



Invest in Afghan women and girls. Invest in hope.

Join us in helping
Afghanistan's women
and girls to believe in a
brighter future.





“Severely limiting the rights of Afghan women and their involvement in humanitarian and development efforts risks pushing more families to flee... It also diminishes prospects for long-term solutions for those already displaced.”

Filippo Grandi
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

The women and girls of Afghanistan are facing unimaginable hardship and discrimination that threatens to erase them from the fabric of society.

In the shadow of decades of war, economic collapse and environmental devastation, Afghanistan now faces a worsening crisis as neighbouring countries ramp up the forced return of Afghans who've sought safety within their borders.

Following the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, millions fled the country, with more than 1.6 million seeking safety in neighbouring Iran and Pakistan.

More than 70% of refugees who fled Afghanistan are women and children. Now, Afghans face being pushed back to a homeland that is unprepared and ill-equipped to ensure their safety, dignity and wellbeing.

Afghanistan, under a de facto authority, remains the only country in the world where girls and women are barred from secondary and higher education.

Their severely restricted access to justice exposes women and girls to greater risks of physical, sexual, and emotional harm, both in public and private spaces.

And restrictions on forms of employment, movement, assembly and speech further erode their chances at rebuilding their lives and living in dignity. The refugee returnees join millions already grappling with food insecurity, human rights violations, trauma, malnutrition and widespread unemployment.

HIGHLIGHT

In the face of overwhelming challenges, many families have resorted to harmful coping mechanisms, including sending children to work—also in neighboring countries—forcing them into begging, hazardous labor, or child marriage, particularly for girls. Some have tragically turned to even more devastating measures, such as selling children to settle debts or subject them to indentured labor for landlords, further perpetuating cycles of violence, exploitation and trauma.



The Afghanistan Situation

While conflict is no longer the primary driver of displacement in Afghanistan, a staggering 3.2 million Afghans remain displaced within the country, and more than 5.5 million are registered refugees or living in refugee-like situations across the region.

The displacement of Afghan refugees has had a profound impact on neighboring countries, overwhelming resources and stretching social services to their limits. These countries are grappling with the immense challenge of providing adequate support, which has created tensions and escalated regional instability.

A long-time generous host to those fleeing Afghanistan's turbulent political landscape, Pakistan's Government initiated a plan in

October 2023 to repatriate over a million undocumented foreigners, primarily affecting Afghans. This initiative has led to a surge in arrests and deportations, placing returnees at risk of persecution upon return to Afghanistan.

Iran continues to host a substantial Afghan refugee population. In fact, it is the world's largest refugee-hosting country and provides Afghan refugees access to national health and education services. It is now carrying out the forced return of undocumented Afghan nationals, in coordination with the Taliban authorities—further exacerbating the vulnerability of those being deported.

HIGHLIGHT

As a result of their trauma, more than 50% of Afghan returnees have increased mental health and counseling needs. Women in particular report experiencing depression, anxiety and withdrawal from family and the limited public space they have access to. Some 55% of children and 45% of adults currently lack access to the services they need to heal.

The Situation in Afghanistan

A shrinking protection space, a fragile economy, insufficient access to basic services, and disasters continue to undermine the ability of Afghans to recover from 40 years of conflict and instability.

Unemployment, underemployment, household debt, and poverty remain widespread, affecting around 48% of the population and severely limiting households' ability to afford goods and services. The collapse of the economy is

also impacting the humanitarian sector, as gaps in sustainable development—such as substandard and incomplete infrastructure, limited livelihood opportunities, and weak healthcare and education systems—continue to fuel recurring humanitarian crises.

As the country struggles with volatile domestic conditions, the needs, vulnerabilities and protection risks continue to grow.



Impact on women and girls

Since 2021, women in Afghanistan have had many of their most fundamental rights restricted or rescinded in a country that has one of the highest rates of violence against women globally. Over 50 decrees have been issued by the authorities that systematically strip away the rights and dignity of women and girls.

