



**Afghanistan Human Rights Center**

**Report On**

**Recent Disaster Response and Discrimination Against Women**

**December 2025**

## Executive Summary and Introduction

Afghanistan is a mountainous country located along a major seismic fault line, a geography that has long exposed its people to earthquakes, landslides, and floods. In stable states, such disasters though unpredictable are manageable through good governance, preparedness, and functioning institutions. In Afghanistan, however, the collapse of state structures and the absence of leadership have turned natural hazards into recurring national tragedies. During natural disasters, as we witnessed for this report, there was no leadership, no coordinated plan, no professional response team, and no effective relief mechanism. The crisis is deepened by the Taliban's policy of gender apartheid and the systemic discrimination against women which is the focus of this report.

Between 2023 and 2025, Afghanistan endured four major natural disasters, the Herat earthquake, the Baghlan and Behsud floods, the Kunar and Nangarhar and Balkh earthquakes. These catastrophes devastated communities already suffering from hunger, poverty, and repression. Women and children, historically excluded from social and economic life, bore the heaviest toll. Taliban issued over 100 laws and guidelines restricting women's human rights and freedoms. The Taliban's bans on women working with aid agencies, the enforcement of Mahram restrictions, and prohibitions on women's education and mobility meant that they were denied effective, accessible, adequate and acceptable rescue, medical care, food, and shelter services. This also meant reinforcing traditional and social restrictions on women to be covered properly going out even when they are at risk of a disaster strike.

In many cases, women died and suffered not because of the disasters alone, they suffered because of discriminatory policies and prejudice against women. In Herat and Kunar, some women died because they were not allowed to be touched and visible to those tasked with saving lives. While in other disaster, simple issues like staying home, lack of proper clothing to come out, or caring for and carrying children out put women at risk. Male rescuers, prohibited from touching women deemed Namahram (unrelated by blood or marriage), hesitated or refused to pull them from the rubble. The tragedy of Afghanistan's disasters is therefore not only geological alone it is discrimination.

Afghanistan remains a party to the core international human rights treaties it ratified before 2021, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). These instruments bind the state to respect, protect, and fulfill human rights without discrimination based on race, gender, social status, or any other distinction. They require equality before the law and the protection of life, health, and dignity for all. The Taliban's discriminatory policies violate these treaty obligations, as well as the principles of international humanitarian and customary law, which prohibit any adverse distinction in humanitarian assistance.

This report is the result of field monitoring and analysis conducted by the Afghanistan Human Rights Center (AHRC). It draws on reports from international organizations, humanitarian agencies, and AHRC's own field data from Herat, Behsud, Baghlan, Kunar, and Nangarhar and Balkh and Samangan. The findings reveal that structural and institutional discrimination against women, has created a pattern of double victimization, first from the disaster itself, and again from exclusion in its aftermath.

The evidence shows that these violations are not accidental. They are the product of a deliberate and institutionalized system of gender and minority persecution that may constitute crimes against humanity under Article 7(1)(h) of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC).

The following sections outline the collapse of Afghanistan's legal and institutional disaster management framework, present case studies from Herat, Behsud, Baghlan, Kunar/Nangarhar, and Balkh and Samangan

and analyze the intersecting crises of poverty, winter, displacement, and deportation. The report concludes with recommendations for the United Nations, donors, and civil society, urging that disaster response in Afghanistan must be delivered in accordance with the international human rights and humanitarian aid standards.

### **The collapse of constitutionally mandated government and affects on disaster management**

Before August 2021, Afghanistan had developed a modest yet functional disaster-management system under the National Disaster Management Law (1391). The law replaced an earlier executive order and established the Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority (ANDMA) as a civilian institution responsible for coordination, risk reduction, and emergency response. It emphasized equality, community participation, and collaboration between national and provincial authorities.

According to article 7 of the law, a High Commission headed by a vice president and composed of ministers and representatives of key ministries oversaw strategy and coordination at the national level. Each province had its own Disaster Management Commission lead by the governor, and even at the district level, similar bodies were provided for by the law. These arrangements reflected Afghanistan's alignment with the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA)<sup>1</sup>, and later with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (SFDRR)<sup>2</sup>, both of which emphasize gender-inclusive participation and the protection of human rights in disaster governance.

This fragile system collapsed after the Taliban takeover in August 2021. The de facto authorities replaced trained staff with clerics, dismissed all female employees, and disembodied provincial structures. Disaster management was militarized and turned into a patriarchal structure, run by untrained religious figures from the Taliban forces, lacking technical expertise. Early warning systems stopped functioning, coordination broke down, and the exclusion of women from public workforce eliminated the capacity to reach female victims or assess their needs. Additionally, the purging of minority officials from government positions led to discriminatory practices in aid distribution against minority communities.

Under the 2004 Constitution of Afghanistan, Article 22 prohibited all forms of discrimination based on gender, while the Disaster Management Law required the state to ensure the protection and safety of citizens, women and children during emergencies. By dismantling these laws, the Taliban violated both domestic law and international standards.

Afghanistan also remains bound by its treaty obligations under the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, which provides that treaties continue to apply despite a change in government. These include CEDAW, ICCPR, ICESCR, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the Convention Against Torture (CAT), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) and the ICC.

For example, Articles 2 and 3 of CEDAW oblige states to eliminate discrimination in law and practice, while Article 12 guarantees equality in access to health care. The CEDAW Committee's General Recommendation No. 37 extends these obligations to disaster management and climate resilience, urging

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<sup>1</sup> The Hyogo Framework Action was the first comprehensive global agreement on disaster risk reduction (DRR), adopted in 2005. Its purpose was to help countries and communities become more resilience to natural disasters.

