

INCLUSION OF LOCAL NGOS AND WOMEN GROUPS AS HUMANITARIAN DRIVERS AND LONG-TERM PARTNERS

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Afghanistan is facing a humanitarian emergency that is deteriorating by the day. 23 million people face acute hunger, and there is a near total collapse of public services. The human rights situation is also dire, with escalating reports of extrajudicial killings, the disappearance of former government employees, and the detention of women's rights activists and journalists.

Despite global recognition of the humanitarian disaster, there is a lack of consensus on how to provide international assistance without empowering the Taliban and Haqqani network leaders. As such, approaches to date have been extremely cautious, often undermining efficiency and efficacy of aid distribution.

The United States has introduced several measures to expedite humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, including channeling aid through independent organizations such as U.N. agencies and NGOs to bypass the Taliban regime. The Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief & Development (ACBAR) is largely responsible for coordinating humanitarian aid distribution and managing the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund. However, ACBAR lacks small, women-led organizations which are key to effective aid distribution.

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF WOMEN'S GROUPS AND LOCAL NGOS

Local NGOs and women's groups are essential drivers of effective aid management and distribution. To ensure their participation in aid distribution networks, it is important to understand their capacity, resources, advantages, and constraints. Moreover, it is critical to understand how current aid processes and coordination systems facilitate or obstruct the participation of local NGOs and women's groups.

Formal non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Afghanistan have historically served communities in times of war. When governments were dysfunctional and the delivery of essential services limited to provincial centers, NGOs provided life-saving health services in hard-to-reach communities.

In comparison, informal women's groups have served local Afghan communities for much longer than formal NGOs. Women's groups initially existed as small charities that imparted lessons of Afghan culture and tradition through crafts and skills-training. Their role shifted significantly with the invasion of the Soviet Union and intensification of the Afghan conflict, as millions of people were forced to flee and neighboring states launched a military resistance. As the politics of jihad flourished, Afghan society became much more radicalized and saw a period of severe backlash against women's rights. Women were limited to their homes and covering their bodies became a marker of men's Islamization and Jihadi appropriation. At the same time, women in refugee communities began developing the first women's social groups, which later became instrumental in spearheading access to education and promoting women's rights during the first Taliban regime.

Through the efforts of informal women's groups to raise awareness and offer services across education, health, and economic sectors, women reclaimed their place in society. From Dr. Sima Samar and Shinkai Karokhail to Hasina Safi and Habiba Sarabi, women leaders emerged under the umbrella of local women's groups and NGOs.

These women and their networks played a vital role in the development and well-being of Afghan society, and advanced broad agendas in support of women and children.

In the 20 years since the fall of the Taliban government in 2001, women's groups and local NGOs have flourished. More than 150 women's organizations have joined the Afghan Women's Network (AWN), while others have led innovative projects across the country – their efforts grounded in the changing social and political landscape of the provinces. With the establishment of women *shuras*,¹ women have been trained to participate in politics and local governance. Through organizations such as AWEC, AWRC, and ECW, they have also made strides in improving the educational landscape of the provinces.

These women-led organizations possess long-term development and programmatic experience in the fields of women empowerment, advocacy, and human rights. They have a proven record of efficiency and effectiveness, and corruption is at an all-time low.

THE CASE FOR STRONGER INCLUSION, NOW

With the return of the Taliban, authorities have imposed several restrictions that severely affect the operations of women's groups. The ban on women's work, the compulsory requirement of a *mahram*,² and the prolonged freezing of funds have constrained and closed down many local operations. Moreover, many women NGO leaders were forced to flee the country during the Taliban takeover, which has left significant leadership gaps. The Taliban have located several of these women's groups due to the recognizability of their leaders, and have since frozen their organizational bank accounts.

