

Interview with a female Afghan aid worker from one of the VOICE member organisations

Name and organisation are not disclosed for safety issues

VIEWS ON THE EU

> 1. What is the current humanitarian situation in Afghanistan?

Afghanistan continues to face a precarious humanitarian situation. Millions of Afghans are experiencing food insecurity, challenges in accessing basic services, disease outbreaks and protection risks. This situation has been exacerbated by climate-driven natural disasters such as floods and droughts. Essentially, the worsening humanitarian crisis is driven by a political one where the international community's non-recognition of the Afghan de facto government has resulted in deteriorating international aid. With exponential rise in needs, particularly with harsh winters approaching and the deportation of thousands of Afghans from neighbouring Pakistan, the humanitarian situation looks bleak.

> 2. What is the state of gender equality in the country?

"Afghanistan under the Taliban remains the most repressive country in the world regarding women's rights," said Roza Otunbayeva head of UNAMA, earlier this year. Afghan women have historically been disproportionately impacted by the crises in Afghanistan. Lack of access to basic services has led to a lower female literacy rate and lower participation of women in economic and political spheres. According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), studies suggest that 87 percent of Afghan women experience at least one form of physical, sexual, or psychological violence, and 62 percent experience multiple forms. Since 2021, the de facto authorities have banned secondary-level education for girls, imposed a female work ban in the humanitarian field, movement restrictions and a dress code, further depriving women of their rights to a safe and dignified life. In such situations, women are more likely to resort to negative coping mechanisms.

> 3. In December 2022, the Taliban issued a decree banning women from working in national and international NGOs in Afghanistan. How has this ban affected humanitarian aid access?

The work ban on female INGO and local NGO employees has deepened the vulnerability of women and girls and increased their barriers to access aid. Today, humanitarian organizations continue to provide services such as food assistance, healthcare, mental health and psychosocial support, cash and in-kind support, and legal assistance. However, the fact that female humanitarian workers cannot go on the ground and that there are strict measures on gender segregation means the exclusion of women and girls from life-saving assistance and other longer term development activities. Women and girls are also not able to participate in assessments that would help determine the risks they face and their needs and this reduces the efficiency of programming to meet their specific, current needs. Within humanitarian work, the gender-based violence sector faces extra challenges in operating. Since 2021, organizations have significantly limited their gender-based violence related activities due to the de facto government's hostility towards gender/women specific activities.

> 4. What initiatives or interventions have humanitarian organizations put in place to address the impact of the ban on women working for NGOs and the subsequent challenges faced by Afghan women and girls?

Despite the massive challenges, humanitarian organizations continue to operate in different sectors and in many parts of Afghanistan. Female participation on the ground is negotiated locally. Although these negotiations are a slow and cumbersome process, they have borne results. Women can access target areas by following the dress code and being accompanied by a close male relative. Recently, the deportation of thousands of Afghans from Pakistan posed an emergency at two border points in the east and south of Afghanistan. Humanitarian actors were able to successfully negotiate the presence of female staff at border points to respond to the situation effectively.

> 5. What coping mechanisms have Afghan households resorted to due to the ban and the different restrictions in place for women and girls?

The restrictions imposed on women and girls have not only impacted educational outcomes and their role in different spheres but also led to mental health challenges for women and girls who are facing uncertainty over their future. There are reports of households resorting to negative coping mechanisms such as child marriage. Young girls have reported being forced into marriage because of the education ban. They said that they were to be married off after finishing school but since schools had closed, their families started marrying them off. Families are also leaving the country in large numbers seeking education and work opportunities for their female family members.

> 6. How can the international community effectively respond to the challenges faced by Afghan women and girls, considering the severity of restrictions and the lasting impact on their lives and rights?

Afghanistan's isolation internationally and the resulting funding gaps have strained life-saving assistance to reach women and girls. While the international community's political stand towards the Afghan de facto authorities takes shape, it is vital that international aid continues to flow into the country. The biggest challenge faced by humanitarian organizations is dire underfunding. Politics should not impede aid that is being delivered independently through UN agencies, NGOs and INGOs, and reaches people in need directly. The international community's support for INGOs and NGOs offers a lifeline to Afghan women and girls who are more marginalized than ever.