<sup>2</sup> The Sendai Framework for Action is the successor to the Hyogo Framework. It was adopted in 2015 and remain the primary international guide for reducing disaster risk. The Sendai Framework was built on Hyogo Framework's lessons but shifting focus from just losses to proactive risk reduction, broadening hazards (including tech/biological), emphasizing health resilience, involving more stakeholders, and setting measurable targets for a more resilient world.

states to ensure women's participation in prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. The Taliban's prohibition of women from humanitarian work directly violates these provisions. Similarly, ICCPR Article 6 guarantees the right to life, which the Human Rights Committee has interpreted as including the duty to protect individuals from foreseeable natural hazards. The impediment to rescue and medical aid to women and minorities because of the Taliban policies contravene with the above treaties.

Likewise, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) complements these protections by recognizing rights to an adequate standard of living, food, housing, water, and health. Article 12 commits states to ensuring the "highest attainable standard of physical and mental health." According to General Comment No. 14, this right rests on the framework of availability, accessibility, acceptability, and quality. Afghanistan fails on all counts.

Similarly, the UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182 on humanitarian assistance enshrines the principles of humanity, neutrality, and impartiality. These principles are not moral ideals; they are applicable norms. Excluding women from aid solely based on gender violates the principle of impartiality, which demands assistance solely on the basis of need.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development urges all UN member states to adhere to the development of a world without leaving anyone behind. Goal 5 calls for gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls, while goal 13 urges urgent action to combat climate change and strengthen resilience to natural hazards. Afghanistan committed to the achievements and implementation of the SDGs and working actively to attain the goals. Afghanistan's regression under Taliban rule undermines attainment of the SDG specially goal 5 and 13.

The Taliban have issued and implemented dozens of decrees aimed at suppressing women and restricting their rights and freedoms. Under normal circumstances, these decrees deprive women of all their rights and remove them from social life. During natural disasters, these same decrees endanger women's lives and have led to their deaths.

The Taliban's discriminatory decrees have not only dismantled years of progress but also reversed Afghanistan's commitments to adhere to the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015–2030). This framework situates gender equality at the heart of risk governance, stressing the need for "a gender-responsive, inclusive, and accessible approach" to disaster management. In Paragraphs 19 and 36 it specifically call for integrating gender, age, disability, and cultural perspectives in all policies and practices. Afghanistan's current exclusion of women from emergency institutions and humanitarian work stands in direct violation of these global norms.

The Sendai Framework built upon the Hyogo Framework for Action (2005–2015), which Afghanistan had adopted and implemented through its National Disaster Management Plan. Hyogo's Priority 4, "Reduce underlying risk factors," required gender mainstreaming in every phase of disaster management. Afghanistan's earlier compliance under Hyogo underscores the regression and policy collapse that followed in 2021.

*"Disaster risk reduction requires an all-of-society engagement and partnership. It also requires empowerment and inclusive, accessible and non-discriminatory participation, paying special attention to people disproportionately affected by disasters, especially the poorest. A gender, age, disability and cultural perspective should be integrated in all policies and practices, and women and youth leadership should be promoted. In this context, special attention should be paid to the improvement of organized voluntary work of citizens."*

*“To encourage the establishment of necessary mechanisms and incentives to ensure high levels of compliance with the existing safety-enhancing provisions of sectoral laws and regulations, including those addressing land use and urban planning, building codes, environmental and resource management and health and safety standards, and update them, where needed, to ensure an adequate focus on disaster risk management;” (SENDAI framework)*

Together, these legal and policy instruments constitute an interconnected web of obligations that transform humanitarian access from a question of charity to a question of right. Denying women participation in disaster response whether as providers or beneficiaries is therefore not a matter of cultural interpretation but a violation of international law. As the case studies of Herat, Behsud, Baghlan, Kunar/Nangarhar and Balkh and Samangan will show, the human cost of these violations is measured in lives lost and communities suffered.

The disasters that struck Afghanistan between 2023 and 2025 reveal a consistent pattern in which Taliban policies determine not only the scale of destruction but also how survivors get aid and assistance. Each event, the Herat earthquake, the Behsud and Baghlan floods, and the Kunar and Nangarhar and Balkh and Samangan earthquakes, demonstrates how institutional collapse and gender-based and minority-based exclusion transformed natural hazards into continued hardships and catastrophes.

During natural disasters, when communication networks, roads, bridges, and culverts are damaged and delivering aid and transporting the injured by land becomes impossible, helicopters become extremely important. Afghanistan faces a severe shortage of helicopters and air transport. Nevertheless, due to a lack of proper and professional management, many of the available helicopters are used to transport irresponsible officials—and even unrelated media teams—to affected areas. Instead of focusing on urgent aid delivery and saving lives, many officials are more concerned with gaining publicity and promoting their personal image.

### **Herat Earthquake 2023**

On 7 October 2023, a 6.3-magnitude earthquake struck Herat, affecting and destroying 382 villages in Zindajan and Injil districts as well as inside Herat city. More than 1480 people were killed and 1950 people were injured. It is believed that over 10000 homes were destroyed and 275000 people were affected. The earthquake also destroyed water resources, wells and agriculture in the areas. The majority of the victims were women and children. 58% of adults died and 60% of injured were women. Because of the Taliban’s restrictions on women’s movement, most women were confined indoors at the time of the quake. When their houses collapsed, they were buried under debris, while male rescuers bound by decrees prohibiting contact with Namahram women hesitated to pull them from the rubble. In many instances, witnesses reported hearing the cries of women and children for hours before help arrived.

“Yes, we witnessed this ourselves. Some women were trapped under the debris, but the men could not touch their bodies because they feared social criticism. If there had been female rescuers, several women’s lives might have been saved.” A woman from the area.

Hospitals lacked resources, female doctors and nurses, and women were not permitted to travel to medical facilities without a male guardian. Field clinics run by international organizations were ordered not to admit unaccompanied women. Many survivors thus felt the sting of discriminatory policy.

