



Lifesaving Humanitarian Response for Women and Girls in Afghanistan



An Urgent Call for U.S. Action

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Lifesaving Humanitarian Response for Women and Girls in Afghanistan: An Urgent Call for U.S. Action

Violent conflict, a devastating drought, and food insecurity affecting over [half the population](#) in Afghanistan are driving one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world. [Assessments](#) indicate this emergency will exponentially grow as Afghanistan's economy teeters on the edge of [total collapse](#) and the country remains almost entirely dependent on external aid. Urgent action is needed to address the looming famine and avert a humanitarian catastrophe that will impact women and girls and other marginalized groups the most.

Over the 20 years of U.S. engagement in Afghanistan, Afghan women and girls made tremendous gains in securing their rights to education, political participation, and economic inclusion. However, since the fall of the government, the rights of [women and girls](#) and other marginalized groups have suffered significant rollbacks, including death threats by the Taliban, barriers to accessing lifesaving services and resources, and human rights abuses, such as prohibitions on girls' access to secondary school and universities and intimidation of female journalists. Women's exclusion from the Taliban's cabinet and other senior roles also signals a significant backslide in women's participation and leadership in governance, peacebuilding, and conflict prevention. Women's human rights defenders protesting these regressions are doing so at grave risk, with [credible reports](#) of reprisals and targeted kill and harassment lists.

Against the backdrop of the broader humanitarian emergency in Afghanistan, these setbacks in women's and girls' rights are having deep and disproportionate impacts on their health, safety, and access to lifesaving assistance.

- Acute food insecurity means that [a quarter of pregnant and breastfeeding women](#) need nutrition support and starving families are [selling their daughters](#) into child marriages to pay for food and other supplies.
- Pre-crisis projections found that [87% of Afghan women and girls](#) would experience at least one form of gender-based violence (GBV) in their lifetime; the current compounding crises have [significantly increased](#) these risks.
- The maternal mortality rate in Afghanistan was already [one of the worst in the world](#) before the Taliban takeover. The current crisis is pushing the health system to the brink of collapse, [leading to worsening conditions](#) for pregnancy, childbirth, and postnatal care. Without immediate support, [health experts predict](#) 51,000 additional maternal deaths and 4.8 million additional unintended pregnancies by 2025.
- Restrictions on women working and traveling outside of the home inhibit the safe, unimpeded engagement of female staff in humanitarian activities, [dramatically reducing](#) women's ability to access safe, culturally-sensitive, and lifesaving services, including safe child birth, child protection, GBV prevention and response, and sexual and reproductive health services.

Recommendations for the U.S. Government:

1

Immediately appoint a senior official in the State Department to address the urgent needs and rights of Afghan women and girls, an appointment the Secretary of State [previously committed](#) to while testifying before Congress in September. The senior official should hold the title of Special Envoy, report directly to the Secretary of State, and be fully staffed and funded. The official should meet regularly with civil society, including Afghan women and girls when safe and appropriate, engage directly in diplomacy, and attend all U.S. Government meetings with Taliban officials. The senior official should lead interagency coordination to preserve the rights and address the needs of Afghan women and girls, as called for in a [recent bipartisan letter](#) from all 24 women Senators.

2

Provide immediate humanitarian aid to address the current crisis in Afghanistan and the surrounding region and ensure resources adequately meet women's and girls' needs. The international community, including the U.S., collectively committed [\\$1.2 billion](#) in funding for the humanitarian response in Afghanistan. The U.S. should immediately provide robust resources to address the urgent humanitarian needs of women and girls, including protection, shelter, food security, reproductive health services, economic livelihoods, and education. To do so, cash flow into Afghanistan must be operationalized. The U.S. should also provide direct and flexible funding for front-line civilian responders and allow for innovative programming across sectors to meet the high levels of need.



