humanitarian assistance, and the extent to which aid is gender-sensitive. We based this on a normative understanding of gender roles and which vulnerabilities – or which combination of risk factors – most impact access to, and satisfaction with, aid. The data were collected just before the nationwide ban on female non-governmental organisation (NGO) workers. The findings provide timely insight on the perceptions of women accessing aid without the availability of female aid workers. Understanding gender-related access barriers and community recommendations can help aid actors to better reach women and girls with vital assistance.

## Main findings: Perspectives from community members in Afghanistan

- Over half the people we spoke to find it difficult to access aid because distribution sites are too far away or difficult to reach, and they do not receive information in a clear and suitable way.
- Women struggle to access aid. They feel less informed about what is available; and they don't trust targeting processes. Women living without a male household member face particular difficulties, because of movement restrictions and the lack of female aid workers. Eighty-three percent of women and 86% of men say that both men and women should have equal access to aid, but only 45% of men and 47% of women say this is the case.
- Communities expect humanitarian organisations to be sensitive to and aware of normative gender practices. This includes understanding the risks and challenges for women participating in aid, and how agencies can adapt to safeguard and protect women and girls.
- People expect the most vulnerable people in their community to receive aid, but this is not the case. They say male community leaders, such as elders, Maliks, religious leaders, and shura members are often involved in targeting<sup>1</sup>, but they recommend relatives and friends, so those most in need miss out.
- Community members want to know how, when, and where humanitarians provide aid and to understand how they spend money in their communities, but they often don't. Women feel even less consulted about aid than men. They want financial transparency and for aid to be better adapted to their long-term needs. They request work opportunities, training, and infrastructure, while recognising that all aid, including short-term relief, is helpful.
- People in Afghanistan expect to influence how aid is provided and to inform humanitarian actors of their priority needs. They ask for needs assessments and door-to-door visits, so they can provide input.

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<sup>1</sup> A Malik is a religious leader who often acts as village representative, a shura is a village council

## Policy recommendations

In one of the toughest environments for women and girls, alternative methods are needed for humanitarians to access and support them. The findings of this research, implemented between November and December 2022, provide insight into how aid providers might still reach people in need despite the tightening restrictions.

When considering recommendations from communities, it is important to note that people's perceptions are strongly influenced by societal rules and norms, many of which already existed in Afghanistan, and some of which were imposed or worsened by the DFA. These recommendations do not exist in perfect conditions, where people's rights are respected. As such, some community recommendations may be in conflict with many of the standards, expectations, and current practices of international humanitarian actors. This report reflects community pragmatism. We respect that communities are well-placed to advise on how aid should be adapted to their current situation and provided in such a way that it ensures the safety and security of recipients.

Recommendations from communities include:

- **Align aid selection with local realities**

When aid is allocated at a household level, men and women say they both prefer men to be the primary recipient because it is easier for them to communicate with aid providers and travel to distribution sites.

- **To prevent dangerous rumours, be transparent about who gets selected and why**

Communities, especially community leaders, must know who has been selected for aid, why they have been selected, and what they will receive. Otherwise, rumours could damage a woman and her family's reputation.

- **Door-to-door aid would reach more women without male counterparts**

For women who do not have a male counterpart, NGOs should consider providing aid door-to-door or in locations where women are still allowed, or through female staff who are still able to work (e.g., UN staff and health workers). There are resource constraints to consider, but this may be the only feasible way that some women will be reached.

- **Engage with women in the community to identify the most vulnerable**

Both men and women think that targeting using community leaders does not always lead to the most vulnerable receiving aid. Engage with women leaders in the community to help target the most vulnerable, or with (mobile) community health workers where possible.

- **A more proactive approach to feedback and post-distribution monitoring**

Humanitarian organisations should identify (older) women within each target community who can act as a point of contact for other women to provide feedback. These focal points could also be trained to conduct post-distribution surveys or interviews with women who receive assistance.

“

I don't think it is good to give the cash to [a woman] if her husband is fine. She is a woman, and her husband must receive the cash because [she] is a housewife, and it is not suitable for her to go to the district.

– *Woman Aid recipient, Nangarhar*

“

We are living in a traditional community, and it might create problems for the woman, either within her household or within the community. People might have negative thoughts about why she was moving around.

– *Community Leader, Nangarhar*

“

It was very difficult for us (to access distribution points). We needed to travel to receive our items. We had no money to get there, and we had many problems on the way. We had to bring our children which makes it more difficult. Now we also need to have a mahram on the journey. It was a difficult experience for me.

– *Woman aid recipient, Kunduz*

“

It is not a perfect method because we are Pashtuns, and we are not going to permit male surveyors to visit these ladies. We have lots of educated ladies in this community, and they have to be given the chance to be members of the team so they can ask questions of other women in the community.

– *Male aid recipient, Kandahar*

# Introduction

People in Afghanistan are more dependent on humanitarian aid than ever. Communities have been rocked by Afghanistan's takeover by the Taliban and the ensuing economic collapse, as well as multiple natural disasters,<sup>2</sup> leading to an enormous humanitarian crisis. In a country that was already one of the world's most complex humanitarian emergencies, Afghanistan in 2023 sees:

- Humanitarian aid organisations targeting 23.7 million people;
- Two-thirds of the population (28.3 million people) in need,<sup>3</sup> a 16% rise from 2022 and a 54% rise from 2021;
- Ninety-seven percent of the population living in poverty;<sup>4</sup>
- Acute food insecurity a risk for 19.9 million people.<sup>5</sup>

The 2022 Humanitarian Response Plan's (HRP) three strategies focus on people of all genders and diverse identities. Its gender promotion strategy<sup>6</sup> emphasises women and girls' rights, makes women civil society organisations (CSOs) central to the response, and promotes the empowerment of women and girls. But providing humanitarian aid in line with these strategies and the core humanitarian standards has become impossible. When the Taliban took over Kabul on 15 August 2021, the humanitarian community was desperate to believe the promises of the DFA to respect women's rights.<sup>7</sup> The state of affairs in January 2023 is heart-breaking. Since August 2021, Afghan women and girls have grappled with new restrictions on their mobility, access to education, and services. Two more devastating blows came in December 2022: the closing of universities for women, and the ban on Afghan women working for national and international organisations.<sup>8</sup> This latest restriction is not just a ban on workers, but a near-ban on women accessing, let alone participating in, humanitarian services. Rapid assessments by the Gender in Humanitarian Access (GiHA) working group and the Humanitarian Access Group (HAG) show that it affects 83% of NGOs.<sup>9</sup>



Even before the recent restriction on female aid workers, women's access to aid was limited by a lack of information about available aid, limited freedom of movement<sup>9</sup>, and inaccessible distribution sites.<sup>10</sup> Women's participation in aid provision, and even engagement with aid, is almost gone, as the lack of female humanitarian staff effectively removes access to needs assessments and feedback mechanisms.

## We talked to




**1,974 people** through face-to-face quantitative surveys and **72 people** in focus group discussions (FGDs).

### Quantitative sample (n=1,974)



#### Gender

-  **1,023** (52%) women;
-  **951** (48%) men.



#### Age

-  **686** (35%) 18-34 years old;
-  **578** (29%) 35-44 years old;
-  **719** (36%) 45+ years old.





#### Aid received

-  **878** (44%) yes;
-  **1,096** (56%) no.




#### Disability status

-  **395** (20%) persons with disabilities;
-  **1,579** (80%) no disability.

#### Status

-  **1496** (76%) host community;
-  **340** (17%) IDPs;
-  **82** (4%) refugees;
-  **50** (3%) returnees.

### Qualitative sample (n=9)

-  **3** women FGDs;
-  **3** men FGDs;
-  **3** community leader FGDs.

#### Location

-  Nangarhar;
-  Faryab;
-  Kunduz.

<sup>2</sup> OCHA. 2022. "Afghanistan – Natural Disaster Incidents in 2022".

<sup>3</sup> OCHA. 2023. "Afghanistan needs and planned response 2023".

<sup>4</sup> IRC. December 2022. "Afghanistan: An entire population pushed into poverty".

<sup>5</sup> WFP. 2023. "Afghanistan emergency | World Food Programme".

<sup>6</sup> OCHA. 2022. "Humanitarian Response Plan".

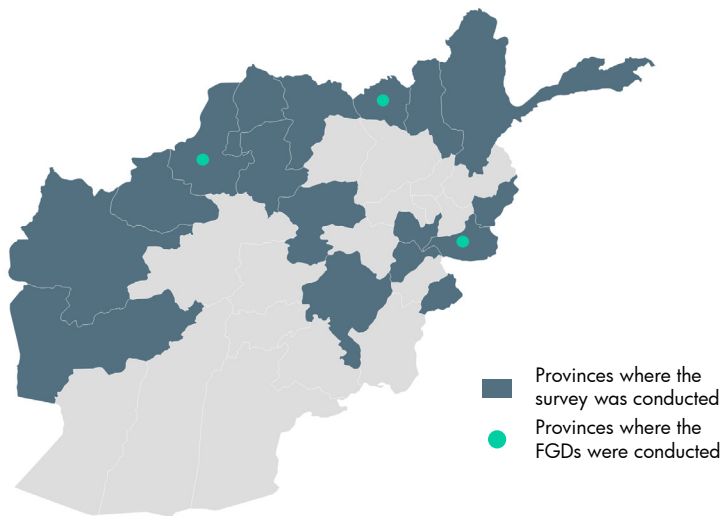
<sup>7</sup> CNN. 2022. "Afghanistan: The Taliban pledged to honor women's rights. Here's how it eroded them instead".

<sup>8</sup> UN News. 2022. "'Unfathomable restrictions' on women's rights risk destabilizing Afghanistan; Security Council voices deep alarm".

<sup>9</sup> GiHA, HAG. January 2023. "Tracking Impact Report on the recent ban on women working with NGOs and INGOs in Afghanistan".

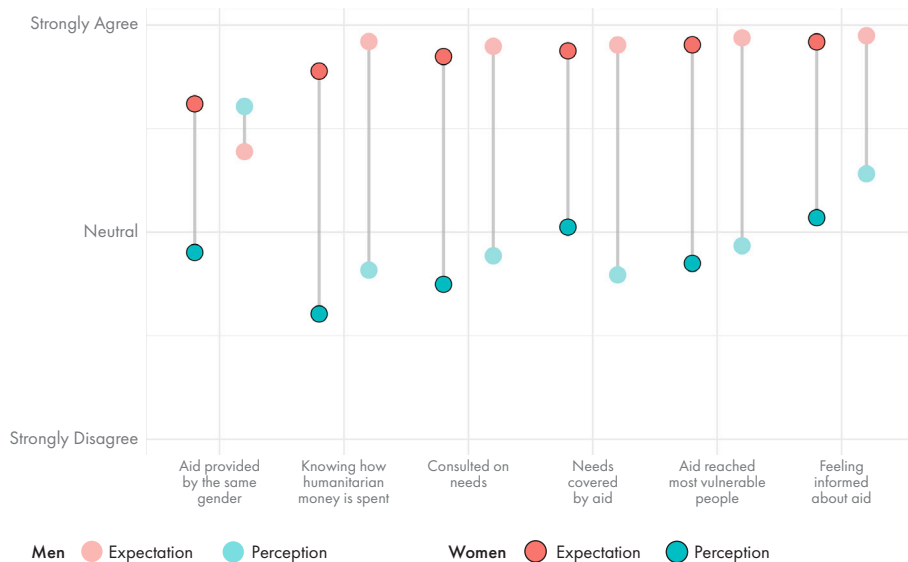
<sup>10</sup> REACH. 2022. "Whole of Afghanistan Assessment: Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment 2022".

