



## COUNTRY BRIEFING

# Afghanistan

### **About the Gender, Justice and Security Hub**

The Gender, Justice and Security Hub brings together researchers, practitioners and activists through a collection of research projects to advance gender justice and inclusive peace in conflict-affected societies. The Hub works across seven countries: Afghanistan, Colombia, Kurdistan-Iraq, Lebanon, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka and Uganda with projects in 17 additional countries across Africa, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East and South Asia.

Spanning from gendered migration, masculinities and sexualities to land rights and transformative justice, each project amplifies the voices of women and marginalised groups. The Hub aims to advance Sustainable Development (SDG) 5 on gender equality; SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions; and the implementation of the UN Security Council's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda.



# Afghanistan

This country brief draws on the following projects: Culture and Conflict; Gender and Forced Displacement; Return, Reintegration and Political restructuring and Gendered Dynamics of International Labour Migrants.

## Country Context

**Protracted and Ongoing Conflict:** Afghanistan has endured many decades of violence, including Soviet occupation, civil war, international military intervention and Taliban control. This protracted conflict and political instability has roots in foreign interventions and ideological struggle and is influenced by ethnic and religious tensions. The Soviet-Afghan War in the 1980s, followed by civil unrest and the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s, led to extensive and often extreme violence, including against civilians. More recently, the U.S. led invasion in 2001, which sought to dismantle al-Qaeda and remove the Taliban from power, resulted in a long-term military occupation, more political instability and more violence. Within the broader struggle for peace, the struggle for gender equality and women's rights remains critical, but in this highly patriarchal and unstable context it remains an immense challenge.

**Fraught Progress Toward Peace:** Peace in Afghanistan has been intermittently negotiated through international diplomacy and various agreements, including the Doha Agreement of 2020, a power-sharing arrangement signed by the U.S. government and the Taliban, which included provision for the full withdrawal of all foreign troops. In the decades before this, the Afghan government, with international support, made attempts at reform, including initiatives to address human rights, improving governance and some measures to address entrenched patriarchal gender norms and the marginalisation of women. However, corruption, lack of infrastructure, and ongoing violence hindered these efforts.

**Taliban Control:** On August 15, 2021, the Taliban captured the capital city, Kabul, marking a crucial turning point in the Afghan conflict. It came as the U.S. was in the final stages of military withdrawal, ending a 20-year presence in the country. While the Taliban victory ended the war, violence has persisted, and civilian casualties have continued. The consequences of conflict remain for the Afghan population, with many displaced and in need of humanitarian assistance. This event has profound implications for Afghanistan's future, and for gender, justice and security in the region.

**Rolling Back Limited Progress on Gender:** Under the Taliban regime, there have been significant rollbacks of women's rights and freedoms. The slow but important progress that had been made in the last two decades, including gains in education, employment and political participation for women and girls, faces severe threats. Gender-based violence and restrictions on women's movement and autonomy are becoming more widespread, while retrenchment of patriarchal and conservative gender norms put women and the LGBTIQ+ community at severe risk of discrimination, marginalisation and violence.

## The Hub in Afghanistan

The Gender, Justice and Security Hub's work in the region has used a range of research methods, including qualitative interviews and policy analysis, to explore the intersection of gender, justice and security. Projects also used several innovative participatory methods, such as storytelling, photography, and other forms of visual art. These approaches sought to create space for women and communities, especially those who are often marginalised, to articulate their experiences of conflict in ways that traditional research methods may not have encouraged.



## The Challenges

**Large-Scale Displacement and Loss of Homes:** At the outset of the Hub's work in Afghanistan mass displacement had resulted in loss of homes and widespread community insecurity. This displacement presented significant challenges to individual and community wellbeing and the continuity of daily life.

**Cultural Identity Preservation Amidst Displacement:** Displaced communities face the challenge of preserving their cultural identity, including language, narratives and traditional crafts, which are at risk of being lost in the process of displacement and resettlement.

**Economic Instability and Lack of Sustainable Livelihoods:** Displaced populations, particularly women, face economic instability with limited access to income-generating activities. Providing sustainable livelihood opportunities is essential to address poverty and economic dependency.

**Gender-Specific Challenges in Conflict Zones:** Women in conflict and displacement settings in Afghanistan encounter unique challenges related to safety, reduced decision-making power and restricted access to resources, all of which are exacerbated by the patriarchal cultural and social norms in the country.

**Peacebuilding and Reconstruction Capacity:** In Afghanistan, there is a crucial need for peacebuilding and reconstruction. The Hub projects aimed to explore how culture-specific knowledge, particularly women's skills in crafts, could contribute to these efforts.

**Health and Hygiene Accessibility:** Access to basic health and hygiene facilities is a major challenge, more so for women and girls who have specific health needs and face difficulties due to displacement.

