

Almost three years after the regime change in Afghanistan, the protracted humanitarian crisis requires a more coherent approach from the international community.

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About CARE Afghanistan

[CARE has been working in Afghanistan](#) since 1961. Currently, CARE and our partners deliver aid in ten provinces, reaching women and children who pay the highest price for what continues to be one of the world's worst humanitarian crises.

Humanitarian Needs

Afghanistan continues to grapple with the consequences of four decades of conflict, entrenched poverty, climate-induced crises, and the most severe restrictions to gender equality and women and girls' rights, including to their right to **full, equal, meaningful, and safe participation** in all aspects of public life. Three years since the current De Facto Authorities (DfAs) took control over the country, humanitarian needs are surging. According to the [Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2024](#), a staggering 23.7 million people require humanitarian assistance. The numbers are beyond belief: [69% of people do not have enough food](#); [67% have trouble accessing water](#), worsened by a prolonged drought linked to climate change. Acute malnutrition is above emergency thresholds in 25 out of 34 provinces, and is expected to worsen, with almost half of children under five and [a quarter of pregnant and breastfeeding women](#) needing life-saving nutrition support in the next 12 months. While needs are increasing, the funding outlook is grim. In 2024, [the HRP totals US\\$3.06bn but only 17.2%](#) is funded as of 27 May 2024. **The cost of inaction is immense.** Essential services, including healthcare and education are on the verge of collapse. Behind these numbers, a complex reality for aid organisations is also unfolding. We are continuously challenged, having to navigate how we respond to the growing humanitarian imperative in a context where the authorities continue to issue edicts, directives, and letters that directly hinder our ability to respond in a principled manner.

Women and girls deprived

Since August 2021, the DfAs have issued various directives specifically targeting and restricting women and girls' movement and [participation in education](#), the workforce, the economy, and public life. On 24 December 2022, the DfAs via the Ministry of Economy (MoEc) announced that Afghan women were to be banned from working at NGOs and INGOs in the country. In the weeks following the ban, nation-wide exemptions were secured in the fields of health and nutrition, and education, which allowed I/NGOs to resume some activities in these sectors. The ban was extended to UN agencies in April 2023, with similar exceptions. NGOs and UN agencies have, and continue to experience first-hand the bans on [Afghan women working for I/NGOs and the UN](#), which remain in force to date and are a total breach of humanitarian principles and violations of women and girls' basic human rights. These bans have decreased most vulnerable women and girls' access to humanitarian aid, and heightened their protection risks, including restrictions on women's freedom of movement and rights, increased risks of gender-based violence, child labour, and early marriage, as well as substantial needs for mental health, psychosocial support, including pushing them into taking desperate measures to make ends meet. [UNAMA reports](#) that since the DfAs took over, the already high prevalence of gender-based violence against women and girls, including intimate partner and domestic violence due to their confinement to their homes—has increased. Findings from a [Gender in Humanitarian Action assessment this March](#) conducted by Afghanistan's Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group that CARE co-leads revealed that women cannot access information and provide feedback (56%), and women cannot even access the much-needed protection services (43%). However, the survey finds a slight improvement in trends regarding women's ability to be present in I/NGO offices and in communities. Looking ahead, we expect many of these constraints to persist, which is likely to continue to severely impact partners' ability to reach women and girls in need of humanitarian assistance, despite humanitarian needs increasing.

Afghan women-led civil society organisations

Afghan women-led civil society has been profoundly altered since the regime change in August 2021. We have observed continued shrinking space for Women-led Organisations (WLOs), heavily impacted by the [ban on women aid workers](#) and other edicts restricting women's enjoyment of their human rights. Meanwhile, the challenges of WLOs are unique, as women are not allowed to work at a higher managerial level, and they cannot be sole legal bank representatives of local WLOs. As a result, some local WLOs opted to change their female directors, deputy directors, board members and replaced them with men. **But WLOs also face a funding challenge as funders and donors think they can no longer operate under these circumstances.** This is, however, not the case. Despite all of the challenges highlighted above, WLOs continue to find ways to provide much needed assistance to women and girls throughout the country. Many WLOs reported ending projects due to a lack of funding, which many experienced as a double blow on top of the bans on women aid workers. Yet, it is critical to be reminded that women-led and women-rights organisations have been delivering life-saving services to women across Afghanistan for years in line with cultural and social norms. And many want to continue to do so, despite the multiple barriers and risks they face. For many Afghan women and girls, WLOs are their last hope of getting aid.