Our data provides timely insight on the situation just before the nationwide ban on women NGO workers. They therefore provide a baseline for the 2023 HRP of perceptions of women accessing aid without female humanitarian personnel, which we can compare and track over time. This will provide an important starting point for tracking the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) mission recommendations,<sup>11</sup> which include accountability to affected people indicators, gender indicators, and access indicators.



Men and women in Afghanistan have high expectations for how aid should be provided. They expect to be informed and consulted about aid, and they want to understand how humanitarian money is spent in their communities. They expect to influence aid and for aid to cover their most important needs. However, the reality falls far short of their expectations on almost all fronts. This matters because being able to influence how aid is provided and viewing aid as transparent strongly drive overall satisfaction.<sup>12</sup>

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



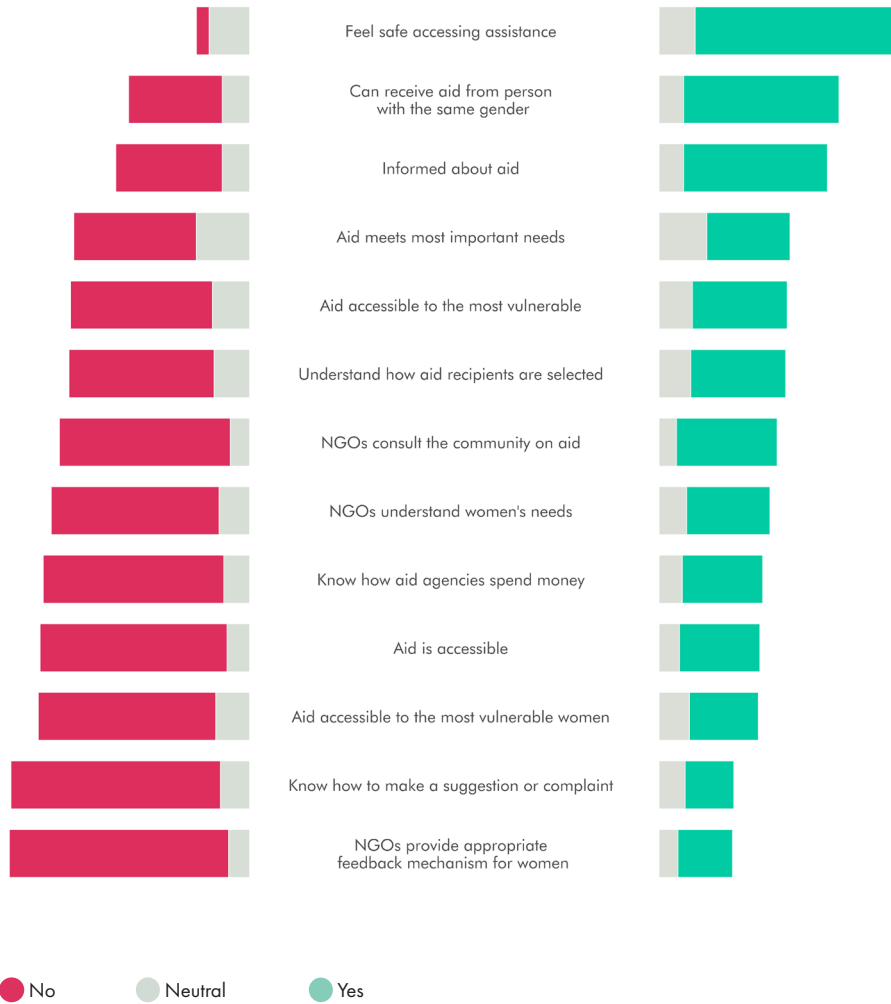
**Gap graph:** Red dots indicate mean scores for importance questions; green/blue dots indicate responses to perception questions. The position of each dot was calculated according to the mean Likert score for each question, where 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree. The line in between represents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

<sup>11</sup> IASC. 2023. “IASC mission recommendations Afghanistan”.

<sup>12</sup> To analyse the respondents’ general satisfaction with humanitarian assistance, we constructed an index based on pairs of “perception-expectation” questions. For each respondent, we calculated the sum of all gaps and divided it by the number of question pairs with valid answers.

# Main findings

Afghan communities are not very satisfied with how humanitarian organisations provide aid. People feel negatively about feedback mechanisms: they do not know how to access them adequately and say there are not enough appropriate channels for women. With decreased active conflict since the DFA takeover, men and women say they generally feel safe when accessing aid, an improvement on 2021.<sup>13</sup> But the bigger problem is access. People feel somewhat informed about available aid, but many cannot access information about it, meaning they miss out.



This bar graph illustrates people's responses to questions on a Likert scale. Each bar shows the breakdown in responses in percentages, utilising a scale of colours from red to green. The red denotes negative responses, while the green vindicates positive responses.

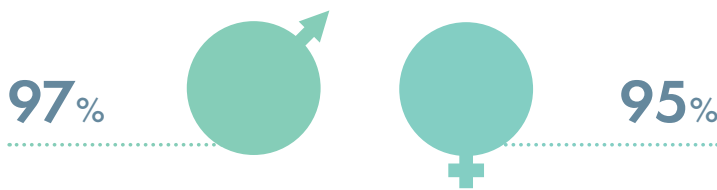
<sup>13</sup> Crisis Group. 2022. "Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban"

# People want to be informed

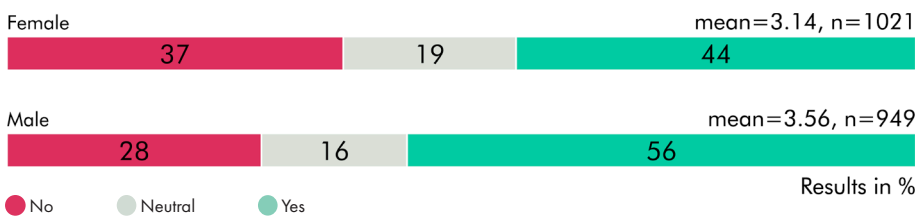
*“Humanitarian aid is our right, so we must have complete information about how aid agencies spend money”*

Lack of access to aid often starts with inadequate information on what assistance is available for whom, when, and where. One-third of people we spoke with feel uninformed, with women more negative (37%) than men (28%). Almost everyone says it is important to them to be informed of available aid. The lack of information and appropriate information channels prohibits people from accessing aid,<sup>14</sup> especially women who are disproportionately disadvantaged because of low literacy: 71% of women we spoke with cannot read or write. Restrictions to their mobility further prevent them from accessing information. REACH found in 2022 that two-thirds of female-headed households do not know how to access information about aid.<sup>15</sup>

Is it important for you to be informed about the humanitarian assistance available to you?



Do you feel informed about the aid available to you?



Among people who feel uninformed, men wish to know more about eligibility criteria, distribution times, and what types of aid are available to them. Women want to know more about the latter too, as well as how long the assistance will last. People feel that the most vulnerable do not always receive assistance. They want to know how humanitarian agencies decide who receives aid and they suggest that the targeting process is corrupt. It is important for aid providers to ensure that they are remaining transparent about 1) eligibility criteria, 2) distribution times, 3) regularity or duration of aid and 4) types of aid. Any communication should be sure to be made to both men and women, and not only through community leaders or among only one gender.

“The NGOs’ staff have direct links with tribal elders, the elders list the names of their relatives to get aid and poor people are deprived of it.”  
– 40-year-old man, Khost

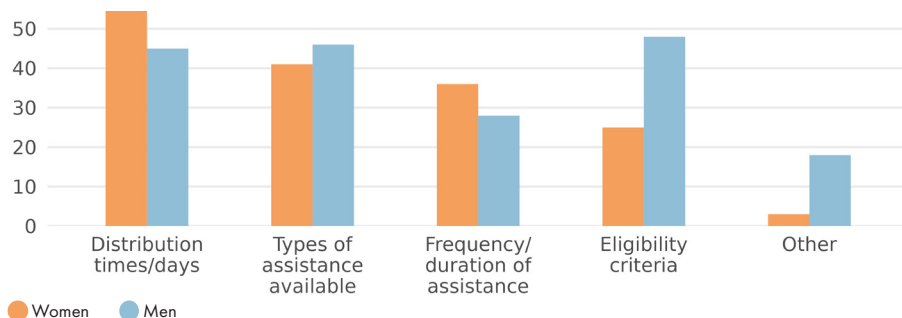
<sup>14</sup> Older persons (of both genders), persons with disabilities (both physical and mental), people with chronic illnesses, and adult women experience the most challenges in accessing information on humanitarian assistance. Source: CARE, IRC, UN Women. November 2022. [“Afghanistan: Inter-agency Rapid Gender Analysis”](#)

<sup>15</sup> REACH. 2022. [“Whole of Afghanistan Assessment: Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment 2022”](#)



Men and women both strongly prefer face-to-face information directly from humanitarian agencies or through community meetings, confirming recent assessments.<sup>16</sup> This is consistent with the more organic social interactions that communities are used to, with limited experience of digital communication. There are logistical and resource challenges in organising face-to-face information, such as door-to-door visits, meetings, and help desks, but the alternatives are not working. Due to literacy barriers, written information does not reach 71% women and 30% of men.<sup>17</sup>

### If you do not feel informed, what would you like to know more about?



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

Information via phone is not a good alternative because 62% of women and 65% of older persons do not have independent access to phones. In some areas, the DFA forbid vendors from selling sim cards to women.<sup>18</sup> The ban on women working for NGOs will further impair female access to information.

### Gendered experience

Most women prefer face-to-face information, but many struggle to access it. Women – especially those with [intersecting vulnerabilities](#) – say their husbands are often better better informed and make decisions in the family’s best interest. An OCHA study found that information disseminated through male community leaders or members, as is often the case in Afghanistan, does not always reach women.<sup>1</sup> This is consistent with existing social hierarchies, and it means women in households without a man and widows may be disproportionately cut off from information about aid. While data did not directly demonstrate needs among other minority groups, observation and anecdotal discussions suggest that internally displaced women without a male counterpart, internally displaced women as part of wider host households and persons with disabilities are just as vulnerable, as they are unlikely to have the same personal networks and access to wider information as others within their communities.

