



Promoting the Recruitment and Retention of Women Humanitarian Workers in Afghanistan



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Photo: UN Women/Olguta Alexandra Anghel



Women and girls make up around half the population of Afghanistan, and it is critical to ensure that they receive humanitarian and life-saving assistance. Women all over the world are differently impacted by crises and face heightened risks in humanitarian settings due to displacement and the breakdown of protection structures.¹ In the cultural context of Afghanistan, women and girls have been disproportionately affected by the current economic and humanitarian crisis, as well as the recent natural disasters which have impacted the country.² Due to the current restrictions on women's mobility such as the mandatory requirement for a **mahram (male escort)** or the compulsory dress code requiring that women wear burka and cover their faces when in public, women and girls face increased challenges in accessing humanitarian aid and services.³ They face difficulty in reaching distribution points, obtaining information on humanitarian assistance as well as voicing their concerns and humanitarian needs. As women are less and less able to access assistance, only 10 percent of them said they were able to cover their basic needs in 2022, compared to 23 percent of men.⁴

Women humanitarian workers play a critical role in ensuring women's access to humanitarian assistance. In the context of many restrictions on women's lives, women aid workers are indeed best placed to work around the barriers facing women and girls who look to access humanitarian assistance. Cultural restrictions make it difficult for men

¹ActionAid (2016). On the frontline: Catalyzing women's leadership in humanitarian action

²Gender Update, Earthquake Paktika and Khost Provinces, GIHA Working Group, 23 June, available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/gender-update-earthquake-paktika-and-khost-provinces-giha-working-group-and-women-advisory-group-wag-afghanistan-humanitarian-country-team-hct-23-june-2022>

³Mid-Year Whole of Afghanistan Assessment, 2022, REACH, available at: https://www.impact-repository.org/document/reach/71cb0cab/REACH_Evolution-Needs-Article_Mid-year-WoAA_April-2022_ToShare.pdf

⁴forthcoming Rapid Gender Analysis, 2022. Afghanistan GIHA Working Group

humanitarian workers to assist women and girls due to restrictive norms around women family members being in contact with men outside the household. This has meant that male workers do not always have access to homes to conduct the needs assessment and monitoring that are needed for rational and equitable aid distribution. When they participate in these exercises, women humanitarian workers ensure that women are reached during field assessments, that distribution points run by women for women can be set up and that women can speak to women to express their feedback on the humanitarian aid received. Without women humanitarian workers, vulnerable groups such as women headed households who do not have male family members to engage with humanitarian workers, are at risk of being completely left out of the humanitarian response. Women's participation in humanitarian assistance is thus crucial to ensuring aid reaches the most vulnerable groups including widows and children, women-headed households, disabled women, and older women and men.

Since the Taliban take-over however, many challenges have been impeding the participation of women humanitarian workers in the response. Women aid workers are only officially allowed to work in very few provinces,⁵ and even there they face many restrictions, such as the need to be accompanied by a male guardian while performing their duty, specifically, making it extremely difficult for women to continue working.⁶ While these restrictions have not been applied uniformly across the country, the lack of clarity around the rules have also created further difficulties for humanitarian agencies when adapting their response to deploy women staff on the ground. These challenges have deeply impacted the humanitarian response in Afghanistan, and as the humanitarian crisis in the country continues to deepen, and space for women and girls shrink further, the UN, national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) need to engage actively with women's causes, and involve women to ensure humanitarian action can reach women, men, girls, and boys and the most vulnerable sections of the population.

In order to map challenges and to find practical solutions to ensure women's participation in the humanitarian response, and in line with humanitarian and UN commitments to gender equality and women's participation, the Gender in Humanitarian Action (GiHA) working group in Afghanistan, co-chaired by UNWomen and the International Rescue Committee (IRC), commissioned a study looking at Promoting the Recruitment and Retention of Women Humanitarian Workers in Afghanistan. The study aims to identify specific barriers faced by Afghan women in their work for humanitarian aid agencies. It also aims to share best practices and recommendations for reversing these barriers, and for enabling more women to participate in humanitarian action. This will be vital for ensuring access by women, children, and marginalized groups to life-saving assistance.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative methodology involving key informant interviews (KIIs) with human-resource (HR) managers and gender coordinators from a representative group of international NGOs, national NGOs, and UN agencies working in Afghanistan, as well as focus group discussions (FGDs) in Herat, Jalalabad, Kabul, Kandahar and Mazar-i-Sharif with Afghan women humanitarian workers, currently working with various humanitarian aid organizations. A total of 43 organizations were included in the study. Fourteen interviews and 6 FGDs were organized. All 74 FGD participants and 11 of the 16 KII respondents (70 percent) were women.

Findings: Barriers to Recruitment and Retention

Barriers identified to the recruitment and retention of Afghan women, including personal, social, and professional barriers, vary in degree from region to region. In some provinces, barriers for women are intensified due to more conservative cultures, fewer resources and lower digital connectivity, while the context in the provinces is also a function of the specific views of the de facto authorities (DfAs) at the local level. Through the FGDs and KIIs, the study found that the following barriers were impeding women humanitarian workers' recruitment and retention:

- The **exodus of qualified men and women** since the takeover by the Taliban has created a shortfall specifically of qualified women. Afghan men typically already had more access to higher education and professional development opportunities, both in-country and abroad, and thus the number of qualified professional women was already less than that of men even before the DfA takeover.
- **Less resourced local organizations** are unable to attract qualified women professionals who still remain in the country. These women are in high demand and are absorbed by UN agencies and the international NGOs.