The ban on secondary and higher education for girls has upended the lives of 1.4 million young girls, inflicting lasting harm on Afghanistan's future. As parents strive to secure an education for their daughters, many women, including former activists, judges, and journalists, are compelled

to seek safety and escape growing oppression.

Access to vital services for survivors of violence has sharply declined, even as demand for these services has skyrocketed.

These severe restrictions on women's freedoms—to move, work, learn, and participate in public life—have reinforced harmful social norms that normalize violence. The absence of protective laws, combined with the introduction of decrees that erase women from public and political spaces, has further entrenched gender inequality.

Increasingly frequent and severe extreme weather shocks impact the lives of millions¹

Afghanistan has endured five consecutive years of drought, worsened by widespread disasters that affected 33 out of 34 provinces in 2024 alone.

These extreme weather shocks—floods, droughts, and harsh winters—are intensifying in frequency and severity, disrupting daily life, driving displacement, and devastating the agricultural sector, the main source of livelihood for countless Afghan families.

Women and girls are disproportionately impacted, particularly in a context like Afghanistan, where social, economic, and cultural barriers already put them at a disadvantage.

Discriminatory norms—such as unequal access to land, water, and resources, and excluding women from decisions about the environment— marginalize women and ignore their critical role in building sustainable solutions.

An estimated 80% of those displaced by weather events and disasters are women, who, while shouldering the responsibility of gathering essential resources, face increased risks of sexual violence and exploitation, especially in displacement camps as they must travel further for water or firewood in precarious conditions.

Economic and environmental stress push families deeper into poverty, leading to a rise in early marriages and stripping many girls of their futures.

Women also face health risks, including pregnancy complications, made worse by poor nutrition, unsafe water, and inadequate healthcare, especially when services become overwhelmed during disasters.

¹ Afghanistan ranks sixth on the list of countries most at risk of crisis and seventh on the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Index of countries most vulnerable and least prepared to adapt to climate change.



Father-of-five, Zamir, 45, and his family inspect a new 2 bedroom home which they hope to move into before winter sets in, built by UNHCR with partner, WSTA.



UNHCR has a clear plan to improve the situation of Afghan women and girls



We will swiftly address the urgent needs of women and girls in overlapping crises in Afghanistan, including with **emergency, lifesaving assistance** upon return and during times of crisis and disaster.



