



## Economic and Food Crisis in Afghanistan: The Impacts on Women and Girls

Afghanistan has descended deeper into an already alarming hunger crisis, exacerbated by the economic and liquidity crisis, drought, and rising food prices, with nearly 20 million people facing acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3 or above) as of May 2022.

CARE conducted a study about the impacts of the economic and food crisis on women and girls in Afghanistan to better understand how they are impacted, what coping mechanisms they use, and how humanitarian actors can better respond to the needs. The study is based on a comprehensive desk review of existing data since August 2021, a household survey of 345 women respondents completed in both urban and rural communities in 9 provinces in the north, west, south, and center of the country, 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.

### Preliminary Key Findings

- The potential for women to earn an income in Afghanistan has deteriorated considerably since August 2021. 87.2% of the women surveyed reported a considerable decrease in their household income since August 2021. In Khost, a total of 100% (38) of households reported decreased income, and in Balkh, Ghazni, Herat, and Parwan, over 90% of respondents also reported a decrease.
- The most common reasons mentioned by respondents for the decrease in income were: 1) inability to access cash (mentioned by 75% of respondents); 2) Loss of employment (60%); and 3) Drought (48%).
- While women have only been formally banned from working in the security and defence sectors, informal announcements by the authorities and rumors about suspension or changes in female participation in the workplace have resulted in a significant drop in the number of women taking up or maintaining paid job positions.
- As per the policy under the current regime, women are required to be accompanied by a mahram<sup>1</sup> if

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<sup>1</sup> A mahram is considered to be the husband, brother, father, or father-in-law of a female

they want to travel more 70km away from their homes. However, in some districts, the local authorities have told women that they cannot go outside of their homes, even to the local markets, without a mahram. The discrepancy in the application of the rules at the local level further inhibits women's movement. Women who were comfortable going to the markets to buy food now rely more heavily on male household members to purchase food.

- This loss of livelihoods, coupled with recent restrictions imposed on women's mobility, increased food prices<sup>2</sup> and diminished access to cash, means Afghans, especially Afghan women and girls, have less access to food than before August 2021.
- Women reported eating less food than other household members. 80% of the surveyed women suggested that they had had to skip at least one meal in the two weeks prior to the research. When triangulated with qualitative findings, a common trend is that there was insufficient food in the household to accommodate the needs of everyone and, as a result, women preferred feeding their children over themselves. Nevertheless, interviewees did highlight that men also prioritise the food needs of their children and wives over their own. 29% of women interviewed indicated that adults in the household reduced their consumption of food in order to prioritise their children. Women largely cited that their husbands were committed to ensuring their wives' food needs, and they attempted to prioritize their wives' eating over their own.
- When women live in joint families<sup>3</sup>, the newest female in the household (generally a daughter-in-law) is likely to be more food insecure, as she has the socio-cultural role of ensuring all other senior members of the household are cared for before she can care for herself.
- 84% of women respondents indicated their household had to rely on cheaper food to ensure their basic food needs are met. Women and men were found to be equally likely to rely on low-quality food.
- In order to cope with the lack of food, interviewees reported adopting the following mechanisms:
  - Taking out loans: Under socio-cultural norms, the individual primarily responsible for earning the income is the one responsible for taking a loan and then making the necessary repayments. Women rarely suggested that they had individually taken out loans.
  - Selling assets or *mahr*: 28% of women interviewed highlighted that they were forced to sell their assets, including for some, their '*mahr*' (gold and jewelry received by the bride when marrying), which is often the only valued asset they own. With the loss of their financial assets, women have become more dependent on their husbands or in-laws. The sale of productive assets, such as land, houses, cows, etc. was also mentioned in the interviews with both men and women. While this provides temporary relief, this will impact households' long-term livelihoods and capacity to face future shocks
  - Resorting to high-risk coping mechanisms: Afghanistan has seen a high spike in the practice of early and forced child marriages, where cash-strapped families unable to feed all their children resort to selling children – most often their girls – and in some cases, their organs. 12% of households (or 41 households) indicated having to marry one of their girls under 18 due to the food crisis.
  - Respondents also reported resorting to dangerous cooking methods, such as burning plastic instead of using gas.
- Humanitarian responses are too often gender-ignorant: Women reported issues related to how and where aid is delivered, inappropriate feedback and consultation mechanisms that do not allow meaningful women and girls' engagement in the response, and the lack of female humanitarian staff to ensure a gender appropriate delivery of aid.