**Integration and Social Inclusion:** The integration of displaced people into new communities or regions while maintaining their cultural identity poses a complex challenge, especially in terms of social inclusion and acceptance.

## Key Findings



### Cultural Identity and Craft

Women's craft, especially embroidery, plays a crucial role in preserving cultural identity, irrespective of the Taliban and interference from Western powers. Embroideries, like charmadozi and khammakdozi, are an important source of income but also carry immense cultural significance, representing a form of tacit knowledge passed down through generations, and helping women maintain a sense of community and identity amid conflict and displacement.



### Craftmaking and Livelihood

Craftmaking is a vital lifeline for women who remain in Afghanistan and who are banned from employment, professional spaces and education. For women who remain inside Afghanistan, craft making from within the home is one of the only options for generating income.



### Documenting Cultural Practices

Little documentation of material cultures and practices exists outside of oral. Prior to the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, one focus of the Hub's work was documenting the practices of craft making, which are embodied and not documented, spoken publicly about or valued outside of the home and communities. There is little recognition of the high degree of knowledge and complex skills of making within national level policies.



### Intergenerational Knowledge and Skills

Intergenerational learning contributes to psychosocial wellbeing and strengthens family ties and community relationships. Intergenerational teaching, for example, girls watching and learning how to make crafts from women within their family or neighbourhood, is an opportunity for exchange, building and maintaining relationships and passing on cultural knowledge.



### Gendered Distribution of Labour in Craftmaking

Those who make products such as kilims/rugs and carpets – are seen as labourers and tend to be women whereas the design content is done by men. This creates a gender hierarchy within the practice that extends through to the financial management and control of any income generated.



### Adaptation During COVID-19 and After the Taliban Takeover

The pandemic forced changes in research methods and support strategies for Afghan craft practices. It also highlighted the resilience and adaptability of these cultural practices, even under challenging conditions like reduced funding, increased health risks and changing political and conflict settings. After August 2021, using a web and phone app to provide logistical support to sell through an online platform and to fly out goods from Kabul has enabled the work to continue.



### Economic Challenges and Opportunities

With the economic fragility and shrinking economy in Afghanistan, focusing work on livelihoods became more critical. An increasing number of women joined the Hub's project focused on income generation through craft sales. This economic participation provided not only financial support but also a sense of empowerment and community involvement.

## Key Findings continued



### The Gendered Impact of Displacement

There are differences in asset ownership, decision-making authority and access to services for women and men in contexts of displacement. Women faced greater and distinctly gendered challenges indicating a need for gender-specific support and policies.



### Displaced Women and Girls Continue Craftmaking

Some women in Hub research projects were able to flee from Afghanistan to Pakistan as their rights were rolled back, mobility restricted and security threatened after August 2021. Women who live in Pakistan as refugees have started practicing craftmaking skills from within refugee camps. This is both for income generation and as a form of maintaining links to their identity and history.



### Mental Health and Wellbeing

In the surveys conducted before the Taliban's return to power, both men and women reported high levels of anxiety and concern for the future, reflecting the widespread mental health challenges among displaced populations. This finding underscores the need for mental health support tailored to the unique stresses of displacement, uncertainty, and ongoing insecurity.



### Health and Hygiene Access

Access to basic health and hygiene facilities, especially for women, remains severely limited. The lack of sanitary products and clean water access poses significant health risks, and there is a critical need for improved health and hygiene infrastructure throughout Afghanistan.



### Educational Gaps and Early Marriage

Girls in Afghanistan have less access to education than boys. Before the Taliban regained control over national education laws and policy, which resulted in the restriction of school attendance for girls, early marriage was one of the most common reasons for non-attendance. This resulted in decreased opportunities for women and the perpetuation of cycles of gendered poverty and dependency.



### Challenges for Afghan Migrant Women in Pakistan

Afghan migrant women in Pakistan face numerous barriers, including legal uncertainties, social isolation, and limited integration opportunities. Despite living in the country for extended periods, they often struggle with precarious legal status, impacting their access to education, healthcare, and employment.



### Economic Challenges for Returnees

Returnees to Afghanistan encounter various difficulties, such as finding employment and dealing with bureaucracy. Women face greater economic challenges in reintegration, often due to gender norms and limited opportunities to participate in the job market.



### Discrimination and Safety Concerns for Returnees

Returnees report discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, language, and political views. Women are particularly vulnerable to safety concerns, facing harassment and feeling unsafe, especially in public spaces or when traveling alone.





## Recommendations

Prior to the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, the Hub's policy and practice recommendations regarding gender, justice and security in Afghanistan focused on promoting women's rights and improving the lives of marginalised groups through participatory research and activism, legal reforms and inclusive governance at the local, national and international levels. These recommendations sought to build a more equitable society, encouraging significant and sustained international support for gender equality, access to education and economic opportunities and political participation for women.