<sup>1</sup> UNOCHA. 2022. “[Engaging marginalized women in Afghanistan in decision making and accountability](#)”

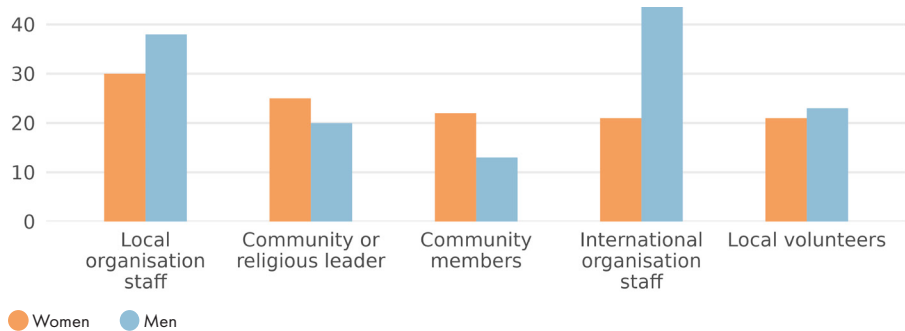
<sup>16</sup> UNHCR. 2022. “[Multi Sectorial Rapid Assessments Analysis - Afghanistan](#)”, REACH. 2022. “[Whole of Afghanistan Assessment: Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment 2022](#)”

<sup>17</sup> Illiteracy was 71% for women and 30% for men in our sample, similar to the World Bank’s findings

<sup>18</sup> CARE, IRC, UN Women. November 2022. “[Afghanistan: Inter-agency Rapid Gender Analysis](#)”

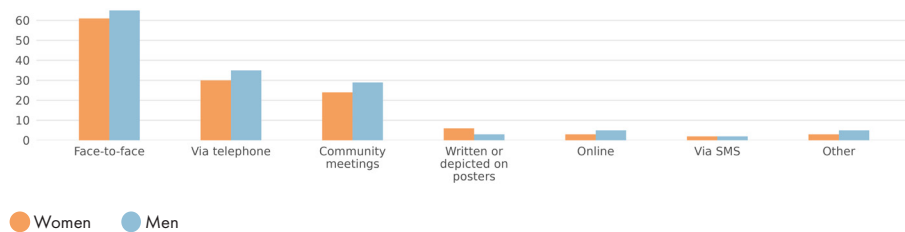
Almost half of men (44%) prefer to receive information from staff of international organisations, but less than one-quarter (21%) of women favour this information source. Slightly more women (29%) prefer staff of local organisations, followed by community or religious leaders, and community members or neighbours. Women might be less likely to prefer international NGO representatives because many commonly use men for face-to-face communication in the field, especially in rural areas. Women tend to say they prefer men in their households to share information.

**From whom would you prefer to receive information about humanitarian assistance available to you?**



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

**How would you prefer to receive information about humanitarian assistance available to you?**



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

Men’s preference for information from international and national NGO staff or volunteers – all people working for humanitarian organisations – contrasts with previous studies in which more men have mentioned community leaders as a preferred information source. Previous studies have indicated that women preferred hearing from other community members.<sup>19</sup> Women still mention community leaders as an information source, although they are not always socially permitted to engage with male leaders. This suggests reliance on information from male family members. We should therefore not assume the women are engaging directly with community leaders, but rather see leaders as an information source for the community.

<sup>19</sup> UNOCHA. 2022. “Engaging marginalized women in Afghanistan in decision making and accountability.”

People in our survey explain their preference by saying NGO staff are less corrupt than community leaders. However, our qualitative follow-up does not always support this. Some interviewees felt that many NGO staff working in distribution sites prioritise their personal networks and allocate resources to contacts who visit the centre – similar to how they perceive community leaders’ practices. Women observed personal relations of NGO staff being prioritised in distributions without waiting in line.

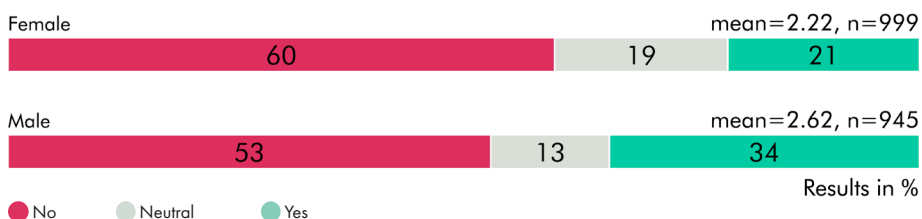
Affected people shared instances of corruption across two provinces, highlighting particular risks during selection and distribution.

In response to numerous open-ended questions in our survey, people complain about community leaders’ roles in aid provision. People say leaders are gate-keeping information and making corrupt decisions on who receives aid and who does not.

### Information needs go beyond aid logistics

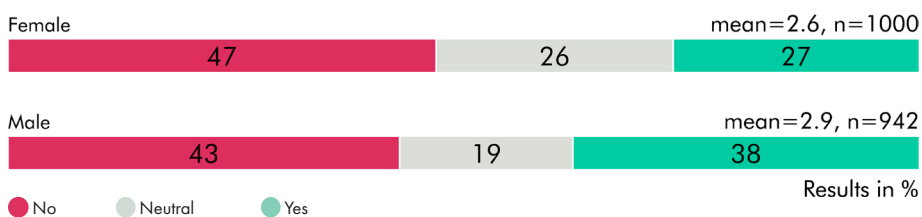
Communities in Afghanistan have high expectations of financial transparency from humanitarians: 95% of men and 88% of women find it important to understand how humanitarian agencies spend money in their region. The reality is disappointing: only 28% of people actually do understand how organisations spend money.

#### Do you know how aid agencies spend money in your region/area?



The lack of transparency applies to targeting and selection criteria as well as knowing how money is spent. Forty-five percent of people do not know how humanitarian organisations decide who receives aid and who does not. People say humanitarian staff consult or cooperate with community leaders to help them identify community members in need, but that they are not doing a good job. They specifically ask for surveys and house visits from humanitarians, who they see as more neutral, so that people who need aid most can be identified.

#### Do you understand how humanitarian organisations decide who receives humanitarian assistance and who does not?



We can't trust them [NGO workers] at all because they select their own relatives and no one takes care of the very poor.

– Woman, Faryab



We don't trust them at all because they are corrupt people, and they are not interested in supporting and helping the very poor. They only select their own families.

– Woman, Nangarhar



They should inform all the people of the community and not only the head of the tribe or the representative.

– 35-year-old man, Badakhshan



It is better to inform us through humanitarian organisation staff.

– 25-year-old man, Khost



Any organisation that works here should tell people how much budget they have for the people and how they spend it.

– 43-year-old man, Khost



They [humanitarians] should consult the people, conduct regular surveys, understand the problems of the people, and distribute [aid to] them fairly so that the right aid reaches the right people.

– 52-year-old man, Ghazni

More transparency is a prerequisite for trust. Adequate information provision must exceed messaging on times and dates of distributions and include information on who is eligible and why, how funds are used in communities, and how long people can expect to receive aid for so they can plan their lives accordingly. We ask this question in numerous contexts, and Afghans find financial transparency more important than most countries.<sup>20</sup>



### Community recommendations

- Ensure transparent information is provided to community leaders and community members about targeting criteria, especially when it comes to why women who have been selected and what this will entail. This can help to reduce ill-founded rumours that have the potential to damage a woman and her family's reputation, and in turn her safety. Both women and men express concerns that if women are selected to travel to receive aid, leaving their homes may subject them to rumours about their modesty and the appropriateness leaving their home to travel to another village or city. There is a direct link between transparency and safeguarding.



### General recommendations

- Information on aid provision should be more holistic, including information on who is distributing aid, how funds are spent, eligibility criteria, when aid will be distributed, where it will be distributed, what will be distributed, and how long people can expect to receive aid. This can help them make longer-term plans and increase trust towards aid providers.

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<sup>20</sup> GTS. 2022. "Listening is Not Enough - Global Analysis November"

# Knowledge of feedback mechanisms remains low

*“There should be a proper place for women to file their complaints”*

Overall knowledge of feedback mechanisms remains low in Afghanistan, regardless of gender, aid recipient status, or rural–urban location. Only 16% of women and 19% of men know how to provide feedback or complain about aid they receive. This is despite the humanitarian community investing in access to and awareness of feedback mechanisms, for example through large-scale promotion of the Awaaz humanitarian helpline.<sup>21</sup>

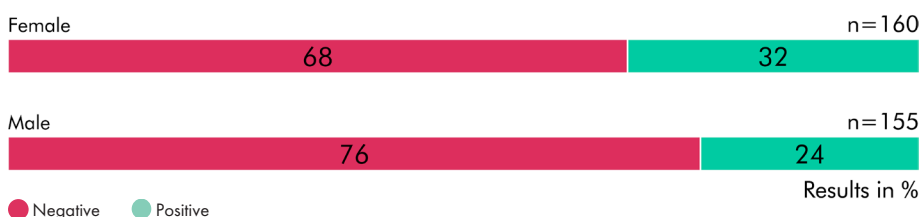
Awareness is lower than in 2019,<sup>22</sup> when 55% of people did not know how to complain. The Whole of Afghanistan Assessment (WoAA) by REACH<sup>23</sup> from 2022 shows 77% of woman-headed households were unaware of feedback mechanisms. The UNHCR<sup>24</sup> also found 63% of people do not know how to complain or provide feedback.

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



Aid recipients, therefore, have little experience with making suggestions and complaints about the aid they receive: 68% of women and 76% of men have never provided feedback. Although one-third of women have complained or provided a suggestion about assistance, no women in focus group discussions (FGDs) had provided any feedback or knew how to provide feedback.

## Have you ever made a suggestion or complaint about the humanitarian assistance you received?



### Note:

While we did ask questions about people’s satisfaction with the response to their feedback, the sample size was too small to analyse and interpret these data.

<sup>21</sup> UNOPS. [Awaaz Afghanistan](#)

<sup>22</sup> OECD. 2019. [“AFGHANISTAN field survey 2019.pdf \(oecd.org\)”](#)

<sup>23</sup> REACH. 2022. [“Whole of Afghanistan Assessment: Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment 2022”](#)

<sup>24</sup> UNHCR. 2022. [“Multi Sectorial Rapid Assessments Analysis - Afghanistan”](#)

Despite the humanitarian community’s commitment to ensure “adequate access to trusted community feedback-complaint mechanisms, especially for women and girls, there are not enough suitable feedback mechanisms for women. Most people we spoke to (68%) say NGOs do not provide appropriate channels. The humanitarian community’s supported feedback mechanisms, such as the Awaaz helpline,<sup>25</sup> are not far-reaching enough for women (see “Gendered experience” box). Most (62%) women lack either knowledge of Awaaz or they do not have independent access to phones, which makes this feedback channel only appropriate to a small subset of the women population in Afghanistan.

**Do you think NGOs provide appropriate channels for women and girls to provide feedback or make a complaint about humanitarian assistance?**



### Gendered experience

Men and women most prefer providing feedback directly to humanitarian staff of the same gender. The next most favoured point of contact is a community leader. However, women themselves rarely make complaints or provide feedback to community leaders. Instead, they rely on male representatives to do so on their behalf, as found by the qualitative OCHA study in 2022.<sup>1</sup> This is therefore not a channel that offers women independent opportunities to share feedback.