“During the earthquake, the absence of female personnel in aid and relief, especially in treatment and urgent care, meant that many women did not receive timely medical attention. The lack of female staff was a major barrier to providing health services to affected women.” Said a woman from Herat.

“Lack of women employee caused innocent women to avoid going to the clinic.” Stated a woman from Herat.

In rural Herat, as in most of Afghanistan, gendered divisions of space shaped mortality. At midday on a Friday, men were out going to mosques, fields, or markets; women were at home tending to children or preparing meals. When the walls crumbled, this spatial segregation turned directly into a gendered death toll. Yet the catastrophe did not end with the tremors. Rescue operations began in Herat city but lagged for days in Zindajan. Allegedly, Taliban officials refused to permit men to touch or move unrelated women without Taliban approval.

The absence of trained female responders magnified the crisis. Before 2021, Herat maintained several all-female civil-defense teams established with UNDP support. These were disbanded after the Taliban’s ban on women’s employment. The Herat Regional Hospital became the center of chaos. Many patients required surgical care, but there were barely a dozen women, mostly midwives, authorized to work, and even they could not operate without male supervision.

“In our area, several women were injured, but because there were no female rescuers, they felt ashamed and hesitant to seek help from men. If female responders had been present, the relief process would have been more humane and effective.” A woman from Herat,

Aid distribution revealed similar exclusion. Convoys arrived late and with limited supplies. Respondents to AHRC field interviews consistently reported inadequate assistance and discrimination in shelter reconstruction. Hazara families in particular noted that they were not counted in early assessments, and they were last to receive aid and inadequately because of their ethnicity.

At the institutional level, the Herat earthquake exposed the complete hollowing out of Afghanistan’s disaster-management architecture. The Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority (ANDMA), once coordinated through a tiered system modeled on international command structures, lost its authority to Taliban provincial governors and clerics who had no technical expertise. The provincial disaster-management department became entirely male and untrained. According to Hasht Sobh daily interviewing a resident in Herat, the Taliban do not possess knowledge and management skill to respond to disasters. collapse of professional standards meant that early-warning data, contingency planning, and community outreach which make core components of the Sendai Framework had ceased to exist.

The statements of some senior Taliban officials insult the victims and victimize them a second time. These officials describe earthquakes and floods as divine punishment upon sinners, especially women—an assertion that makes humanitarian assistance, cooperation, and solidarity with victims more difficult.

## **Behsud Floods 2024**

On August 17, 2024, severe flooding struck Markaz Behsud district in Maidan Wardak province, Afghanistan, causing widespread destruction and exacerbating the region’s continued and existing humanitarian challenges. The floods impacted at least 2,000 families, with approximately 500 families losing all their crops. An estimated 70-80 families, comprising around 500 individuals, were displaced, seeking refuge in local mosques.

The devastating floods in Behsud district caused widespread destruction across numerous villages. Among the most severely impacted areas, the villages of Sorkh Shinieh, Dahni Dolaneh, Nuabad, Dahni Rabdo, Sheniye, Darzgiro, Altamur, Kariz, Nurg, Sardolaneh, Khrdak Sar, Diwalag, and Seri Robodeh were reportedly destroyed completely. These villages were home to approximately 400 families, all of whom displaced by the disaster.

The flooding resulted in significant infrastructure damage. Major roads, including the main public thoroughfare, became impassable, obstructing relief efforts. Local wheat mills, crucial for food processing, were submerged and rendered inoperable. Additionally, water reserves were destroyed, leaving the population without access to clean drinking water and increasing the risk of waterborne diseases.

Agricultural losses were catastrophic, with hundreds of acres of farmland devastated and the entire potato harvest, which was the main product, wiped out. At least 200 livestock had also perished, further undermining food security and family incomes. The economic impact was profound; farmers lost a year's worth of labor just before harvest time, which was their life capital for the whole coming year.

But no aid was delivered or received from Taliban-controlled institutions or humanitarian organizations, leaving affected communities in dire conditions. As winter approached, the urgency for shelter and heating materials became critical but no aid was available. Displaced families lacked basic amenities and faced severe challenges in securing food and clean water.

### **Baghlan Floods 2024**

In May 2024, flash floods destroyed villages in Baghlan and Takhar, killing at least 347 people and injuring more than 1,651 people. Over 7,800 houses were swept away. This flooding was very tragic affecting a large population and territory. The floods affected a vast majority of terrain and villages including Baghlan e Jedid, Burkha, Dahne Ghori, Doshi, Guzargai Noor, Jelga, Khost, Pul Hesar, Pul e Khumri, Nahrin, and Tala wa Barfak), Badakhshan (Argo, Darayem, Kohistan, Nosai, Tagab, Teshkan, Yawan, Warduj. Families lost members so dear to them. Some families lost almost everyone. Afghanistan's northern valleys are geologically and hydrologically vulnerable. The combination of deforestation, poor watershed management, and unplanned construction as well as change in the rain pattern has turned seasonal rains into recurring disasters.

The aid was slow to arrive and never adequate. Aid distribution took place through male elders, which reportedly excluded widows and women without guardians.

Health centers were overwhelmed and unable to treat female patients due to the ban on women working in health care. There was report of a rise in miscarriages and postnatal deaths.

As with the earthquake, the gender based division of labor shaped exposure and mortality to floods too. When the floods struck, men were outside or quick to move, while women remained indoors caring for children and home errands and chores. The fast-moving water inundated mud-brick houses, trapping those insides. In response to disasters, women are slow to react because of their priority places with the instructions coming from the male members of family, carrying children and covering up for complying with the Taliban code.