⁵Afghanistan: Taliban Blocking Women Aid Workers, Human Rights Watch, November 2021, available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/11/04/afghanistan-taliban-blocking-women-aid-workers>

⁶Women's Rights in Afghanistan One Year After the Taliban Takeover, UN Women, August 2022, available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-08/Gender-alert-2-Womens-rights-in-Afghanistan-one-year-after-the-Taliban-take-over-en.pdf>

This leaves few to choose from for local organizations, which lack resources to offer competitive compensation packages.

- Sometimes **complicated online job application procedures**, which also require strong internet connectivity, pose a barrier for women to access and apply for positions.
- **Cultural and perception barriers**, such as families considering NGO and UN jobs inappropriate for women, are another challenges, often compelled by the disapproval of elders, neighbours or even beneficiary communities assisted by these women.
- **Women's child-care and domestic responsibilities**, as well as their overall roles as care providers in the family, are other important challenges, especially when they have younger children or older family members.
- Due to the **additional needs of women staff, such as facilities for childcare, separate work spaces**, or transport, some organizations find it more economically convenient to recruit men.
- Personally too, **women often lack confidence** in their own abilities and therefore do not apply for jobs.
- **Fewer opportunities for higher education or professional development for women** have resulted in high competition from male counterparts, so that women tend not to be selected for technical or senior management or leadership roles. If selected, they sometimes do not receive adequate mentoring support and encouragement within the organizations, and often resign due to work pressures.
- **The compulsory dress code and the requirement of a mahram** also pose barriers, particularly for women who do not have a mahram or when the male members of the family have their own livelihoods or education needs.
- **Women field workers fear being stopped and questioned at security checkpoints** of the Taliban.
- The DfA's **refusal to interact with women** poses yet another barrier to women's recruitment to leadership and senior management positions as it prevents women from participating in negotiations and meetings with the DfA.
- **Men in leadership and male colleagues at times passively or actively make the work environment unfriendly for women colleagues**, discouraging them from continuing their work. According to a number of women participating in the FGDs ran for the study, male colleagues may worry about accompanying women during fieldwork due to possibilities of problems with the Taliban. Some women in the FGDs suspected the men felt vindicated in their opinion that women are not competent to work, and in the current environment, feel freer to express this attitude.

Best practices and recommendations

To ensure that they continue reaching women and girls in Afghanistan, a number of international NGOs and UN agencies have already adopted measures to attract, recruit, and retain Afghan women staff. Some successful strategies for attracting women applicants include announcing **women-only positions**, using **multiple alternatives job announcement methods** such as using local radio and TV channels and circulating job openings internally among staff and through HR and personal networks, as well as head hunting. **For field positions, posting printed job announcement in local languages** in public places, and spreading the word through personal and professional networks has helped. **Lowering requirements for women candidates** during shortlisting and **practicing positive discrimination** in favour of women candidates during selection have also helped women candidates be hired. **Couples hire** is another method that is effective for increasing women's recruitment, particularly in the provinces and for fieldwork.

To induct and attract educated young women, **professional internship programmes** have proved to be effective by providing opportunity for practical on-the-job training and mentoring so that they can be hired to positions that open up at the end of the internship, if they are adequately prepared. **Internal promotions of women staff** have enabled upward movement over time so that women can take on more responsibility in decision-making roles. Moreover, **establishing and tracking gender-parity targets** in recruitment has ensured more accountability to gender equality and gender balance in staff of various organizations.

Most importantly, staff retention and recruitment has been assisted by providing safe and respectful **work environments and adequate support to women staff** such as maternity leave, childcare support, sufficient cost allowance and facilities for mahram requirements, safe transport, and flexible work hours and modalities, in particular for breastfeeding mothers or women with very young children. Other incentives that worked are **professional capacity building and higher education support** provided to staff, with more allowance for women staff so

that they can experience career growth.

Case-by-case negotiations with the DfA to resolve specific barriers faced by women staff in different locations has also proven to be an effective strategy to obtain more freedom for women staff to continue working in the current context.

To ensure the recruitment and retention of women humanitarian workers, humanitarian actors, the UN, international and national NGOs should:

- **Develop accessible offline mediums for job announcements** (written announcements, announcements through local radio and TV channels)
- **Ensure simpler and more transparent application processes**
- **Adjust selection criteria** to the gender-related societal and cultural limitations facing women candidates to ensure more women applicants can be successful (e.g if not necessary, not making English-language and computer competencies criteria for recruitment of qualified technical staff)
- **Adopt positive discrimination** in favour of women applicants
- **Have diverse interview panels** including with at least one or more women panellist during all job interviews
- **Establish and communicate clear codes of conduct** for all staff for preventing gender-based discrimination and abuse, and effective mechanisms for addressing complaints; and establish women staff associations, to promote a positive working environment for all women staff
- **Provide adequate support for women employees** such as safe transport, separate workspaces, maternity leave, flexible work timings, possibility of work from home, mahram support during field work, guest houses for women staff in the field which can accommodate mahrams, and other modalities, as needed
- **Increase professional development opportunities for women staff and build space for women in leadership and succession planning**
- **Raise awareness both among organizations' staff, including male staff members, and within communities** on the important role of women humanitarian workers
- **Implement partnerships with local and women-led NGOs and CSOs** and advocate with donors to sustain and support these organizations
- **Negotiate and advocate with the DfA**, including in collaboration with donors, to enable women to fully participate across the spectrum of humanitarian action and to remove barriers to their movement, in order to ensure effective and timely service delivery for women and girls,
- **Strengthen women-led coalitions and networks** such as the Afghan Women Network (AWN), to build support for local women civil society activists and humanitarian workers