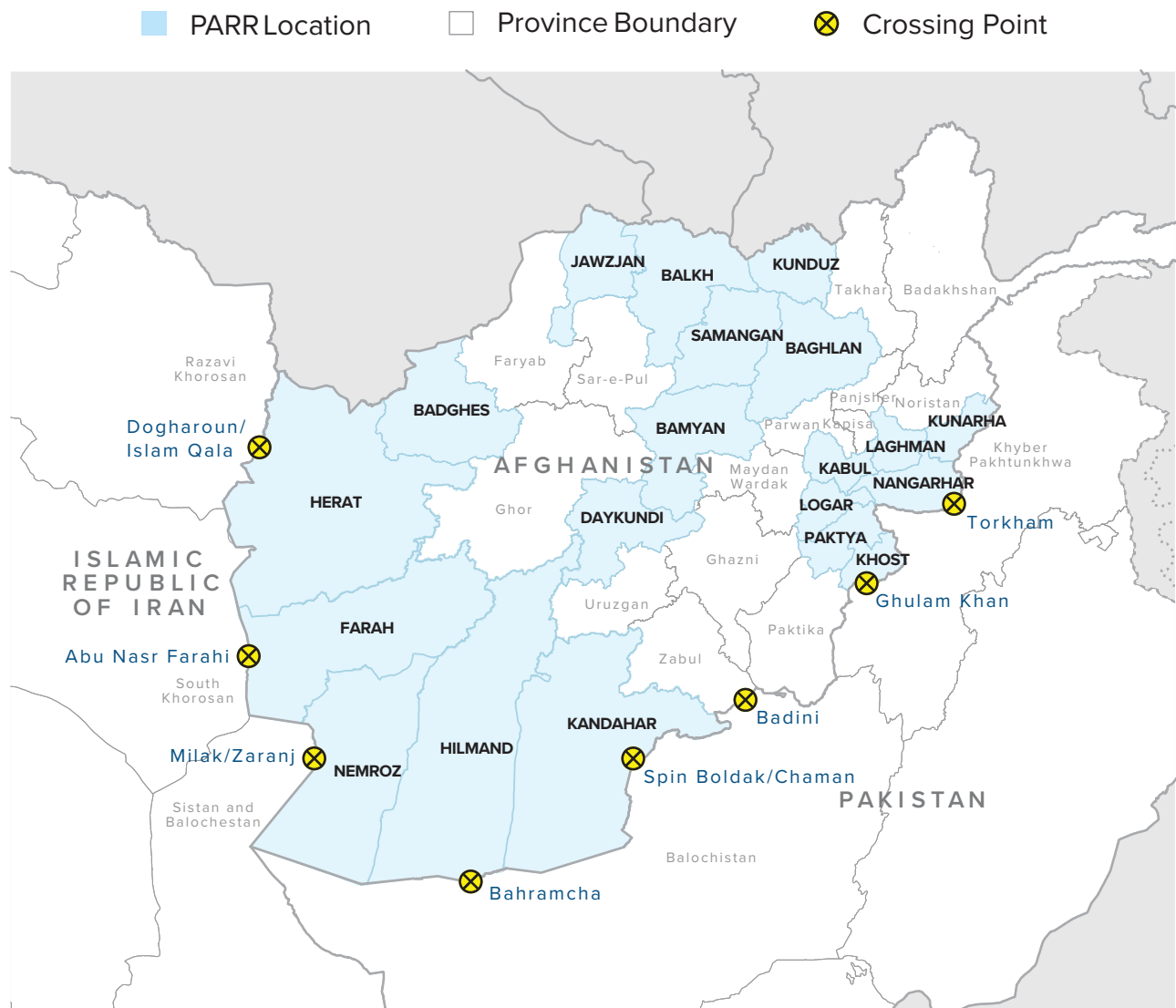
We will continue to create and support **safe, secure, supportive spaces for women and girls**, offering comprehensive counseling services, including mental health and psychosocial care, to help them heal from trauma and rebuild their lives.



Through **meaningful community engagement and empowerment initiatives**, particularly targeting women, children and other vulnerable groups, we will cultivate a deeper respect for community and the rights of every person.

Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration (PARRs)

UNHCR has identified Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration (PARRs) across Afghanistan — regions with high numbers of returnees, where a ‘whole-of-society’ approach is being employed, investing in local infrastructure to improve access to services and supporting self-reliance and empowerment initiatives, especially for women and girls, to help them rebuild their lives



Focus Area 01:

Emergency and lifesaving support for Afghans forced to return

Having sought refuge in neighbouring countries, the faces of young children such as these now reflect the harsh reality and uncertain future of being forced to return to Afghanistan.





01

A humanitarian emergency is unfolding as millions of Afghans are pushed or forcibly returned to Afghanistan amid rising hostility.

Since September 2023, over 3 million Afghans—almost 1.6 million in 2024 alone—have returned or been deported to a country where communities already struggling to survive must now absorb and support them. As both Iran and Pakistan have ramped up mass returns in 2025 amid escalating anti-Afghan sentiment, nearly 150,000 returned to Afghanistan in the first weeks of April.

These returns are overwhelming Afghanistan's already fragile systems. With resources depleted, services overstretched, and reintegration efforts stalling, many returnees—mostly women, children, and ethnic minorities—are being pushed into deeper poverty.

Impact on women and girls

The ongoing forced returns are disproportionately impacting Afghan women and girls, who are forced to abandon their lives elsewhere and re-enter a country where their access to certain employment sectors, education, and freedom of movement is severely restricted—or entirely denied.

Among the most vulnerable are female-headed households and widows who shoulder the greatest burden in a society already fractured by years of conflict and instability.