The operational structure of the humanitarian response mirrored the administrative chaos of Herat. Local Taliban authorities assumed control of aid distribution but excluded international agencies from direct engagement with affected communities unless they agreed to employ only male staff. Several NGOs, including those specializing in maternal health and protection, were suspended for attempting to deploy female workers.

Floodwaters destroyed thousands of hectares of farmland, washing away topsoil and seed reserves. In Afghanistan's agrarian economy, this meant the erasure of household wealth overnight. Women, traditionally responsible for small-scale agriculture and animal husbandry, lost both income and autonomy. Poultry flocks, vegetable gardens, and dairy goats—assets often controlled by women—were decimated.

In many families, men migrated temporarily to urban areas to find work, leaving women behind in ruined homes without resources or legal standing to claim aid.

The ICESCR's Article 11 recognizes the right to an adequate standard of living, including food security. The state's failure to facilitate replanting support or livelihood recovery for women constitutes a breach of that obligation. Furthermore, the Sendai Framework's Priority 4, "Build Back Better," requires recovery processes to be inclusive and to reduce future risk. By excluding women from reconstruction, Afghanistan ensures that vulnerability will be perpetuated, not reduced.

### **Kunar and Nangarhar Earthquakes 2025**

In August and September 2025, a series of earthquakes struck Kunar and Nangarhar, killing around 2066 people and allegedly around 1588 of them were women and children. The earthquake also injured over 1620 people and around 875 of them were female. Once again, women and children constituted the majority of casualties. The Kunar and Nangarhar tragedy surfaced another problem, discrimination and continued violence against women in the form of commission and omission. Reports were coming from the field indicating that women were left unattended because Taliban did not allow men to touch women. Many women were buried under rubble because they feared going out with lack of proper clothing would be bad and many even could not see medical staff because of the unfortunate norm of "Namahram" reinforced by the Taliban. Therefore, because of cold weather and freezing conditions, children and elderly women died from exposure.

These earthquakes struck at a time when eastern Afghanistan was already overwhelmed by the mass deportation of families from Pakistan. Because of the Taliban return, poverty became widespread, food insecurity expanded, and because of geographic hardship roads were inaccessible. The combination of displacement and disaster produced a crisis within a crisis. Under the Sendai Framework's model, disaster outcomes are determined by exposure, vulnerability, and capacity. In Kunar and Nangarhar, all three were at critical levels: women's exposure was high because confinement placed them in unstable housing. Because of poverty and lack of access to the region, people build their houses of structure and materials that were not earthquake proof. The materials and even architecture of work were very rudimentary given the constant wave of conflict, displacement and destruction. Therefore, vulnerability was extreme due to housing structure. It was also through that people were not aware and did not receive any training on how to prepare for earthquakes or react to earthquakes. And this lack of awareness along with inaccessible roads made people vulnerable. We also noticed that capacity to assist was near zero because of lack of resources and also exclusion of competent staff and women from preparedness of programs.

Local male residents began rescue efforts with bare hands, but under Taliban they were forbidden from handling female bodies or entering private homes. In many media reports, including local and international media, like NYTimes, this issue was reported. Many of those trapped suffocated before help arrived. The absence of female staff rendered entire villages inaccessible. Health facilities operated by international agencies faced bureaucratic obstruction, with Taliban administrators demanding written approval for each deployment and restricting treatment of female patients.

Economically, earthquakes obliterated the backbone of rural livelihoods. Women, who contributed to family incomes through embroidery, dairy, and poultry work, lost both workspace and market access. Taliban decrees banning women from commuting outside and to local markets erased their remaining economic roles. The World Bank (2025) estimated that excluding women from the workforce reduces Afghanistan's GDP by at least 21 percent annually—a loss that translates directly into slower recovery and prolonged dependence on aid.

### **Balkh and Samangan Earthquake**

Midnight November 3rd, Balkh and Samangan were rocked by a strong 6.3 Richter earthquake. It killed over 27 people mostly women and children and injured over 1000. The disaster impacted over 1000 homes in Balkh, Samangan and other parts of northern region. Districts like Kholm, Marmol, Chemtal, city of Mazar Sharif, Dar-e-Sof and other parts were affected by the earthquake.

The tragedy happened only a short while after the incident in Kunar and Nengarhar, showing the risk of natural disaster threatening safety and life of Afghanistan people in every corner. Though the area was accessible and within the proximity of major cities of Mazar and Aibak, the problem of getting health and relief support was the same. Several hundreds of families in the face of a brutal winter left to mercy of nature and extended family and relatives to survive. One man said, “I had to move back inside the impacted home, for I cannot pay rent. I am afraid of walls and roofs coming down on my family, but we have no other choice in this situation. “

Complaints poured in when people did not get access to humanitarian assistance and communities were left off by the officials to receive aid. This situation worsens the experience for my families, women and children. According to *Hasht e Subh Daily*, “the shortage of female health workers has hindered women and girls ’access to healthcare services,” So the impact of earthquake again on women and girls are harsher, for the lack of women providing aid, and their vulnerability.

The repetition of identical failures across three years of disasters reveals a systemic pattern of deliberate neglect. Rescue was delayed because of weak administration and programming; aid was denied because of discriminatory policy; and accountability was absent because of fear. When the cumulative effect of exclusion predictably leads to death and suffering, it becomes not mere discrimination but a violation of the right to life and dignity. Afghanistan today represents a textbook case of governance-induced vulnerability. Earthquakes are natural, but the extent of human loss is political.

These disasters compel a broader question for the international community: how can humanitarian principles be upheld in a system that forbids impartiality and impose restrictions on women? The Afghan case challenges not only national responsibility but the credibility of the global humanitarian regime.