Multiple assessments recommend phone or SMS feedback channels to ensure access for women; even more so after the ban on women’s employment in many sectors.<sup>2</sup> But the independent use of phones is not a given for all people; only 38% of women we spoke to confirm this. It is not just women who struggle to access phones; only 35% of older persons have a phone they can use whenever they want.

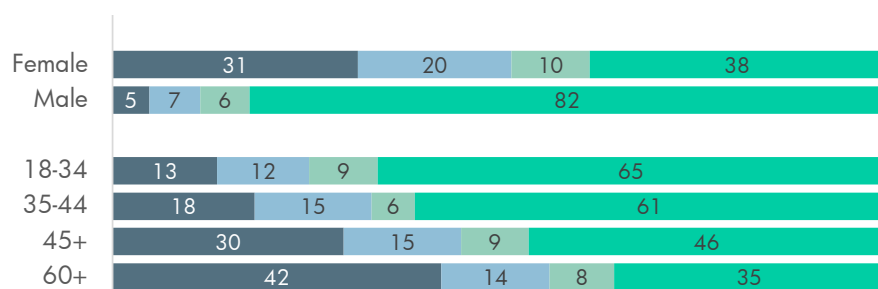
Many intersecting characteristics and barriers for women limit phone usage, such as confidence, low literacy and digital literacy, limited access to phones, and restricted permission to use phones. This explains why only 16% of women suggest feedback via phones.

<sup>1</sup> UNOCHA. 2022. “[Engaging marginalized women in Afghanistan in decision making and accountability](#)”

<sup>2</sup> REACH. 2022. “[Whole of Afghanistan Assessment: Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment 2022](#)”

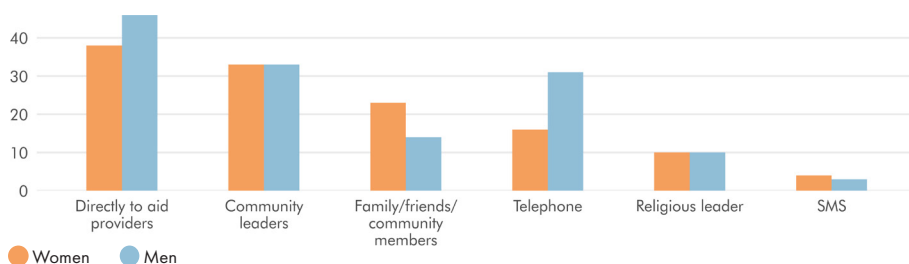
<sup>25</sup> UNOPS. [Awaaz Afghanistan](#)

## Phone usage by gender and age



- I do not know how to use a phone
- Someone in my household has a phone and I need permission to use it
- I do not have access to any phone, but I know how to use one
- I have my own phone which I can use how I want

## Which feedback channels would you be comfortable using to provide feedback or make a complaint about humanitarian assistance?



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

Men (46%) and women (38%) feel most comfortable providing feedback and making complaints to humanitarian agencies directly, followed by talking to community leaders. People perceive that community leaders have the authority and power within their communities to influence change.

In our health study in 2022,<sup>26</sup> communities found it important for organisations seeking feedback to focus on informal and personal networks. This allows women safe spaces to share their experiences. One example provided was using older women in the community.<sup>27</sup> In our study, older women were seen as trusted sources for health information and valuable points of contact for other women in the community. Similarly, the inter-agency Rapid Gender Analysis (RGA) found through their best practice survey that “some organisations have noticed that older women have more power and influence than younger women within the community.” These women enjoy more freedom, including less restrictions on their mobility and the ability to communicate with men. Older and elder women also hold respected positions within the communities, and as such have somewhat more ability to make decisions regarding appropriate practices for women in their communities. It might be worth investigating if older women or women community health workers (CHW) could play a role in information provision or as feedback focal points for other women, as this will be accepted by the DFA.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> GTS. 2022. “Protecting and improving healthcare: insight from Afghanistan”

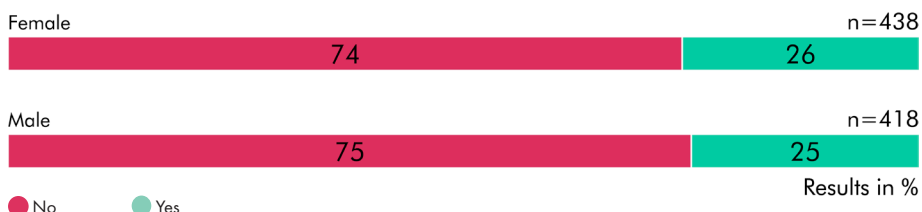
<sup>27</sup> UNOCHA. 2022. “Engaging marginalized women in Afghanistan in decision making and accountability.”

<sup>28</sup> CARE, IRC, UN Women. November 2022. “Afghanistan: Inter-agency Rapid Gender Analysis”

## Reporting instances of misconduct

Most people we spoke to (75%) do not know how to report instances of NGO misconduct. Qualitative findings suggest that, while not often, there might be perceived misconduct. Women in Faryab and Kunduz noted that NGO staff often behaved disrespectfully during distributions, with examples of using abusive language, neglecting people with additional needs (e.g., persons with disabilities, older persons) at distribution sites, and failing to communicate equally with men and women. It is unclear whether they experienced these instances with women or men aid workers.

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



### Community recommendations

- Provide in-person feedback mechanisms for men and women. Both men and women welcome opportunities for women to provide feedback about aid experiences. They do, however, expect and prefer feedback mechanisms to be gender sensitive, which mostly means in-person feedback, but in some cases phone feedback mechanisms. (See 'General recommendations' for how this might be possible in light of the ban).



### General recommendations

- Given the current ban on women in NGOs, an alternative way to ensure women can provide feedback to other women could be for NGOs to identify (older) women within each target community to act as contact points for other women's feedback. These women could also be trained to conduct post-distribution surveys or interviews, considering their safeguarding, and providing them with payment according to their work. To ensure the safeguarding of these women, buy-in from community leaders is required. They can help to provide protection and permission for women community representatives to engage with other women in their community.
- Investigate whether older women or female community health workers (CHW) could play a role in information provision or as feedback focal points for other women, if this will be accepted by the DFA.<sup>29</sup>



The place for distributing food items was not suitable at all, and we felt very bad and had lots of problems because the distributors insulted us a lot.

– Woman, Nangarhar

<sup>29</sup> CARE, IRC, UN Women. November 2022. "Afghanistan: Inter-agency Rapid Gender Analysis"



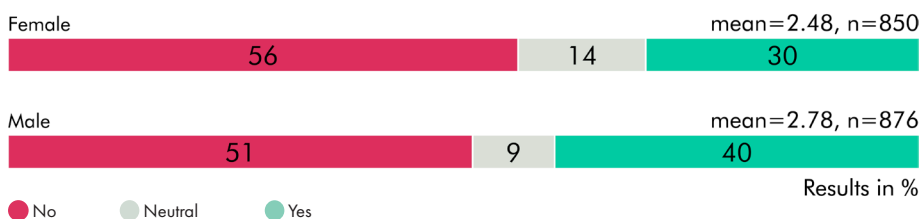
## People want to be involved in decision-making

*“They should listen to the needs and demands of the people”*

Many people (53%) say their community was not consulted on how aid is provided. There is a disconnect between community expectations of consultation, and the extent to which humanitarian actors are actively reaching out and capturing their feedback. Ideally, outreach would take place at the onset, during, and after the project cycle. But this is often not the case in Afghanistan – most projects only include a post-distribution monitoring component as the sole feedback opportunity. Our findings are similar for women when compared with the REACH MSNA 2021 data,<sup>30</sup> when 30% of women and 70% of men indicated they had been consulted. Our data showed, however, that more than half of men surveyed had also not been consulted.

Currently, humanitarian organisations mostly conduct consultations with community leaders,<sup>31</sup> but this does not always align with people’s preferences: community members see community leaders as gatekeepers and want NGO staff to talk to the community directly. Frontline women humanitarian staff have been the main mechanism for ensuring women’s participation in aid provision. Women have expressed trust in providing feedback to women health workers.<sup>32</sup> However, whether feedback to female health workers can connect easily to the humanitarian response remains to be seen, let alone whether health workers have the capacity to assume this task. Without this option, engagement with women is restricted to phone interviews, with all their limitations.

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



Communities frequently mention consultations when asked how humanitarians can improve. People also ask for needs assessments and community visits from humanitarian personnel so they can show them the difficulties they are dealing with.



*They should listen to the needs and demands of the people, find the really needy and deserving people, and help them by strengthening relationships with the elders.*

*– 23-year-old woman, Khost*

<sup>30</sup> REACH. 2021. [“Whole of Afghanistan Assessment: Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment 2021”](#)

<sup>31</sup> REACH. 2022. [“Whole of Afghanistan Assessment: Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment 2022”](#)

<sup>32</sup> UNOCHA. 2022. [“Engaging marginalized women in Afghanistan in decision making and accountability”](#)

In our 2022 health survey,<sup>33</sup> both men and women saw the potential for pairings of young educated women and older women to play a role in allowing women to have a say in how health services are provided, and provide feedback on the health response. This idea, in which the hierarchical position of older women and education of younger women are leveraged, could extend to humanitarian engagement.



### Community recommendations

- Conduct assessments and community visits from humanitarian personnel so communities can show them the difficulties they are dealing with. Do not just rely on interaction with community leaders.
- Create pairs of older and younger educated women as point of contact for other women in the community. Using the hierarchical position older women have, and the education of younger women, they might be trained for needs assessments, post-distribution monitoring, and focal point for feedback on humanitarian aid.



### General recommendations

- Explore if female health workers can be deployable for engaging with women community members regarding humanitarian aid. Women trust health workers, but the capacity, protection, and safety of women health workers must be ensured.

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<sup>33</sup> GTS. 2022. "[Protecting and improving healthcare: insight from Afghanistan](#)"

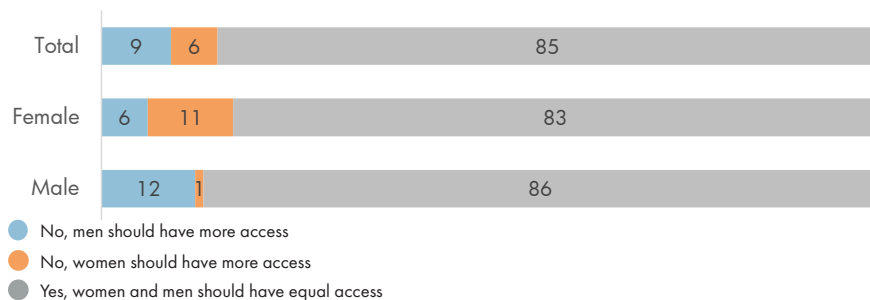
# Are vulnerable populations really prioritised in aid distribution?