UNHCR has consistently warned against the risks of forcibly returning Afghans to a country where half the population depends on humanitarian aid to survive. Returnees arrive traumatized, uncertain of where to turn in a land that offers little safety and even fewer opportunities. All returns should be safe, voluntary, and dignified.

Many children and adults whose families have lived in exile for years are arriving in a country they have never set foot in.

These large-scale forced returns risk pushing Afghanistan deeper into crisis as poverty and food insecurity worsen.



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UNHCR is responding to the urgent needs of the returnees and is seeking financial contributions from our generous donors to support this assistance.



Life-saving assistance at key entry points on the borders

When people are forced to leave their homes suddenly, they are left with only the essentials and lose their ability to earn and spend. UNHCR is present in border areas, assisting returnees to meet their most urgent, life-saving needs—whether for food, shelter, healthcare, or transport to their areas of origin—with cash assistance. This support helps them not only address their most pressing needs, but also take an essential step toward rebuilding their lives, securing housing, and preventing further displacement.

Responding to protection needs in areas of return

Upon arrival, returnees most often seek help with legal documentation, child protection, family reunification, and support for women and girls. Many report harrowing experiences—raids, arrests, and harsh detention conditions—before deportation. Some were separated from family, while others had belongings confiscated at the border. UNHCR operates in 20 key return areas across Afghanistan, providing psychosocial support, safe spaces for women and counseling for at-risk children, and facilitating access to healthcare, legal aid, and other essential services.

Targeted support to individuals with specific needs

Individuals with specific needs—such as those with cognitive impairments, mental health conditions, physical disabilities, unaccompanied children, or elderly persons—are often the least likely to come forward to make their needs known, even when their support networks have broken down during deportation. Returnees with specific needs are rapidly identified and immediately referred for protection and assistance interventions, including specialized medical, legal, administrative, or other necessary support, with a focus on the most vulnerable.

Focus Area 02:

Mental health and psychosocial support

Ali Ahmad, 5, at the Legal Counselling & Assistance Centre, accompanied by his mother to receive support in obtaining essential civil documents.





02

Decades of conflict, violence and severe violations of their human rights have left generations of Afghan women and girls traumatized and in need of urgent mental health care.

Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) issues are escalating at an alarming rate in Afghanistan where the population has historically faced perpetuated conflict, trauma from war, and shifts in ideological governance.

The Taliban takeover in 2021 saw the introduction of successive gendered restrictions, economic downturn, increased unemployment, and struggles to access basic services.

The ongoing humanitarian crisis, compounded by displacement, disasters, and the return of refugees, has intensified

the suffering of Afghan communities. Data suggests that over half of the population is living in distress, with one in five individuals suffering from severe mental health issues.

Refugee returnees are especially vulnerable, with more than 50% facing significant mental health support needs. Suicide rates are rising across the country, particularly in certain regions, driven by factors such as child marriage, family violence, and extreme socioeconomic hardship. Yet, shockingly, 55% of children and 45% of adults have no access to critical MHPSS services.





Impact on women and girls

For many women, cultural and authority-imposed restrictions on mobility and autonomy have severely impacted their sense of potential and self-worth. The additional burden of managing domestic responsibilities often stifles their ambitions and limits their opportunities.

Women-headed households face the overwhelming challenge of balancing both traditionally male and female roles, which takes a heavy toll on their physical and mental well-being. This is compounded by feelings of isolation, social stigma, and limited freedom in social spaces, further

diminishing their autonomy and sense of empowerment.

Limited access to education has been identified as a key driver of the mental health crisis among girls and adolescents, deepening feelings of hopelessness and insecurity. This lack of opportunity not only hinders their personal growth but, as the demand for psychosocial support continues to vastly outstrip available services, girls, in particular, face considerable psychological pressures in isolation.

HIGHLIGHT

Psychosocial support has the transformative power of breaking down barriers and fostering healing. UNHCR has a comprehensive multi-year Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) Strategic Plan to address the urgent need for enhanced mental health services for forcibly displaced communities in Afghanistan. This plan aims to build community resilience, improve the quality and effectiveness of interventions, and prioritize the promotion and protection of psychosocial well-being, while providing vital treatment for mental health issues.