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- 2 According to the REACH Joint Market Monitoring Initiative, the cost of flour has almost tripled since last year, as has the cost of oil and gas.

<sup>3</sup> Joint families in Afghanistan refer to multiple generations of the same family sharing a house. Everyone in the household is considered responsible for contributing to the overall house and not prioritising their own family. Meals are generally eaten as a household and income is provided to the head of the household to manage for everyone.

- Only 34% of women respondents to the household survey suggested that they had received some form of support in the last year. Of those women who received support, less than 15% had been consulted on the type of assistance they needed prior to receiving it, and only 19% suggested that the assistance had been adapted to meet the specific needs of women. Of the women who received support and indicated support was not adapted, 97% indicated they were not able to report the issues to humanitarian actors.
- Examples of inadequate delivery of assistance included: the delivery of aid in mosques, which are often not accessible to women; the distribution of aid through male humanitarian workers, which can be culturally inappropriate; and the location of the distribution points that are too far away, which causes issues with transportation costs and requires women to travel outside of their community, accompanied by mahram.
- The research further found that the lack of attention to gender equality in the response is due to the main following reasons: 1) limited number of gender focal points and gender experts to ensure gender is incorporated at all stages of sectoral interventions, 2) limited capacity among organizations to identify and implement measures to better integrate gender in their preparedness and response efforts, 3) limited contextualized understanding of gender in Afghanistan, and how to navigate gender equality as such, 4) limited availability of female staff who can provide support for design and implementation.

*“Before August 2021 we would cook 3-4 food items per meal (rice, chicken, meat etc). Now we only cook one item. The food is just too expensive now. Some nights we would eat nothing and go to sleep hungry.” (Woman, male headed household, Parwan)*

## Recommendations

### To donors and member states

- Providing and facilitating humanitarian aid is not sufficient unless it is paired with urgent action to address the economic drivers of the crisis. Donors and member states must act immediately to prevent further socio-economic collapse and a further worsening of the humanitarian and food security situation, by resuming development aid in support of basic services- including civil servant salaries- via the Afghan Reconstruction Trust Fund and other means; and by exploring options such as engaging with the Central Bank to increase liquidity and macroeconomics stability.

### To humanitarian actors

- Ensure that, at a minimum, all food security and humanitarian interventions are gender-responsive and, where possible, gender transformative. The provision of assistance should always be conducted through an age, gender and diversity lens, be informed by gender analysis and by protection and GBV risks assessments.
- Ensure Gender Equality and the Empowerment and Protection of Women and Girls is central to the response, including through;
  - Supporting the hiring and retention of women aid workers through the adoption of flexible HR policies designed with female staff (such as allowing female staff to have mahrams and covering related costs, adjusting office set-up, etc.)
  - Regularly consulting women and girls on which food aid modalities they find most appropriate, and rolling out women-friendly feedback and reporting mechanisms. For in kind interventions, opting for women-friendly sites, days and times to maximize women’s access, while considering any risk factors.

- Investing in strengthening organisational gender capacity through staff recruitments, regularly conducting training, gender audits or organisational and program capacity assessments, systematically assessing interventions against gender and age markers, etc.
- While continuing to empower women and girls in culturally appropriate manners, designing and integrating Engaging Men and Boys in Emergencies (EMBiE) interventions, building on lessons learnt from such interventions in Afghanistan. Food security interventions are well positioned to host EMBiE approaches, capitalizing on men's concerns to ensure their wives have equal access to food.

### To humanitarian donors

- Adequately resource gender-responsive food and nutrition security interventions and when possible and safe to do so, gender transformative approaches as suggested above. Along with funding for food and nutrition interventions, address the “secondary” impact of the food crisis, such as increased protection risks, by adequately funding protection and GBV programming.
- Hold your partners/grantees accountable to principled humanitarian action, especially with regards to the effective and meaningful participation of crises affected women and girls as well as the participation of female staff in all steps of the interventions, from design to close out and evaluations.
- Ensure all funded proposals for food security interventions are informed by a gender analysis, a protection and GBV risk assessment, and the use of Sex, Age and Disability-disaggregated data and an assessment against the IASC Gender and Age marker.



After losing her job as a teacher due to the closure of girls' schools, Grana now cultivates vegetables to consume and sell.