However, under Taliban rule, many of these recommendations cannot realistically be implemented due to the regime's extremely restrictive policies. Legal reforms and justice mechanisms that had been established to protect women's rights have now been dismantled or are ignored, leading to increased gender-based violence and many forms of discrimination. Women's rights, including freedom of movement, right to work, access to education and possibility to participate in public life are severely restricted.

Despite this, the recommendations, which were developed by Hub projects prior to 2021, remain useful for several reasons. First, they provide a framework and a benchmark for future advocacy and policymaking, highlighting the baseline standards that international and Afghan stakeholders can strive to re-establish. Second, they serve as a documentation of the work done, the progress made and the specific challenges faced, which can inform current and future humanitarian and development efforts in the region and elsewhere. Third, these recommendations intend to keep the global community's focus on the rights and needs of Afghan women and marginalised groups. Finally, the Hub has continued to work with partners in Afghanistan, which has provided valuable insights and lessons learned that can aid in crafting strategies for resilience and support under the current regime, and for potential future opportunities for reform and transformation.

### Recommendations up to August 2021

#### Afghan Government and Policymakers

- **Economic Empowerment:** Develop and support programmes for the economic empowerment of displaced women, particularly in the craft sector.
- **Educational Programmes:** Implement policies and programmes to prevent early marriage and promote girls' education.
- **Reducing Discrimination in Education:** Review and amend community education policy and practices to combat discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, and language.
- **Mental Health Services:** Establish mental health services that are accessible to displaced populations, with a focus on addressing the unique stressors for these communities and to women and girls in them.

#### UN Agency, International NGOs and Humanitarian Actors

- **Women's Health:** Prioritise women's health initiatives, including antenatal and reproductive health services.
- **Basic Needs and Sanitation:** Advocate for and provide access to clean water, sanitation facilities, and food security to mitigate health crises.
- **Peace and Reconciliation Advocacy:** Advocate for peace processes in Afghanistan, especially focusing on women's inclusion, while encouraging engagement with Afghan people who have existing relevant skills and experience.
- **Awareness of Rights and Access to Justice:** Raise awareness and improve understanding of women's rights and refugee rights and provide support in seeking access to them.

## International Community and Host Countries

- **Support for Afghan Migrants and Returnees:** Assist Afghan returnees and migrants in terms of job placement, social integration and addressing poverty.
- **Skill Utilisation:** Identify and utilise the skills and qualifications of Afghan experts, particularly those who have been displaced, to contribute positively to their host communities and homeland.
- **Legal Protection for Migrants:** Strengthen legal protections for Afghan migrants, especially for women, and facilitate their integration and access to public services.

## Recommendations after August 2021

### External Governments, International NGOs and Organisations

- **Engage, Organise, and Mobilise Afghan Experts Inside Afghanistan and Across the Diaspora:** To support Afghans, in their homeland and in the region, the UN, host countries for Afghan refugees and organisations from the Afghan diaspora need to develop policies to identify Afghan experts and determine how to best capitalise on their social, human, cultural, and economic capital.
- **Exert Leverage to Catalyse the Stalled Peace Process:** The international community needs to use whatever leverage it has over the Taliban to pressure them to begin the stalled peace process and reconciliation with all facets of the society, especially with women and highly qualified individuals.
- **Shift the Narrative Around Afghanistan by Focusing on and Supporting Work That Draws on Women's Skills, Produces Financial Value and is Still Possible in the Current Situation:** Despite deep and sustained attacks on women's rights, security, and livelihoods, women continue to work, especially in modes that allow them to stay inside the home. To bolster this work, trade routes between Afghanistan and Pakistan are vital. International organisations should be working to maintain these trade routes to enable e.g. craft products to leave the country to generate income and NGOs should continue to support work that enables women to generate an income from their homes.
- **Include and Advocate for the Inclusion of Women in Political Processes:** Afghan women risk being erased from the ongoing dialogues about the future of their nation that are being held by the international community. A possible recognition of the Taliban in the coming years will make this erasure a large price that future generations of women might pay. All donors and policymakers should maintain the equality of all genders at the heart of their advocacy and policy.
- **Crisis Responses are Gender Blind and Need to be Aware of Intersectional Inequalities:** The crisis of 2021 made it clear that gender blind policies of protection, including evacuation and access to humanitarian visas and related safety, were gender blind. Related resettlement programmes also showed a lack of awareness of intersectional inequalities in Afghanistan. The Hub's Gender Intersectionality Crisis Toolkit addresses this gap in understanding and should be utilised and adapted in other contexts.



To learn more about Hub research in Afghanistan visit:  
<https://thegenderhub.com/publications/country-briefing-afghanistan/>

This Country Briefing was first published in the Hub's final report, *Gender, Justice and Security: Structural Challenges, Feminist Innovations and Radical Futures*. Go to [www.TheGenderHub.com](http://www.TheGenderHub.com) to read the full report and to learn more about all 38 research projects in the Hub.



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