*“Organisations are not capable of identifying the most vulnerable. Even wealthy families are receiving aid”*

Afghan people find fairness important, and they do not always think the right people receive aid. Almost all people (95%) find it important that the most vulnerable people receive aid, but only 33% think this happens.

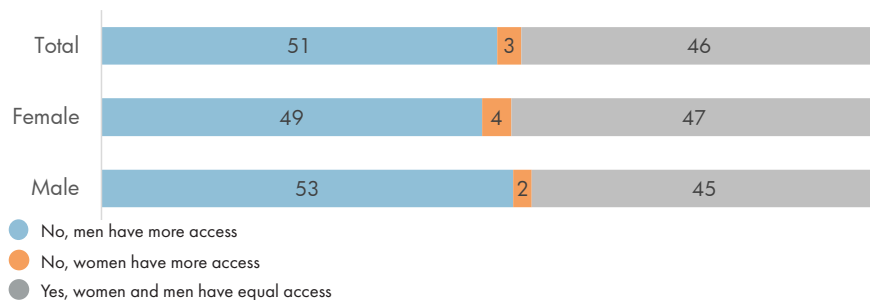
Most people (85%) expect that men and women should have equal access to aid. In practice, however, the majority still feel men have greater access to aid than women.

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



\*Percentages can add up to 99% or 101% due to rounding

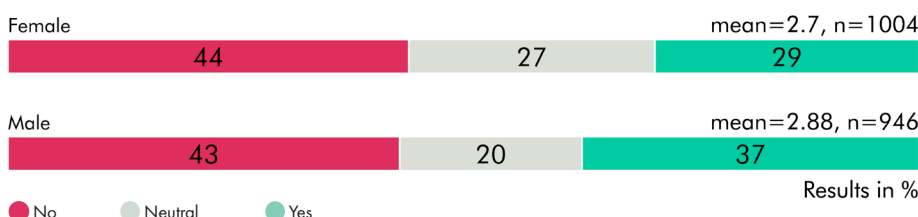
## Do you think women and men have the same access to humanitarian assistance provided by NGOs?



\*Percentages can add up to 99% or 101% due to rounding

For many, humanitarian aid does not adequately reach the most vulnerable people in their community; only one-third think it does. People often mention widows, women-headed households (WHH), those in poverty, persons with disabilities, orphans, and older persons as the most vulnerable in their community. They say “widows without men in the family” or “orphans or widows without guardians” struggle most, demonstrating the difficulties imposed by the mahram rule.<sup>34</sup>

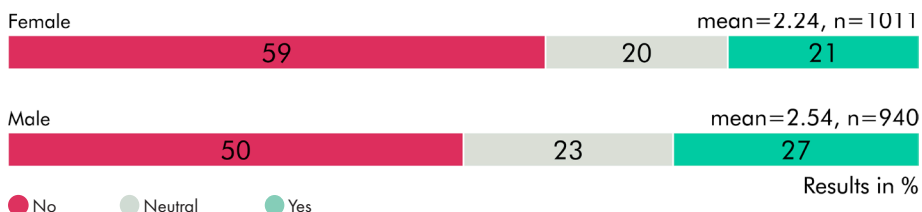
## Do you think humanitarian assistance is provided to the most vulnerable in your community?



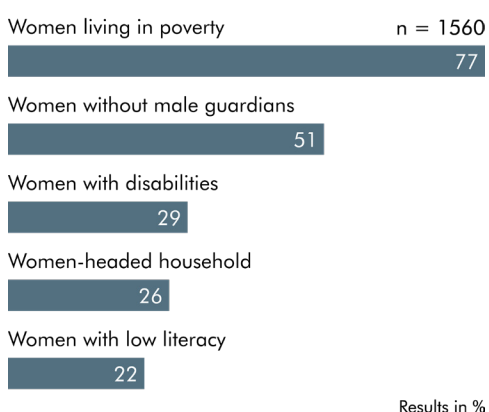
<sup>34</sup> Mahram rule: All women must be accompanied by a mahram (a male member of their family) when travelling further than 70km from their home. This policy however, can differ by province and district.

When asked specifically if humanitarian assistance reaches the most vulnerable women and girls in the community, 59% of women and 50% of men feel it does not. Based on the types of women commonly highlighted as “vulnerable,” gaps in aid delivery appear most absent for women living in poverty,<sup>35</sup> and those without a male guardian, which includes women with husbands who are addicted to drugs, a common problem in Afghanistan.<sup>36</sup>

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



### If not, which women are left behind?



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

Qualitative findings reflected these results, with men, women, and community leaders all citing that vulnerable populations should be the primary focus for humanitarian organisations, but in many instances they are not.

“

I would hope that NGOs provide information based on vulnerability levels. There are women who are widows and have no one to support them; that is why I think women are more needy than men.

– Man, Faryab

“

I think our people receive aid, but the organisations are not capable of identifying the most vulnerable because even wealthy families are receiving aid; they can manipulate the organisations. It is not fair at all. Aid should be given to those who need it most, in an honest way.

– Man, Nangarhar

“

The women who are widows and who do not have guardians in their homes have difficulties and need aid.

– 47-year-old woman, Badakhshan

<sup>35</sup> We asked our respondents who they thought were most vulnerable in their community, and ‘poor people’, ‘people living in poverty’, and ‘homeless’ people combined were the most often mentioned categories.

<sup>36</sup> Drug use has increased a lot over the last years, due to increasing poverty rates and decades of war. Aljazeera. 2022. [“Despair and poverty fuel drug use in Afghanistan”](#)



## Gendered experience

Men and women are widely in agreement that if a woman does not have a male counterpart, then aid should be prioritised for her. These attitudes alter if the household is 'intact'. If a woman is selected for aid while married to an 'adept' man (a husband who has the physical capability to travel to distribution sites and collect aid), both men and women think it would be better for the husband to be selected. Communities say that, if available, the husband should be the primary target for aid because he can travel to distribution sites, collect aid, and provide feedback through more accessible channels. These findings were consistent across the three provinces where we collected data.

It is important to reiterate that this suggests that communities (men and women) prefer that men are selected to physically collect/receive any assistance for the household and maintain any interaction with the NGO. In instances, however, where a man is not available, communities feel that women should then be directly targeted. Communities continue to highlight that they considered women with [intersecting vulnerabilities](#) to be the most vulnerable and should be prioritised for aid above all others.

*"I think the majority of the neediest people are women, it is better to support them over men."*

*– Community leader, Faryab*

*"I support the decisions to support women when they are widows, and others who are suffering from disabilities or unemployment. I agree that these women should be supported."*

*– Community leader, Kunduz*

*"I support aid to vulnerable women; they need to receive humanitarian aid because we have a lot of women who have to work to feed their families, and their problems increase day by day because the new government does not permit such women to work and support their orphan children."*

*– Man, Kunduz*

## Intersecting vulnerabilities: Women-headed households, rural areas, and large households fare worst

Looking at singular risk factors, people with disabilities, people who live in a household with more than 15 people, and displaced people have higher gaps between expectations and perceptions on aid, an indicator for lower overall satisfaction. Risk factors combined make things worse: women living in rural areas, particularly those who are also the head of the household, and female-headed households with more than 15 household members, tend to be less satisfied with aid delivery.<sup>37</sup>

Access is difficult for people with disabilities, people who indicated they live in a household with more than 15 people, and non-host-community members. Women living in rural areas have more negative perceptions of access to aid than women living in urban areas.<sup>38</sup>



### Community recommendations

- Target men for household aid when possible. Men and women in the three provinces we conducted FGDs prefer that in instances where aid is allocated for a household, men should be the primary target because it is easier for them to manage the communication and travel to distribution sites.
- For women who do not have a male counterpart, NGOs should consider – resources allowing – more tailored distribution practices such as door-to-door aid provision or providing aid in locations where women are still allowed.



### General recommendations

- Additional selection methods should be introduced, which are primarily focused on identifying vulnerable women – especially those with intersecting vulnerabilities. Many NGOs appear to be reliant on one type of selection process, either through community leaders or household surveys (conducted by men). A multi-pronged approach could include:
  1. engaging with other women in the community and asking them to profile women,
  2. referencing mobile community health workers (if apparent),
  3. conducting needs assessments and household visits instead of relying on recommendations of community leaders. Also ensuring that any eligibility site visits are completed by selected men and women from the community.



In Afghanistan, women, just like other known vulnerable groups as older persons and people with disabilities are still often underrepresented in research and assessments or studied as homogeneous groups. To get a more nuanced understanding of how different vulnerabilities impact people's overall satisfaction with aid and access to aid, we created statistical models to look at how different demographic characteristics influence overall satisfaction with aid, and to what extent these risk factors interact with each other. Understanding these interactions can provide insight into which groups of people need more attention from the humanitarian community and provide focus for targeted aid programmes and future assessments.



Women who do not have a mahram and live in remote areas have the most difficulty accessing aid.

– 59-year-old woman, Kabul



When we will in the villages it is hard to go to any aid because organisations forget about us. We can't get aid as easily as people in the cities.

– Woman, Faryab

<sup>37</sup> To analyse the respondents' general satisfaction with humanitarian assistance, we constructed an index based on pairs of "expectation-perception" questions. For each respondent, we calculated the sum of all gaps and divided it by the number of question pairs with valid answers. We then looked at different profiles of people, and if they scored higher or lower on overall satisfaction in the index.

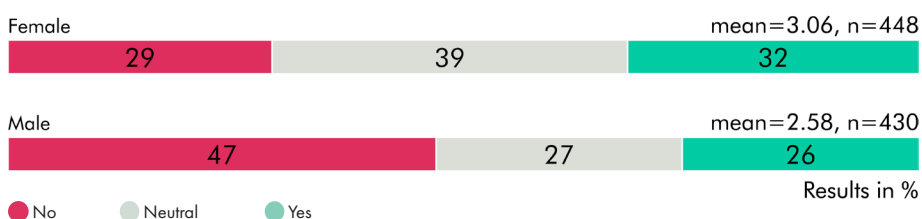
<sup>38</sup> We modelled the impact of interactions between different vulnerabilities among the women subsample with outcome 'access to aid', to see if and how different combinations of risk factors lead to an overall lower perception of access.

## Long-term needs are not met:

*“Aid workers should help people in a way that is sustainable and not temporary”*

Almost 50% of people we spoke to have received some type of aid in the last six months. However, only 29% of the people who received aid said their most important needs were met by it. A total of 47% of men felt that their most important needs had not been met, and 29% of women. Why women more often say that their most important needs are met might be explained by the type of aid that is most often provided. Though we explored what people’s unmet needs are, it is unclear what type of aid people prefer to cover their needs. This will be explored in the next round of data collection, so that findings can more explicitly explore the differences between men and women and what would be needed to satisfy their needs.