3

Prioritize the safe, equal, and unrestricted access of female aid workers in the delivery of humanitarian aid. Recognizing that exclusion of women dramatically undermines the delivery of services to women and girls, the U.S. should call on the Taliban to uphold women's freedom of movement and economic rights and communicate and enforce directives to this effect uniformly at all levels of Afghan society. The international donor community must insist that all actors operating in Afghanistan, including the United Nations (UN), implementing partners, and humanitarian agencies, take a unified stance to consistently and systematically work to overcome impediments to female aid workers' engagement at every level and across every sector.

4

Provide financial and technical support for conflict prevention, gender equality, human rights, peacebuilding, education, and atrocities prevention programming. Support for these programs is vital to preserve and build upon the gains made during the last 20 years. The U.S. Government must meaningfully and expediently address legal restrictions currently impeding the funding, implementation, and delivery of these essential programs and activities that are imperative to serve, protect, and empower Afghan women and girls and human rights defenders. At a minimum, these activities will allow for the monitoring of human rights abuses and lay the foundation for future accountability mechanisms and processes.

5

Mandate the use of a gender and social inclusion analysis for all humanitarian, peacebuilding, and development action. The needs of women and girls in all their diversity, including but not limited to adolescent girls, widows, women with disabilities, and other marginalized groups, will remain unmet without intentional efforts to identify and address them. Effective programming requires analysis of key conditions and gender roles in consultation with affected communities, particularly women and girls, and the inclusion of female aid, peacebuilding, and development staff in conducting the assessments. The use of gender analysis is a critical component of the [Women's Entrepreneurship and Economic Empowerment Act](#) and [Women, Peace, and Security \(WPS\) Act](#), and the U.S. Government should prioritize this tool to ensure programs meets the needs on the ground.

Recommendations for the U.S. Government:

6 Leverage bilateral and multilateral diplomacy to maximize opportunities for Afghan women to safely, equally, and meaningfully participate in leadership, peacebuilding, and humanitarian aid. Afghan women have been disproportionately marginalized from decision-making platforms. The peace talks in Doha and Moscow were no exception. Now, the Taliban is excluding women from societal decision-making entirely. Without meaningful participation of women at all levels of society, their rights and agency will remain under threat and instability will perpetuate. The U.S. should leverage its diplomatic engagement with the Taliban and international partners to demand women's inclusion, leadership, and perspectives in line with the [WPS Act](#), the [WPS Strategy](#), and the [WPS implementation plans](#), as well as U.S. obligations under [UN Security Council Resolution 1325](#) and international law.

7 Center civilian protection in ongoing U.S. engagement in Afghanistan and hold all actors publicly accountable for violations of international humanitarian law and human rights abuses, particularly those perpetrated against women and girls. The U.S. should lead the international community in supporting robust monitoring and accountability for violations of international human rights and humanitarian law against Afghan women and girls through ad hoc and existing mechanisms, such as through the Security Council's UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) mandate renewal in early 2022, the [Children and Armed Conflict](#) and WPS agendas, and the work of the [new special rapporteur](#) on human rights in Afghanistan. The U.S. should also leverage its position on the UN Human Rights Council to urge immediate action to deploy a human rights monitoring mission to Afghanistan to prevent and address abuses.

Summary of Recommendations:

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Immediately appoint a senior official in the State Department to address the urgent needs and rights of Afghan women and girls.

2

Provide immediate humanitarian aid to address the current crisis in Afghanistan and the surrounding region and ensure resources adequately meet women's and girls' needs.

3

Prioritize the safe, equal, and unrestricted access of female aid workers in the delivery of humanitarian aid.

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Provide financial and technical support for conflict prevention, gender equality, human rights, peacebuilding, education, and atrocities prevention programming.

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Mandate the use of a gender and social inclusion analysis for all humanitarian, peacebuilding, and development action.

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Leverage bilateral and multilateral diplomacy to maximize opportunities for Afghan women to safely, equally, and meaningfully participate in leadership, peacebuilding, and humanitarian aid.

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