The Impact of the Food Crisis on Women and Girls in Afghanistan

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Afghanistan is in the grip of one of the largest and most severe humanitarian emergencies in the world, with over half of the population requiring humanitarian assistance to survive. Approximately 18.9 million people across the country are at crisis or worse levels of acute food insecurity, with projections anticipating a deterioration in food access as a result of worsening economic conditions, climate change, and global impacts of the conflict in Ukraine.

Enduring gender inequality, compounded with recent restrictions on right to education and to work, have further impacted women and girls in their ability to access sufficient and nutritious food.

CARE conducted a study on how the food crisis in Afghanistan affects women and girls differently to better understand the gendered economic, cultural, and practical barriers to food security. This research highlights key findings on household food security, negative coping strategies women and families adopt, and shortcomings of humanitarian actors in gender-responsive aid delivery. The study is based on a comprehensive desk review of existing data since August 2021, a household survey comprising of 345 women respondents, completed in both urban and rural communities, a series of qualitative interviews with 18 women, 9 focus group discussions (FGDs) with men, and key informant interviews (KIIs) with food security specialists and humanitarian actors. The data was collected in urban and rural districts in 9 provinces in the north, west, south, and center of the country.

Key Findings

1. Women have a limited access to food

Household income has sharply decreased

The potential for women to earn an income in Afghanistan has deteriorated considerably since August 2021. . 87.2% of survey respondents reported that since August 2021, they had experienced a considerable decrease in their household income.

Household income has significantly decreased across the country, with all surveyed households reporting a decrease in the province of Khost, and 90% of households reporting a decrease in the provinces of Balkh, Ghazni, Herat, and Parwan. Only 11% of families suggested they had an increase in income. The most common reasons mentioned by respondents for the decrease in income were: inability to access cash (mentioned by 75% of respondents), and loss of employment (60%).

Female heads of household suggested that their access to income has drastically reduced since August 2021 due to the economic crisis and reduction of employment and livelihoods opportunities, worsened for women by mobility restrictions. Yet even before then, many women already found it difficult to meet their household's basic needs even with employment (some respondents reported that they used to work as teachers, tailors, and cleaners).

> "My husband died five years ago, and now I am the head of my family. I used to sew so I could provide for my family… recently I had to sell my sewing machine because we needed food and the demand for tailoring is almost non-existent. I don't know what we will do now." (Woman head of household, Herat)

Similar situations were noted among male-headed households, with men losing their positions or having reduced salaries.

> "We had money and we didn't have an economic crisis in our family. The average money we spent was 10,000 AFN (about USD 110). Now though, we can hardly meet any of our basic needs." (Woman, Balkh)

> "Before the political change, we could support our children, our pregnant women and our elders. We were able to support our family and pay our expenses on our own. I was a member of the provincial parliament, my sons were police officers, and my husband wasn't working because he had a disability…After the political change, our entire family income has become zero." (Woman, Khost)

> "My brother and I dropped out of school so we could earn an income. I was in 7th grade and my brother was in 3rd grade. My brother works at night now and I work during the day. There was no one else to support us because of my father's sickness." (Woman,18, Khost)

Women are consistently excluded from employment opportunities as a result of gendered views of men's and women's societal roles. The current economic crisis has caused unemployment to skyrocket across the country, with the few jobs available in labour, agricultural, and trading sectors frequently prioritized for men. A combination of societal attitudes towards women's role outside of the house and limited job opportunities in-country leave women with fewer employment options.

> "In general, women do housework and chores and cannot contribute to the economic income of their families. Also there are no economic opportunities for women. Some of the most appropriate work for women to contribute for their household incomes are; tailoring, livestock keeping, making handicrafts, and making dairy products. Some heavy works are not appropriate for women like agriculture, selling items in the market, and other physical works." (man, FGD, Balkh)

> "If women contribute with men in livelihood of family, that would be a good thing, but it should be in a way that does not hurt the dignity given to women." (Man, FGD, Herat)

As a cleaner in Kabul highlighted:

> "Me, my sister and my two female cousins used to have jobs as cleaners for rich families. Because we cannot read and write, this was one of the few things that we could do to earn money for our families. But since August 2021, most of these families have left the country or they don't have money anymore. We all lost our jobs. There are not families here anymore that want our services. People can't afford it or they are just not here." (Woman, male headed household, Kabul)

Another woman from Balkh province responded that she had previously taken on in-house tailoring as a more socially appropriate employment opportunity for her in her village. However, the economic crisis impacting families country-wide has reduced the ability for households to spend on non-essential services, leading her business to close. She highlighted that in her community, there were no alternatives for women to earn an income, because there were no other areas which were suitable for them to work.

Women's access to food is impacted by mobility restrictions

Under the current policies of de-facto authorities, women are required to travel with a mahram (male guardian) when travelling more than 70 kilometres away from their homes. This also applies while travelling abroad, to another province or district, or travelling outside of their local community. However, the application of this policy varies from place to place. In some districts, women reported that that they had been told by the local authorities not to travel outside of their homes, even to local markets, without a mahram. The discrepancy in the application of this law at the local level further inhibits women's movement and creates additional stress on women when deciding whether to leave their homes for essential goods, work, travel, or other purposes.

The enforcement of mahram policies has dissuaded families from allowing women to travel outside of the home. As a result, women's access to food has been significantly restricted. Some participants to semi-structured interviews CARE conducted noted that they used to be comfortable going to markets to buy food, but now have anxiety and fear about such movements. As a result, families, and women are reducing their movement outside of the house, and are relying more on other male family members to manage food-related tasks.

> "I used to go to the market after work every day. I went to buy the vegetables and I knew the best places to buy flour and rice. But now, I'm just scared to go outside. I don't know if someone is going to say something to me. I don't want to get in trouble. So, I send my son or my husband now." (Woman, male-headed household, Kabul)