While nearly 75 percent of women's groups are either closed or inactive, **it is important to support the women's groups that have continued to operate through the difficult transition period. Including these groups in the humanitarian funding delivery process is critical to reaching women across Afghanistan and ensuring women-led institutions are centered in the humanitarian agenda.**

GIWPS hosted several consultations with women's organizations and identified the following **priority issues**:

- **Ensuring funding streams reach local NGOs and women's groups.** The financial sanctions on the Taliban impact both internal and external monetary transactions to Afghanistan, which disproportionately affects local NGOs and women-led groups. While there has been a relaxation on the use of Hawala³ for international NGOs, local groups are often left behind. Ensuring funding streams reach local women's organizations is critical to their ability to deliver humanitarian support to the most vulnerable populations.
- **Shielding human rights activists and women's organizations from Taliban scrutiny.** The Taliban suspiciously watch human rights activists and scrutinize the activities of women's organizations, particularly following demonstrations by women activists. Especially given recent accounts of forced disappearances and arbitrary detentions, continued targeted surveillance threatens the safety of prominent women's rights activists and raises animosity toward women's activities.

¹ Shuras are traditional meetings where local community members can convene to discuss topics important to their livelihood. The meetings encourage free communication between the government and the local Afghans, while women's shuras often center on bringing attention to women's political and economic participation. [AFGHANISTAN: SHURA GIVES VOICE TO WOMEN'S ROLE IN PAKTIKA](#).

² Mahram refers to the Taliban's policy of requiring women to be accompanied by a male family member – essentially acting as a chaperone or guardian – when engaging in work or public life. [Afghanistan: Taliban Abuses Cause Widespread Fear](#)

³ Hawala, is an old and popular and informal value transfer system that has been used since centuries in Afghanistan and region in most efficient way, HAWALA system was banned in many countries on the pretext of money laundering to terrorist networks [Book Review: Understanding Hawala, Afghanistan's Informal Money Transfer System \(rferl.org\)](#)

- **Protecting the security of women activists and aid workers, especially in Southern provinces.** While there is some tolerance of women activists in the North and South, most Taliban commanders impose harsh restrictions on women's activities and mobility. Taliban leaders frequently give controversial statements on women's right to work, and women aid workers face severe restrictions.
- **Increasing the funding capacity and transparency of UN offices.** During the bidding and grant allocation process for humanitarian aid, UN staff often demand large shares of administrative costs from local partners. This financial burden, compounded by the Taliban's indirect taxation system, often prevents local NGOs from effectively distributing aid.
- **Reducing barriers to participation in local networks and aid coordination mechanisms.** Most women's organizations are not members of ACBAR – the leading aid coordination body – largely due to high membership fees. In comparison, many women's groups are members of the Afghan Women's Network, where membership fees are optional and the organizational culture is more welcoming to women-led groups.
- **Supporting and sustaining women's organizations under Taliban rule.** Despite the effectiveness of women-led organizations in reaching women in conservative communities, avoiding costly operations, and ensuring culturally and gender-sensitive working environments, most have little to no institutional support. These organizations need core funding and for-profit sources to ensure their survival and sustainability under Taliban rule.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Create a targeted funding stream to support the core functions of women's organizations in Afghanistan.** This can also serve as a mechanism for grant transactions for other local organizations that do not qualify for international transactions under current banking regulations and donor restrictions under Hawala.
- **Invest in capacity building, as in ACBAR's Twinning model, to pair local and international organizations** and increase their ability to provide humanitarian support through joint trainings, technical mentoring, access to funding, and knowledge transfer. A Twinning model will ensure NGOs and INGOs are eligible partners in emergency humanitarian support and advance effective aid delivery to Afghan communities.
- **Include local NGOs and women's groups as long-term partners in humanitarian assistance.** Fostering humanitarian and aid-based partnerships can bridge the gap between local and international organizations, which supports short-term emergency responses and promotes long-term development.
- **Facilitate mentorship between Afghan women in exile and the NGOs and women's groups operating on the ground.** Support for mentoring programs between women inside and outside the country is needed to create an environment for women's groups to operate and contribute to humanitarian assistance, education, vocational training, job creation, and community development.
- **Ensure political and financial support for safeguarding civic space.** Coupling aid distribution with other services, such as funding for advocacy, awareness raising, and the provision of psychosocial counseling, is critical for supporting women-led organizations and their ability to operate.