### Does humanitarian assistance meet all your most important needs?



Just as in 2022<sup>39</sup>, food assistance in 2023<sup>40</sup> will be the most frequently provided type of aid. Among those who receive aid, 82% of men and 80% of women receive food. Despite the 2022 HRP’s strong focus on food assistance and food security, and a high proportion of people receiving food assistance, nourishment remains the top unmet need for men and women. Healthcare is the second-most mentioned need for men. Women mention water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) and cash as their priority needs after food. Food as most mentioned unmet need does not come as a surprise with the high levels of food insecurity in Afghanistan,<sup>41</sup> but most people mention cash assistance as their preferred aid modality.<sup>42</sup> Cash assistance allows them to negotiate their own prices and being flexible to respond to their household needs.

Humanitarian and development aid have been a constant support in the life of many Afghans for more than 40 years. Since the Taliban took over Kabul on August 15, 2021, many development programmes that fell under the Afghan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) abruptly stopped due to the freeze of funding which used to be directly channelled to the Afghan government by international donors. Funding was repurposed to humanitarian funding cycles to make sure essential elements of development programmes - including the health system - did not collapse completely. But this pause in development funding, in combination with the subsequent economic crisis, hit communities hard. They are asking for more long-term solutions to make them less dependent on humanitarian aid.

<sup>39</sup> UNOCHA. 2022. [“Humanitarian Response Plan”](#)

<sup>40</sup> UNOCHA. 2023. [“Afghanistan needs and planned response 2023”](#)

<sup>41</sup> WFP. 2023. [“Afghanistan emergency | World Food Programme”](#)

<sup>42</sup> REACH. 2022. [“Whole of Afghanistan Assessment: Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment 2022”](#)



## Gendered experience

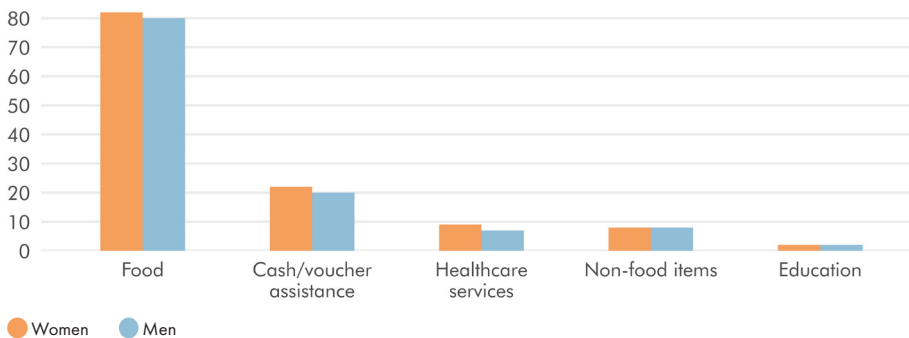
Women in our qualitative discussions said they found all types of aid they received relevant, whether cash, non-food items or food items. Both men and women said there are no gender sensitivities in the type of aid distributed and that all types of aid are relevant for the needs of men and women. Women did mention one challenge: large food packages made travelling from distribution points back home even more difficult. One woman in Kunduz shared that she sold part of her food package before travelling home because travel was too difficult.

*“It was very hard to carry the food items to our house. We sold some items so we could get home, because it was too heavy and too big.”*  
– Woman, Kunduz

Among women there was a strong preference for cash support. They were better able to negotiate what was needed in their household, what substitutes they could make, and find cheaper alternatives which might last longer than food assistance.

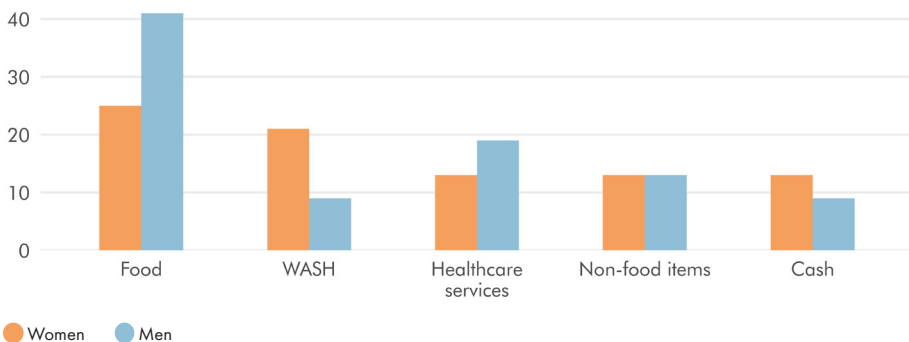
*“Cash is easier because we know how to spend it. We know what is important for our families.”*  
–Woman, Nangarhar

### If you have received aid, what type(s)?



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

### What are your most important unmet needs?



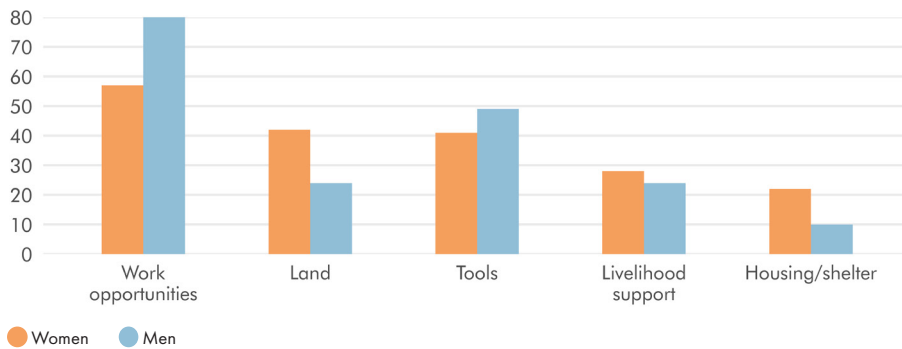
*\*Percentages do not total 100% because respondents could choose multiple options*



People's needs go beyond emergency aid. Dissatisfaction with aid is closely aligned with assistance not being sustainable enough to meet long-term household and individual needs. People emphasise that while they are grateful for the support, it was not sufficient to support their households' long-term needs or to ensure they "could make it through the winter."

Affected people want opportunities to earn a (long-term) income or support for improved livelihoods. Since the Taliban takeover, unemployment has risen drastically.<sup>43</sup> Unsurprisingly, both men (80%) and women (60%) most frequently request work opportunities. In addition to employment opportunities, people mentioned other types of support to increase self-reliance and reduce their dependence on aid, including but not limited to cash assistance, improved infrastructure, and agriculture support.

### What would enable people to live without aid in future?



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

New rules<sup>44</sup> on the kinds of employment women may engage in and new restrictions on women-led businesses in some provinces have narrowed women's work opportunities.<sup>45</sup> One reason the DFA gives for the ban on women attending university is the perceived inappropriateness of certain scientific subjects for women, such as engineering and agriculture.<sup>46</sup>

Despite such external pressure to confine women within their homes, many women still request vocational training and support to set up businesses or participate in existing businesses. They ask for support with vocational trades that can be done from home, including: (1) tailoring, (2) hand crafts/weaving, and (3) baking. These activities would enable women to earn income without engaging in the public space and markets.

Community leaders too shared what they felt would be suitable sustainable livelihoods for women. It is important to reiterate, however, that they considered this kind of support mainly for widows or women without male support. When male counterparts are present in the family, both men and women still gave preference for livelihood opportunities to the man.

Men in Kunduz reflected on the potential for NGOs to build job opportunities rather than just train women in vocational activities. They felt the establishment of a market, a factory, or negotiating space for women in the market would be a more appropriate approach, given that even with skills, it would be difficult for women to earn a suitable income.

“

They have supported us, in some ways. But the support was not enough. They gave us 5,000 AFN and then we received flour and cooking oil. It was not sufficient at all. We needed something to help us for a longer time. Winter is coming and our needs will increase day by day.

– Woman, Kunduz

“

We received cash cards, and we used them to buy food items. The aid was very good, but it only lasted a short time and was not enough to resolve our problems.

– Woman, Nangarhar

“

I think both men and women, literate and illiterate, are suffering from unemployment and poverty, and we need to take part in some vocational courses like making handicrafts, sewing clothes, and carpets, and even baking cakes. We need such opportunities to support our families.

– Woman, Faryab

“

Some businesses are good and suitable for women, like handicrafts and cooking programmes. Tailoring and poultry farming are also suitable for women and not men. The main problem here is that NGOs have very short programmes, which do not help people to build their lives.

– Community leader, Kunduz

“

It is useless just to train them. These ladies are not receiving the quality machines and equipment they need to start their businesses. They cannot earn money to support their families because she needs other skills and support from the government. Women would need to find a place in the market for their products, and this would create a lot of problems. NGOs need to make space for them, so they are safe, and then they can earn a regular income.

– Man, Kunduz

<sup>43</sup> UN News. 2022. "Afghanistan: 500,000 jobs lost since Taliban takeover"

<sup>44</sup> Tailoring, hand crafts, weaving, cooking, baking

<sup>45</sup> TOLO News. 2022. "Some Shops Run By Women Closed in Balkh"

<sup>46</sup> NDTV. 2022. "Taliban Explains Why Afghan Women Have Been Banned From Universities"



### Community recommendations

- Focus on both short-term and long-term aid. While affected people are grateful for the aid provided, men and women would still prefer additional opportunities, so families can maintain livelihoods without the support of aid. These include livelihood support, job opportunities, and vocational training.
- Women prefer aid to be delivered in the community, because of the difficulties they experience travelling and the size of food packages.



### General recommendations

- NGOs should consider creating access for men and women to existing livelihood interventions, cash-for-work, or other learning opportunities, in addition to aid packages.
- Explore how to organise women support to set up businesses or participate in existing businesses that can be done from home, including: (1) tailoring, (2) hand crafts/weaving, and (3) baking. These activities would enable women to earn income without engaging in the public space and markets.
- A stronger focus on linking humanitarian with development aid is necessary to meet communities' needs and make them less dependent on emergency assistance

# Harmful gender roles

*“Women are for the house or for the grave”*

Effectively addressing the needs of women and girls requires awareness of the cultural dynamics and norms (see Normative gender roles box) through which they, men, and boys understand their roles and responsibilities. Gender norms dictate what it means to be a “man” and “woman,” and thereby the foundations through which men and women can operate socially. This determines women’s autonomy to access and use aid, the potential risks women and girls face accessing aid, the types of aid considered socially acceptable, and the power hierarchy through which aid is used.

## Normative gender roles in Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, life is largely directed by normative gender roles and responsibilities. For many Afghans, family is the centre of life, and the roles of women and men are primarily practised to ensure communities and households live efficiently and harmoniously. Men and women have prescribed and rigid roles that are deemed “appropriate for their physical and emotional state.” It is the man’s duty to support the family and act as a primary breadwinner, while the responsibility of the woman is to maintain the family dynamic, ensure their health and wellbeing, and manage all household responsibilities.

This results in considerable power differences between men and women. Men retain the social and financial decision-making position. Attempts or perceived attempts to shift these power dynamics can lead to a sense of disharmony in the household and community, and ultimately impact the “honour” and “status” of the family. This would also likely include social ostracisation and in some cases the result of gender-based violence.

Both women and men, in qualitative conversations, highlighted the roles and responsibilities to which they are expected to adhere. They reported that any divergence from these roles often came with criticism, or at the minimum considerable questioning, from the extended family and often the wider community.