### **Women and humanitarian aids**

Recently, the UN secretary general in reaction to the Taliban banning women aid workers to assist women impacted by earthquake in Kunar and Nengarhar said what Taliban do in banning women is not only unacceptable, but it is stupid. He was scolded by the Taliban spokesperson. The UNSG call presents the reality of a regime that ban women education, women work and cancel women from public life. This is not only stupid, but a madness in the form of political lust oppressing women and minorities. The reason why the Taliban bans women could be everything other than Islam and Afghanistan tradition of revering women’s role in public life.

Before Taliban taking power in Kabul, women were struggling to thrive in a traditionally male dominated society, politics, economy and culture. The 2004 constitution in article 22 provided for equality of both men and women before the law and women were given quota representations in parliament. Under the republic regime, women represented Afghanistan to the UN and important capital of the world. Women made a healthy number in schools, 3 million out of 8 million and 40% of universities and 23% of workforce. They also freely worked for NGOs and UN organizations, USAID and other donor agencies. Women were not restricted from traveling around and out of the country.

This positive vibe reverberated across the country to the extend where women from rural areas joined police and security forces in thousands defying long standing traditional taboos. Women also joined sports and entertainment without restrictions. The Afghanistan constitution, EVAW law and many other policies

including action plan on women, peace and security protected women against discrimination and persecution. NGOs and government provided services to women in need without discrimination. Special loans, micro credit programs, and vocational trainings were provided to women to speed up integrating in public life.

But Taliban even then opposed women. The Taliban campaign against women leaders and activist killed and injured dozens of women, poisoned thousands of girl students and closed hundreds of schools.

After 2021, Taliban started to impose the most restrictive regime ever applied on women. The Taliban have issued over 100 decrees, laws, directives, and verbal guidance that effectively suffocate women inspiration for rights and freedoms as free citizens of the country. Some of the laws and policies are so medieval that they stun even radical elements in other parts of the world and tremor any sound and sane person to the core. For example, the law on promoting virtue and prevention of vice calling women's voices forbidden to be spoken to Namahram is so insane that it could be measured to the next level of stupidity in policy making sense.

In practice—as demonstrated across all five disaster case studies—the prohibition on women working, studying, and moving freely has created severe, life-threatening limitations for women in need of services and assistance during emergencies. Interviews conducted for this report consistently revealed that the absence of women in care and service-delivery teams discouraged affected women from expressing their needs, seeking medical or psychosocial support, or even reporting injuries. Many remained silent despite experiencing pain, trauma, or illness because engaging with male responders was either prohibited, stigmatized, or unsafe under Taliban rules.

As part of its inquiry in Herat, the AHRC interviewed fifteen women, representing the diverse ethnic makeup of the province. Among the participants were three Pashtun, eight Tajik, one Uzbek, one Sadat, and one Hazara woman. One participant declined to share her name or occupation, and another preferred not to identify with her ethnicity. Their professional backgrounds varied widely—attorneys, housewives, businessowners, and school instructors—yet their experiences converged: all reported significant barriers to accessing aid, and all affirmed that the exclusion of women from the disaster-response workforce directly contributed to the suffering of women survivors.

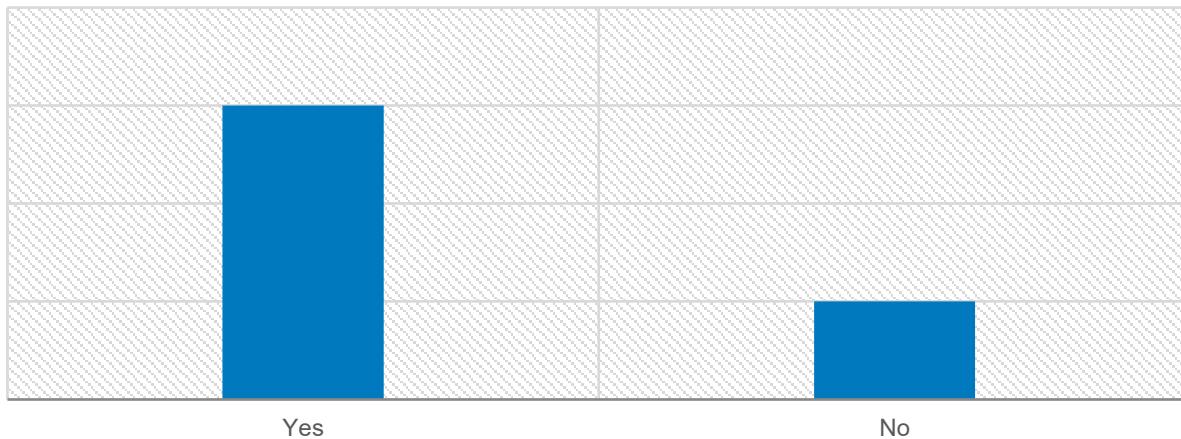
They all described the destructive effects of the recent earthquake on their lives. Each woman was directly affected, whether through the loss of her home, damage to property, or ongoing emotional distress. Many spoke of fear continued long after the ground stopped shaking. One respondent said the disaster left her “under constant psychological pressure,” while another explained that it “had a deep emotional impact” on her and her family. Another said that “The earthquake shattered our sense of security. Our lives are now filled with anxiety, and we still cannot sleep in peace. Even rain or strong winds make us feel afraid.”

Although humanitarian assistance eventually reached some areas, support was inconsistent. Several participants mentioned waiting days before receiving food or shelter, and others said that no help arrived at all. “On the first day, no help reached us. On the second day, residents and neighbors took the initiative and set up tents for families who had lost their homes. Almost all respondents emphasized the role of local residents for providing assistance.

The absence of female aid workers was described as a serious obstacle that prevented some injured women from being treated or approached safely. In a few cases, women themselves took the initiative to help others in their neighborhoods despite their own losses. Many witnessed confirmed that several women were not rescued because the male helpers were not allowed to touch them.