“Women-led organisations have firsthand knowledge of needs and priorities within their communities. They provide crucial insights into the challenges faced by women and girls. They are experts and fully capable of addressing those issues if they receive flexible and longer-term funding and support.” An Afghan women-led organisation shares with CARE.

Principled delivery of aid

Humanitarian organisations are facing bureaucratic and administrative impediments (BAIs) such as delays in project approvals, increased scrutiny, and interference at various stages, which are delaying aid delivery and challenging principled aid even more. This requires ongoing concertation between humanitarian actors, including with local organisations, and the UN-led coordination system to ensure a collective, principled engagement strategy towards the DfAs. This is why the Humanitarian Country Team has also developed and endorsed [Joint Operating Principles \(JOPs\)](#), which form the framework for engagement in bi-lateral and joint negotiations with the DfAs and which all humanitarian actors are expected to comply with. As humanitarian and development agencies, we continuously engage with the DfAs at all levels, from national to local, to deliver on our mandates, including negotiating access to all areas, negotiating regulations imposed on NGOs, getting interventions and projects approved, etc. **Donor governments need to do the same.**

Way Forward and Key recommendations

One The international community wants Afghanistan to achieve economic and political stability and remains concerned about civil rights' curtailment, shrinking civic space and women and girls' rights, but has at the same time withheld active engagement and traditional development aid. Before August 2021, 80% of the former GoA's budget was sustained through international grants and aid, which are now largely inaccessible due to the discontinuation of development assistance and the imposition of sanctions. **It is critical and timely for the international community to agree on a proactive and principled engagement strategy vis-à-vis Afghan DfAs that puts economic development and women and girls' rights at the center.** Isolation policies have not worked anywhere in the world. They will equally fail in Afghanistan and only lead the country, and possibly the region, into greater fragility, deeper poverty, increasing civilians' reliance on humanitarian aid and exposing women and girls to more protection risks and deprivation of their fundamental rights. CARE is urging donor governments, Monetary Financial Institutions (MFIs) -such as the World bank, and International Financial Institutions (IFIs), to significantly **increase funding for gender transformative economic development, resilience, livelihoods, climate change adaptation, water management, social cohesion, inclusion, gender equality, human rights, and rule of law** and for basic needs, to prevent the collapse of essential social

services like health and education, under the various existing funding instruments already in place, such as the UNDP [Trust Fund](#). These funds should be utilized in a manner that is aligned with principled humanitarian action, including ensuring that implementing agencies are taking all possible measures to ensure female staff and WLOs are able to work and take part in all aspects of the programs to ensure women and girls participate, are consulted, and reached. When the stakes are so high and half of the country needs humanitarian aid, more engagement is the least bad policy option; it affords more opportunities for progress over time, especially on the economy and livelihoods, than does disengagement or isolation.

Two: If we are to seriously invest in the recovery of Afghanistan and avoid the country falling into deeper poverty and isolation than it is today, we must invest in Afghan CSOs, especially in WLOs. The status of women must remain a diplomatic priority for all states engaging with Afghan DfAs to ensure that the restrictions on female humanitarian staff in the humanitarian sector are overturned and restrictions on women and girls' rights are lifted.

All efforts to consult and include Afghan women and girls in processes on Afghanistan must be made. **Their safe, direct, and meaningful participation is essential.** It is critical everywhere in the world, but it is even more true in Afghanistan, given the existential threat WLOs face. Donors should deliver on their commitments and ensure CSOs, especially WLOs, have access to quality funding and should share (rather than transfer) risks with partners, especially local and national partners and WLOs, in line with Grand Bargain commitments. This includes ensuring intermediaries (UN agencies and INGOs) also adopt more risk-sharing approaches and more equitable partnership modalities with local actors and don't shy away from working with and supporting WLOs because of the pressure they are under. WLOs need our support more than ever, on a no regrets basis.

The current situation for women and girls in Afghanistan is not acceptable and significant international attention and pressure are needed. The international community can seek cooperation from the DfAs on issues of mutual interest while keeping up pressure on key demands such as women and girls' rights, lifting the ban on female humanitarian workers, lifting BAIs, humanitarian access, and addressing the myriad of challenges that hinder us from reaching all those in need effectively. There is an urgent need for a longer-term plan of action to deal with Afghanistan's persistent issues, and the isolation is a recipe for disaster. We expect that the Netherlands, which has always been a strong advocate for women's and girls' rights, continue to proactively monitor the situation in Afghanistan and support operating agencies to advance gender equality and women's rights.

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