## Gender norms impact access to basic services: “We cannot choose if we want an education”

Access to any basic service<sup>47</sup> for women and girls depends on permission from a senior man in the household (usually the husband). A recent study<sup>48</sup> completed for the Spotlight Initiative in Afghanistan showed that, of a nationwide representative sample, 76% of men and 63% of women said that men should be responsible for making all household decisions. A distressing 62% of women and 59% of men feel that violence is an acceptable response to a woman going out without permission.

<sup>47</sup> Basic services refer to the following services or facilities: education, health, employment, and social activities.

<sup>48</sup> Salma Consulting. 2023. ‘Spotlight Initiative: Study on GBV in Afghanistan,’ UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA, UN Women, Afghanistan (not published)

“

A good woman is someone who is obedient to her husband and who raises her children well. A good woman must be well-mannered and kind. Women’s roles are very important because we are responsible for how our children grow up and we make them good future members of the community. We have a lot of responsibilities, but they can only be done by us.”

– Woman, Nangarhar

“

A man is someone who does the most difficult tasks outside of the home, such as feeding his children and making sure the house and his family have everything they need. We have a lot of duties and responsibilities. We are responsible for the development of this country and to encourage our sons to do the same. We are responsible for performing all social duties because that is not suitable for women. Everyone in the community has high expectations of men.

– Man, Kandahar

“

The family and the community have certain expectations of men because we are needed to be effective... if a man does not do these things, he may be seen as useless and not as a real man and. A good man is the answer to a healthy community.

– Man, Herat

“

Girls face many restrictions from their families. We can’t choose if we want an education and we are not capable of visiting healthcare clinics alone, it is not our decision.

– Woman, Kunduz

In qualitative discussions, men said it was in a woman's "best interest" to seek the permission of a man in her family if she needed to go somewhere. They suggested this prevented risks that women could face when travelling. Men also reiterated the trouble women would face if they attempted to access basic services without the permission and accompaniment of a man from their family. Most women confirmed that they needed to seek permission before going out.



### General recommendations

- To reach women in Afghanistan, humanitarians will have to engage with patriarchal structures to ensure access to aid for women, especially in light of the ban on female NGO workers. Women and girls generally are not given the power to decide whether they access basic services. Women's husbands or fathers heavily dictate their activities. Women with intersecting vulnerabilities are even more unlikely to access services independently or without the permission of a man.
- Agencies could explore alternatives to reaching women, such as referring to teachers, older women in the community, and potentially women health workers, this should be done in consultation with male community leaders to ensure acceptance and safeguarding for these women.

**How gender responsive is aid provision? "It was a big shame for us to be standing in such a place for aid distribution."**

### What is gender responsiveness?

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

### Targeting and selection process

Communities shared mixed feedback on how sensitive aid has been to the needs of women and girls. Women have diverse experiences of being selected for aid. Examples of women's selection include:

- Visiting an NGO office and requesting support;
- Referral by local community networks to NGO offices;
- Selection through household surveys or community mapping;
- Referral by community leaders.

In most instances, these selection processes are not gender sensitive. As detailed in the recent inter agency RGA, NGOs report their practice as gender sensitive by ensuring at least 50% of selected people are women.<sup>49</sup> But this does not ensure equal selection opportunities for most women, especially the most vulnerable women and girls. Our interviewees said that male representatives from NGOs remain the primary actor in the selection process, either through door-to-door surveys or recommendations from local elders.



I think very few girls can make good decisions about when and how they access healthcare. It is best that they ask their husband or father's permission; they often know better. Women are also not capable of travelling alone, it is something very hard for them. They must go with a man to help them.

– Man, Nangarhar



I ask my husband's permission before going to the store or to seek medical care because we are unable to make such decisions on our own. He knows better what is good for me.

– Woman, Nangarhar



They arrived in our village and were surveying the houses. I asked them to survey my house, and they chose me as the person most in need of this assistance.

– Woman, Faryab



We went to the NGO's main office... they chose me and selected me for support after that...

– Woman, Faryab



Three men surveyed the area; they were searching for the neediest people in the community. They entered our house and checking its condition... they selected us for aid.

– Woman, Nangarhar

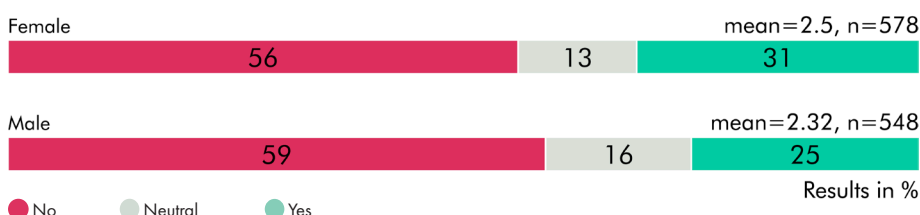
<sup>49</sup> CARE, IRC, UN Women. November 2022. "Afghanistan: Inter-agency Rapid Gender Analysis"

Women are not likely to have permission or be willing to engage with an “unfamiliar” man. Many women and girls therefore risk being left out of aid selection. Women-headed households, widows (especially those living within larger joint families), internally displaced people (IDPs), women with disabilities, and other women and girls with intersectional vulnerabilities are even at more risk because they often live on the fringe of communities, making them more isolated. Again, the ban on female NGO workers creates a huge barrier to accessing aid.

### Travelling to get aid

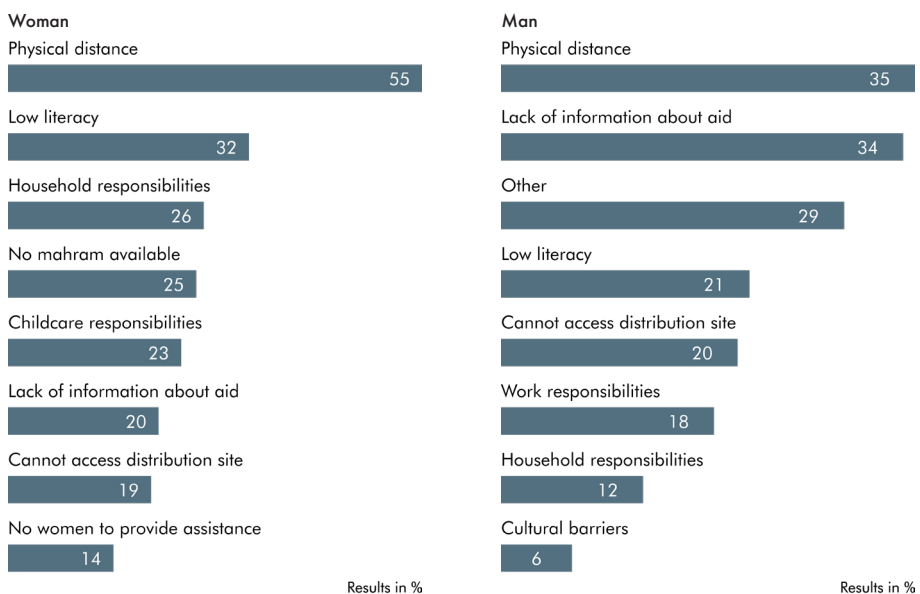
More than half (58%) of the people who receive aid find it difficult to access, irrespective of gender. Concerns and negative attitudes about aid access are associated with physical barriers, household responsibilities for women, and potential risks and practices deemed inappropriate for women.

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



Men are most concerned with required travel distances and associated transportation costs. Women are additionally concerned about literacy, household responsibilities, and the availability of a mahram. These barriers can be categorised into two groups: (1) physical and (2) social.

#### If you found it difficult to access aid, why was that?



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

Women suggested that they face considerably more difficulties accessing aid if they are required to travel to a distribution point. As caregivers they would have to travel with young children, thereby increasing the cost of transportation and the burden of travelling when having to carry goods back. Distance also keeps them from their household responsibilities. In instances where there is no one else in the home, neglecting work for a day can have negative consequences for women, even resulting in violence to her.



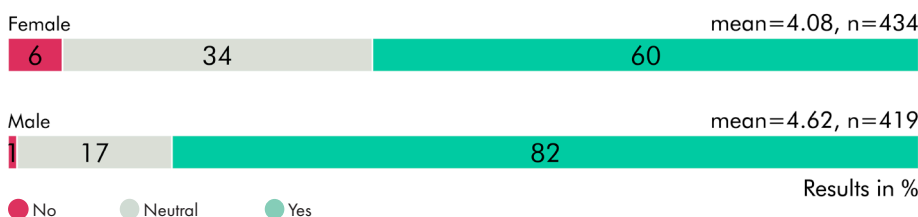
We do not accept men from outside of families to come and speak with women in our families. It is not appropriate, and it can cause problems for women in the community.

– Man, Faryab

## Physical Risks

Safety issues do not hinder people's access to aid much. This is consistent with findings from ACAPS<sup>50</sup> and REACH<sup>51</sup>. Most people who access aid feel safe. Women, however, feel slightly less safe than men (60% vs 82%).

### How safe do you feel accessing humanitarian assistance?



Feeling unsafe is mostly associated with required travel distances (67% of women and 43% of men). Although most people indicate they feel safe, in FGDs, women mentioned multiple challenges, such as physical risks, including transportation risks; fear of harassment; questions by authorities; and requiring a mahram. Anxiety about travelling and potential harassment leaves many women discontent with the overall experience.

Women explained that their mahram was not always available on distribution days and that travelling could cause their mahram to lose a day of salary. These risks are even more significant for women living in rural areas, who need to travel farther to distributions.

## Participation in aid distributions

Humanitarian actors distribute aid to thousands of individuals and organising tailored and gender-sensitive distributions can become a logistical nightmare. The recent Rapid Gender Analysis<sup>52</sup> rightly identifies that gender responsive practices should ensure that women and girls have equal access to aid, without negative experiences accessing distribution sites.

Since women risk being negatively affected by engaging with unfamiliar men, gender segregation is currently a necessary measure to achieve gender responsive aid distribution. Any instance where unrelated men and women are required to spend time in the same location is considered inappropriate and can negatively affect women, girls, and their families. Some NGOs do adopt strict gender-segregated distribution efforts, but women across the three provinces still reported having to wait in the same space as men, which made them feel uncomfortable.

The absence of female humanitarian staff means gender-segregated aid distributions can no longer exist, risking the exclusion of 50% of the population. Providing aid in spaces where women and girls are still allowed, such as educational institutions and health centres, could be a temporary emergency measure, while humanitarians advocate for a reversal of the ban.

“

The situation for distributing these items was not suitable at all because there was no discipline, nobody took turns, and there was a big rush. It wasted our time, and we needed to go to the city for these services.

– Woman, Nangarhar

“

It was very difficult for us [to access distribution points]. We needed to travel to receive our items. We had no money to get there, and we had many problems on the way. We had to bring our children, which makes it more difficult. Now we also need to have a mahram on the journey. It was a difficult experience for me.

– Woman, Kunduz

“

It was difficult to locate the exact location. There was no discipline, and we were all suffering because we had small children, it made it very difficult to access the items on time.