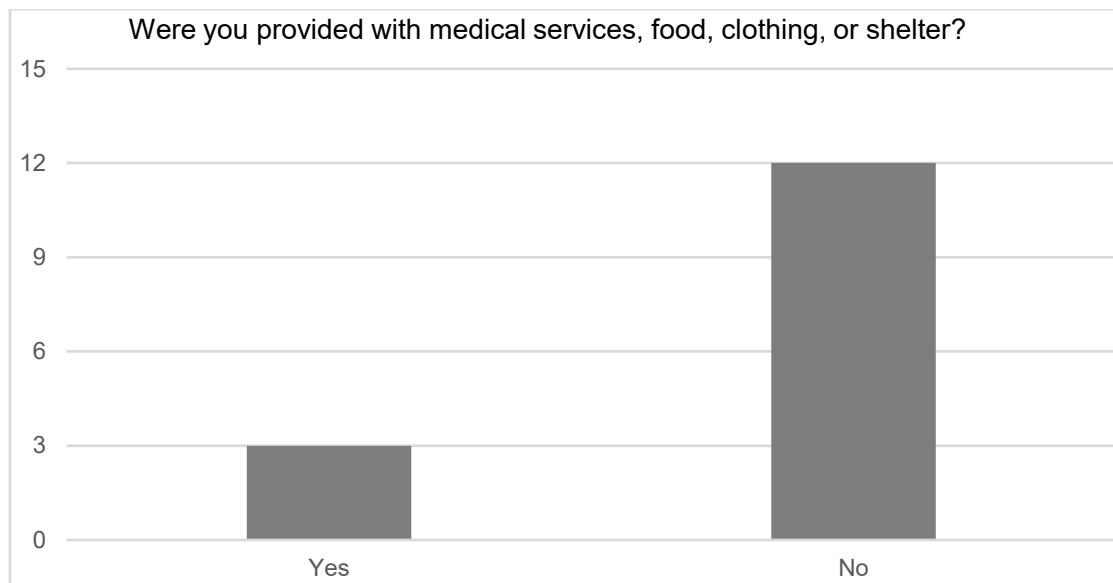
In response to the question “Did you witness injured women being denied help by men? Did the absence of female aid workers prevent women from receiving assistance on the day of the earthquake? Eight of them said yes. One of the women stated: “We witnessed this ourselves. Some women were trapped under the debris, but the men could not touch their bodies because they feared social criticism. If there had been female rescuers, several women’s lives might have been saved.” And another said, “Yes, several women were injured, but because there were no female aid workers, many of them were too shy or embarrassed to ask for help. The absence of female responders was one of the biggest problems.” Among the interviewees, one said that women regardless of their gender received aid”.

**Did you witness injured women being denied help by men?**



So, it was evident from the responses that not only women suffered because the men aid workers were not allowed to touch women bodies under rubble or in need of lifting up, but it was also an issue that dissuade women who were in need of help could not ask for it, for they were shy or afraid of being retributed for asking a man.

Also, the AHRC found that most of the affected women did not receive medical services, food, clothing, or shelter on the first day of the earthquake. Twelve women said they were provided these forms of assistances only after several days, but the medical services were very limited.



When asked about current needs, respondents emphasized shelter, psychological comfort, and safety as their most urgent priorities. Many noted that health services were either unavailable or difficult to access. Clinics were described as overcrowded, far from residential areas, and often without female doctors, conditions that discourage many women from seeking care. Transportation challenges and limited income further restricted access.

Feelings of insecurity extend beyond physical damage. Most women said they do not feel safe leaving their homes, describing harassment, restrictions, and social tension that intensified after the earthquake. Some also referred to broader fears related to movement, public behavior, and gender norms.

Before August 2021, most respondents spoke of having clear personal or professional ambitions, continuing their education, working, or supporting their families through skilled employment. Those hopes to have since been replaced by uncertainty. “Now I just hope for peace to return to people’s lives,” one woman wrote, reflecting a sense of resilience mixed with exhaustion.

Across all testimonies, the women’s recommendations were consistent: ensure education and employment opportunities, improve access to healthcare, especially female providers, and create conditions where women can safely participate in recovery and community life. Their words illustrate not only the hardship they face but also their determination to rebuild. Despite material loss and continuing fear, these women express hope for safety, dignity, and a future where they can once again work and live without fear.

### **Crises in Crises**

Every disaster in Afghanistan is amplified by layers of poverty, cold, displacement, and discrimination. Each natural catastrophe compounds existing structural crises, transforming what should be temporary emergencies into enduring humanitarian tragedies.

By 2024, an estimated ninety-six percent of the Afghan population lived below the poverty line (UNDP, 2024). Women, barred from work by Taliban decrees, were left without income or autonomy. During the

earthquakes and floods of 2023 and 2024, widows and women-headed households sold their remaining possessions to buy food. Poverty forced families to live in unstable terrains, riverbanks, hillsides, and earthquake-prone areas placing them at the front line of every hazard. Poverty in Afghanistan is not an accident of circumstance; it is the predictable outcome of gender and ethnic exclusion that has removed millions of women and minorities from the economy.

Over 40 decades of war and conflict, environmental degradation, including land erosion, foliage disappearance, deforestation and destruction of irrigation system, farmlands and orchards and plantation of landmines created a ground vulnerable to any level of natural disasters and its afterwards. Further, the Russian invasion, civil war, mass atrocities committed by the Taliban and the war against terrorism entrenched the vulnerability to potential natural disasters. Also, war enabled warlords and political influentials to grab lands, sell them to the poor without regard to the hazards threatening people's life. Further, poverty and lack of proper urban and construction oversight and codes, made everyone house built in Afghanistan vulnerable to earthquake, landslides, and fire.

Afghanistan's winters are among the harshest in the region. After the 2023 Herat earthquakes and the 2024 floods in Behsud and Baghlan, thousands of families spent months in open fields or unheated tents. Temperatures in some areas fell below zero. Women were unable to collect firewood or purchase fuel without a male escort, and many families were forced to burn their furniture to stay warm. Dozens of children died from cold-related illnesses (OCHA, 2024). These deaths were foreseeable, preventable, and therefore constitute violations of the right to life under international human rights law.

Between 2024 and 2025, over 2.6 million Afghans were deported from Pakistan and Iran (UNHCR, 2025). Many of these returnees arrived at border camps already overwhelmed by disaster survivors. The deportations created what can only be described as a humanitarian overflow, where refugees and disaster victims competed for the same meager aid. Women among the deportees faced triple vulnerability: statelessness, homelessness, and gender persecution upon return. Forced deportations during a humanitarian emergency violate the principle of non-refoulement under the 1951 Refugee Convention and customary international law.

Ethnic minorities, particularly the Hazara, Tajik, and Uzbek communities, continue to suffer from systematic discrimination. In provinces such as Ghazni, Bamyan, Andarab, Takhar, Baghlan, and Faryab, families were expelled from lands they had occupied for decades. Land confiscations disguised as "reallocations" deprived communities of property and security. These forced evictions, often targeting the Hazaras, violate rights to housing and protection under Article 11 of the ICESCR and Article 27 of the ICCPR, which protect against arbitrary displacement and discrimination.

Women with disabilities have faced complete neglect. During the Herat evacuations, disabled women were left behind because there were no accessible transport or rescue mechanisms. In camps, there were no ramps, toilets, or mobility aids. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), Article 11, obliges states to ensure the protection and safety of people with disabilities in situations of risk. None of these obligations are being met. The exclusion of disabled women from aid and evacuation efforts reflects both gender and disability-based discrimination, creating multiple layers of vulnerability.

The Taliban's ban on education since 2022 has erased an entire generation of future female professionals. Without women engineers, doctors, social workers, and administrators, Afghanistan's capacity for disaster response will continue to shrink. Each year that girls remain excluded from education, the country loses a future cohort of responders and decision-makers. Exclusion today ensures vulnerability tomorrow.

Climate change intensifies these crises. Afghanistan's rainfall patterns have shifted, glaciers are melting, and deforestation continues unabated (UNEP, 2024). Women and girls, traditionally responsible for

fetching water and firewood, must now travel longer distances in hazardous conditions, facing risks of assault and exhaustion. Yet, they remain excluded from climate adaptation planning and decision-making. This exclusion contravenes the Paris Agreement (2015) and the Sendai Framework, both of which emphasize the integration of gender equality into climate and disaster governance.

The convergence of poverty, gender apartheid, ethnic persecution, and climate stress has created a cycle of vulnerability that no humanitarian intervention can address without structural change.

## **Disaster Management**

The 1391 Law on Disaster Management establishes a high commission for disaster management and requires the formation of provincial and district-level commissions. However, the recent four major natural disasters have shown that this structure has nearly collapsed. Competent professional staff were replaced by clerics with no technical background. Training and capacity-building programs that once prepared local officials for emergency response are now completely absent. Most importantly, women have been erased from the entire structure, leaving no space for their participation or leadership. This institutional damage, if not repaired and reformed, will continue to produce poor and ineffective disaster responses. The agency, instead of performing its legal duties, has relied on NGOs and international organizations for funding and implementation, functioning as a passive body detached from its own responsibilities under the law.

Regarding the availability, accessibility, acceptability, and quality of aid, serious gaps were observed during each disaster cycle. Although aid was eventually made available, it often arrived late and in insufficient quantities. In both the Herat and Kunar cases, people repeatedly complained about delayed and inadequate assistance. Many areas were geographically isolated, and aid did not reach women who were among the most affected. In Kunar, Herat, and Baghlan, women struggled to access food, shelter, and basic relief. In Behsud and parts of Herat, women belong to minority groups were excluded from aid distribution. The quality of the aid was also poor; people reported fragile shelters with no heating systems and low-quality food supplies. These failures reflect not only logistical shortcomings but also a deeper pattern of neglect, exclusion, and lack of accountability in the management of humanitarian response in Afghanistan.

While women generally affected by natural hazards differently because of their socioeconomic role in society, the affect of natural disasters were disasters because of discrimination and exclusion of women in Afghanistan society.

## **Discrimination**

Discrimination in aid delivery is widely reported. Assistance has turned into a privilege granted through power, gender, and ethnicity rather than a right based on need. The Taliban's control over humanitarian operations has allowed interference at every level, from the selection of beneficiaries to the employment of aid workers. In most affected regions, aid distribution is directed toward communities loyal to the de facto authorities, while others, particularly the Hazaras, Tajiks, and Uzbeks, face systematic exclusion. Recent assessments reveal that in some provinces, only about 17 percent of Hazara households have received assistance, despite being among the most affected by hunger and displacement. In Behsud flood and in Herat Hazaras complained about not getting aid and could not be covered by many programs run by the Taliban.

Women's situation is even more alarming. Taliban's ban on women working for NGOs, coupled with severe restrictions on movement, has created an environment where female-headed households are left unseen and unreached. Without women aid workers, there is no access to women beneficiaries; without access, there is no equality in relief.

Further, the Taliban publicly calling women's immorality, sins and lack of compliance with Sharia the reason for the disastrous events made the disaster a blame game. For, example in prayer sermons and other occasions the Taliban mullahs always cited women immorality and freedom as their sins causing divine punishment in the form of earthquake, flood and fire. This has impeded and socially discouraged empathy and solidarity and assistance delivery to women during the events. This discriminatory approach violates humanitarian principles of impartiality and neutrality and contradicts Afghanistan's international commitments under instruments such as CEDAW and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The result is a pattern of deprivation that extends beyond emergency response—it institutionalizes inequality, perpetuates gender apartheid, and transforms humanitarian aid into a mechanism of control, deepening the suffering of those already abandoned by governance and excluded from justice. In response, there is a need for criminalization of the Taliban policy of treating women with discrimination as gender apartheid and to advocate for criminalization and recognition of the gender apartheid either in the draft convention of crimes against humanity or amending the ICC.