– Woman, Faryab

“

The place for distribution of food items was not suitable for us at all. We felt really bad and had a lot of problems with the men there, and the distributors insulted us a lot. There was no discipline and it was a big shame for us to be standing in such a place.

– Woman, Kunduz

<sup>50</sup> ACAPS. 2022. “Thematic report: social impact monitoring July to October 2022”

<sup>51</sup> REACH. 2022. “Whole of Afghanistan Assessment: Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment 2022”

<sup>52</sup> CARE, IRC, UN Women. November 2022. “Afghanistan: Inter-agency Rapid Gender Analysis”

## Social risks of receiving aid

Women and girls face social risks in the process of receiving aid. Our findings highlight that the act of receiving aid can negatively affect the image of a woman or girl and her family. If women and girls are seen travelling alone, this can cause rumours. Opaque selection processes can lead to rumours too; about how a woman or girl was selected, who selected her, how she received it, whether she behaved inappropriately to be selected, and so on. The same, however, is not true for men. This leads to women preferring male members of the household being selected for aid instead of themselves.

Some FGD participants suggested that such attitudes and social risks have reduced significantly as aid distributions have become more common and accepted, especially where numerous households from the same community are selected for aid. This shows how acceptance and safety of accessing aid is closely tied with transparency of information. If it is common knowledge that women have been selected for aid and it is known that they may have to travel, this can reduce rumours about travelling outside of their home and how they were selected.



### Community recommendations

Women, men, and community leaders all support vulnerable women being prioritised for aid, particularly those with intersecting vulnerabilities.

- Ensure transparency around targeting and, if possible, ensure that numerous households in one community are selected for aid. This normalises the process and increases acceptance among community members
- Bring aid as close to communities as possible, to avoid travelling for women and girls



### General recommendations

- Explore if more aid can be provided in spaces where women and girls are still allowed, such as educational institutions and health centres, as temporary emergency measure. While exploring alternative options to 'traditional' aid distributions, the safety of women in these institutions and workload should be continuously assessed.



We are living in a traditional community, and it might create problems for the lady, either within her household or within the community. People might have negative thoughts about why she moves around.

– Community leader, Nangarhar



People used to have bad ideas if a woman left her house alone. But we know now that many women and men get food and money given to them from NGOs and have to travel to get it.

– Man, Kunduz

## A new reality: Women accessing aid despite ban on women aid workers

To better understand gender-sensitive aid provision in Afghanistan, we designed three vignettes<sup>53</sup> with scenarios of women interacting with humanitarian assistance on:

1. Community feedback mechanisms;
2. Post-distribution monitoring or needs assessments;
3. Targeting.

These vignettes were designed based on real-life situations and were implemented in December 2022 – before the ban on women aid workers on the 24<sup>th</sup> of December. To understand what community feedback mechanisms for women should look like, we asked FGD respondents to discuss how suitable they felt the feedback collection method was for women and girls.

### Vignette 1:

Women in your community received food packages to help maintain their food security. The organisation who gave it to them want more information about how the food has helped the household. They send two male staff into the community to go to the houses of women who received the food to ask them about it. Female staff could not come because they did not think it was safe for them to travel into the province.

In all interviews, community leaders said door-to-door feedback from women, collected by men, was undesirable and suggested it could be damaging if a woman participated.

We used another vignette in group discussions with women who receive aid, again to understand their attitudes to gender-sensitive approaches to post-distribution monitoring.

### Vignette 2:

Khadija received 20,000 AFN in cash to help her family meet their food needs. After two months, a man came to Khadija's door and asked to speak to her about the money she received. The man said he was from the organisation who gave her the cash and only wanted to speak to Khadija alone about the money.

Women across Kunduz, Nangarhar, and Faryab all agreed that using men for post-distribution data collection was not suitable, irrespective of the kind of information he needed to collect. Most women suggested a preference for a female staff member to call them and discuss it over the phone.

We also explored men and women's attitudes towards targeting women instead of men, considering the restrictions around women being involved in decision-making and interacting in public space. In many instances, attitudes from both men and women are negative towards targeting women.

We asked men and women how they felt about Sara being selected for cash assistance, rather than her husband.

“

I think they [the men] should come to the community, but they have to have women employees with them. We do not agree with male members from an NGO speaking to the women in our community.

– Community leader, Faryab

“

The local leaders and male members of the family must be present when asking the women about their food items. The best way would be to have women, then they could share their opinions much better.

– Community leader, Kunduz

“

This is not suitable at all; we live in a traditional community. A male surveyor is not acceptable; speaking to women is not accepted by anyone here.

– Woman, Faryab

“

We do not agree with this scenario at all. We live in a traditional community, where men are not allowed to visit other women. It is not acceptable for a man to speak to Khadija alone about money. It is very offensive and can cause problems for her.

– Woman, Nangarhar

<sup>53</sup> We used vignettes in our 2022 health study and found it an effective way of getting women, men, and community leaders talking about a situation, rather than using standard interview questions.



### Vignette 3:

A humanitarian organisation identified Sara to receive cash. They found that her family had little money and she was not able to feed her children. The organisation said they were giving the money to Sara and not to her husband. Sara had to travel to the neighbouring district and then wait in line for two hours to receive the money. Other people were receiving cash and waiting, including men, other women, and disabled persons.

Almost all respondents strongly disagreed with Sara being the key recipient of the cash over her husband.

Men and women only felt it was more appropriate to give the money directly to Sara if her husband had issues, such as addictions, or was known to behave badly with her (Intimate Partner violence can include physical, mental, and economic violence).



### Community recommendations

Women, men, and community leaders all support vulnerable women being prioritised for aid, particularly those with intersecting vulnerabilities.

- When aid is allocated for a household, men and women prefer that men are the primary targets because it is easier for them to manage the communication and travel to distribution sites.
- Using men for post-distribution data collection with women aid recipients is perceived as not suitable by women who received assistance, irrespective of the kind of information he needed to collect. An alternative would be – if they have access to phones – to have a female staff member to call them and discuss it over the phone.



### General recommendations

- For women without a male counterpart, like widows, those separated from their husbands, or with husbands who have disabilities, or husbands who have an addiction, NGOs should consider more tailored distribution practices and targeting practices to avoid burdening such women with the extensive travel. These tailored distributions, such as door-to-door aid provision, will require more human and financial resources.

## What's next?

We will conduct another round of quantitative and qualitative data collection, including key informant interviews with humanitarian staff. We hope to learn from their successes in either reaching women despite these challenging times, or successfully negotiating female NGO workers with the DFA at the district or province level. We will also discuss these recommendations for improvements with communities, to assess alignment with their needs and requirements for implementation.



I don't feel good about this situation. It is not good that the organisation is giving it to Sara and not her husband, because he is the one responsible for buying food and non-food items. He is the one responsible for supporting the family.

– Man, Faryab



I don't think it is good to give the cash to Sara if her husband is fine. She is a woman, and her husband must receive the cash because Sara is a housewife, and it is not suitable for her to go to the district. She should stay home and take care of the children.

– Woman, Nangarhar



If her husband is addicted to drugs, then it is fine that the office selected Sara for the aid. She would be the best to spend the money properly for her family.

– Woman, Faryab

# Methodology

## Design

The study adopted a mixed-method approach, including both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. The study is planned for completion over two rounds of data collection. The first was completed during October and November 2022; the second is planned from February to March 2023.

## Sampling

### Quantitative sampling

The sample aimed to cover the general population in Afghanistan. Overall, the sample was stratified by urban and rural areas of the country. Since no census data exists for Afghanistan, we used a gridded population survey approach for our sampling. We used WorldPop data for projected population estimates in Afghanistan in 2020 and Global Human Settlement Layer – Settlement Model grid data to distinguish between urban and rural areas. We used these datasets to create a grid covering Afghanistan with cells of approximately 160 households each.

Among these cells we sampled 25 cells with probability proportional to cell size (larger cells had a higher chance of being selected). At the cell (site) level we sampled 72 individuals with a random-walk approach, going to each nth dwelling, n being calculated based on the number of households in the locations and the sample size. This random walk approach cannot always be implemented in a precise manner since the exact number of households within the sites is not always known precisely.

The total planned sample sizes was 1,800 (of which X and y were urban and rural survey respondents respectively). With some under- and oversampling at some sites, we had an actual total sample size of 1,973.

### Qualitative Sampling

For the purpose of the study and to ensure effective triangulation, participants for the qualitative interviews were sampled from the same target community. A total of three communities were selected in consultation with UN Women. The communities were identified as being locations for aid distribution and areas with high numbers of people in need. These were completed in Nangarhar, Faryab, and Kunduz provinces.

A total of seven participants were selected for each FGD. This ensures a sufficient number of respondents to build a valuable discussion, but not too many to create limited opportunities for respondents to expand on their opinions and experiences. All interviews were completed in the local language – either Dari or Pashto. We conducted 3 FGDs with men, 3 with women, and 3 with male community leaders.

Tools were created in collaboration between UN Women, GTS, and Salma Consulting throughout the inception phase of the study. Each tool was designed to answer research questions, as previously highlighted. The tools developed for this study included the following:

- Quantitative household survey;
- Focus Group Discussion guides for:
  - Female aid recipients;
  - Male community members;
  - Community leaders.

## Quantitative Tools

The quantitative data collection tools were designed using the previous survey implemented by GTS in Afghanistan in 2021/2022, including our so-called core questions that measure the quality of aid in terms of information provision, participation, transparency, fairness, relevance, and feedback mechanisms. The survey tool also included questions on gender-specific access barriers. The survey tool was shared and discussed with GiHA working group members and Accountability to Affected People (AAP) working group leads.

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

## Qualitative Tools

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

The themes covered included:

- Gender norms and limitations;
- Selection of aid recipients and distribution (successes and challenges);
- Attitudes towards women as recipients of aid;
- Follow up on aid delivery (success and challenges);
- Trust in humanitarian actors.

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

## Analysis

### Weighting

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

### Precision of estimates

To calculate margins of error per region we used the package “survey” in R, specifying the exact survey design as outlined above. Precision varies from question to question, and sample size per question, as some questions are follow-up questions asked to a sub-set of the total sample.

For questions asked to all recipients, margins of error range between 0.8 and 9.6 percentage points for binary questions (with a mean of 5% point) and between 0.06 and 0.49 for Likert questions (with a mean of 0.22) on our scale of 1-5.

## Limitations

### Adaptation of the Likert scale from 5 point to 3 point

Despite training on how to ask Likert scale questions, our enumerators and respondents struggled to answer questions on a 5-point scale. The nuance between 'not at all' and 'not very much' or between 'completely' and 'mostly yes' was not well understood. We therefore decided to transform the 5-point Likert scale to a 3-point scale, with 'no', 'neutral', and 'yes' as answer options. Although this does not hinder our analysis much, it does give us less nuance in how the data is presented and understood.

### GPS collection issues

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

### Identifying sampled locations

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

### Permission to conduct interviews with women

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

### Permission to record interviews

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



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