## **International Response and Accountability**

The international community's response to Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis has been constrained by the dilemma of engagement: how to deliver aid without legitimizing a regime that enforces discrimination. Since 2022, most UN agencies and NGOs have negotiated narrow exceptions with the Taliban to allow female staff to operate in certain sectors, such as health and nutrition, but under strict conditions of segregation. In other sectors—education, protection, and livelihoods—female participation has been almost entirely prohibited. Agencies have adapted by using male intermediaries to deliver aid to women, a practice that preserves access but erodes legality. Operating under discriminatory rules contradicts the UN Charter, CEDAW, and the humanitarian principles enshrined in Resolution 46/182.

Neutrality cannot mean silence. Humanitarian actors have a duty not only to deliver aid but also to defend the principles of impartiality and non-discrimination. The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (1994) explicitly require assistance to be given without adverse distinction. When organizations comply with restrictions that exclude women, they risk complicity in systemic discrimination. True impartiality demands reaching all those in need, not merely those whom the authorities permit to be seen.

Neighboring countries have also aggravated the crisis. The mass deportations of Afghan refugees by Pakistan and Iran during ongoing emergencies constitute serious breaches of international refugee law and humanitarian principles. These deportations, carried out without coordination with UNHCR or humanitarian partners, expose deportees—especially women—to homelessness, hunger, and persecution upon arrival.

Donor governments also bear responsibility. Funding that flows through discriminatory systems sustains those systems. Under the International Law Commission's Articles on State Responsibility, states must neither recognize nor assist serious violations of international law. Donors must therefore condition aid on measurable gender-access benchmarks and independent verification mechanisms. Financial assistance should prioritize human rights organizations, diaspora networks, and community-based initiatives that embody inclusion and reject discrimination against minorities. Supporting Afghan women's capacity and minority communities is not only a moral obligation but also a legal and strategic necessity for effective humanitarian delivery.

The role of the United Nations must evolve accordingly. UNAMA's current mandate, while monitoring human rights, lacks the enforcement tools necessary to address systematic gender persecution. Its scope should be expanded to include the documenting crimes such as gender apartheid and persecution under Article 7(1)(h) of the Rome Statute. The Human Rights Council's Special Procedures have already

identified the Taliban's governance as a regime of institutionalized oppression. Thus, it is time to recognize and criminalize gender apartheid as a heinous crime committed against women in Afghanistan. The newly established investigation mechanism is an important step toward documentation, and its mandate should be broadly defined. The next step must be accountability, ensuring that these findings are translated into legal action and international consequences. The new independent mechanism ought to be supported and its function must resume.

Civil society and academic institutions also play an essential role. The documentation, analysis, and dissemination of evidence are indispensable to maintaining international attention and pressure. Afghanistan researchers, lawyers, and students must be supported to build the legal and analytical capacity necessary to sustain long-term accountability efforts. Universities and think tanks should expand training in international law, documentation, and advocacy for Afghan scholars and activists, ensuring that the country's future human rights defenders remain engaged despite exile or repression.

Finally, the Afghan crisis exposes the limits of the global humanitarian system itself. How can humanitarian principles survive in a context where impartiality is forbidden, and gender equality criminalized? The Afghan experience challenges the world to reconcile the delivery of aid with the defense of rights. To accept conditional access that excludes women is to normalize discrimination; to refuse engagement is to abandon the victims. The path forward lies in principled pragmatism—negotiating access without conceding legality and delivering aid while affirming that equality is not negotiable.

### **Conclusions and Policy Recommendations**

The experience of the past three years has made one fact undeniable: in Afghanistan, gender determines survival. The problem is not a lack of resources or capacity—it is deliberate exclusion. Afghanistan remains legally bound by its international commitments, and the Taliban's decrees violate jus cogens norms, which cannot be suspended under any circumstance. The international community must treat these violations not as internal affairs but as crimes of global concern. Silence in the face of systemic discrimination amounts to complicity.

The Afghanistan Human Rights Center, in order to ensure an effective and fair response to natural disasters in Afghanistan, presents the following recommendations:

**To the Taliban:** The bans on women's work, education, and mobility must be lifted immediately. Civilian-led disaster governance should be restored, and women professionals reinstated across institutions. Equal access to aid must be guaranteed, and independent monitoring permitted.

**To the United Nations:** A unified, rights-based approach must replace fragmented humanitarian negotiation. Women's participation should be made as a precondition for all humanitarian operations. UNAMA's mandate should be expanded to include investigation of gender persecution and accountability under international law.

**To Donor Governments:** All funding should be conditioned on verifiable gender-access standards and independent oversight. Donors should prioritize NGOs, diaspora organizations, and education initiatives, and support the resettlement or creation of safe zones for displaced and deported women. We also urge donor governments and NGOs to allocate more resources for the reconstruction of destroyed villages, taking into account that with the approach of winter, the cold weather could exacerbate the suffering of survivors.

**To Neighboring States:** Forced deportations must cease, and temporary protection and humanitarian corridors must be established for Afghanistan returnees. Regional coordination should aim to ensure safe, voluntary, and dignified movement.

To Civil Society and Academia: Documentation of violations must continue despite censorship. We welcome the newly established UN investigative mechanism. Afghanistan lawyers, researchers, and students must be included and supported through training and collaboration to preserve evidence, build legal cases, and sustain advocacy.

The end.