Here are some of UNHCR's Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) projects for which we are seeking financial contributions from our generous donors.



Community mental health and psychosocial wellbeing activities

Mental health support service orientation and awareness sessions are being conducted across 29 provinces, beginning with community leaders upon their arrival in new locations, to challenge and reduce mental health stigma. UNHCR tackles the support needs through community-based solutions, empowering refugees to assist one another, foster mutual support, and become agents of change. By strengthening psychosocial case management and counseling skills within communities, we are building a sustainable response in a country where mental health services remain severely limited.

Mental health support through women and children's safe spaces

UNHCR, in collaboration with its partners, has integrated mental health and psychosocial support into women's and child protection activities. Mental help support is woven into arts-based and play activities within child-friendly spaces, offering children a creative outlet for healing. For women, it is incorporated into arts and crafts, and women's gathering sessions, all conducted in supportive group settings. Additionally, recognizing the importance of family well-being, UNHCR seeks to extend psychosocial support services to support families as a whole, fostering resilience and holistic healing across communities.

Focused, individual psychosocial support

One-on-one counseling services are provided by trained psychosocial counselors who use scalable, evidence-based brief interventions tailored to the context of Afghanistan. These counselors receive on-the-spot training to enhance their skills and effectiveness. Referrals are a critical part of the approach, particularly in areas where MHPSS is integrated with health services and provided in health facilities, ensuring a comprehensive, multilayered support system for individuals with severe mental health issues.


Bahara, 32, an Afghan returnee from Iran, is running a tailoring business with the support of a UNHCR livelihood grant, creating job opportunities for women. Herat province.



Focus Area 03:

Protection from violence against women and girls





Shogofa and her sister Latifa at the
Legal Counselling & Assistance
Centre, accompanied by their mother,
to obtain essential documents like a
birth certificate and National ID card
(Tazkira) in Herat Province.

03



Since the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, the 21.4 million women and girls in Afghanistan have endured a systematic erosion of their fundamental human rights, spanning social, economic, and political spheres.

The new authorities imposed severe edicts, initially barring women from public office, employment with NGOs and UN agencies, and limiting education beyond the sixth grade. By 2024, these restrictions expanded to further suppress female participation in the workforce, enforce strict dress codes, limit women's roles in humanitarian delivery sites, and impose salary reductions for female government employees.

In August 2024, the introduction of the Morality Laws codified and extended discriminatory policies, including mandatory dress codes and the requirement for women to have a male guardian (mahram).

Women-headed households and widows are commonly identified as one of the most vulnerable populations in Afghanistan.

UNHCR is actively engaging thousands of community leaders, both women and men, to become empowered partners in preventing and responding to prevalent violence against women and girls within

their communities. They are facilitating critical referrals to services, reaching thousands of individuals through information sharing.

We aim to equip communities with the knowledge and skills necessary to tackle the destructive effects of violence and harmful practices, while fostering resilience and creating a foundation for lasting change and collective well-being.

Beyond advocating for the respect of everyone's rights, ensuring the safety of women and girls and their access to support is a crucial step toward empowering them to rebuild their lives and secure a brighter future.

Sodaba, 4, at the Legal Counselling & Assistance Centre, accompanied by her mother, to obtain essential documents like a birth certificate and National ID card (Tazkira) in Herat Province.

Here are some of UNHCR's projects aimed at protecting women and girls from violence for which we are seeking urgent financial contributions.

Safe spaces for women and girls

UNHCR's women's community centres offer women and girls a rare chance to reconnect socially and express themselves freely without fear of judgment or harm. They not only provide a refuge—they offer essential support, including well-being activities, capacity-building, skills development, access to essential information on available services and community concerns, and non-stigmatizing psychosocial care and referrals in cases of violence—supporting women and girls to heal, regain strength, and rebuild their lives. While these initiatives have made a profound impact on individual women, they are all the more essential in the current context, where almost no avenues exist for women to seek legal redress for gender discrimination or violence.

Dignity kits

Dignity kits are an essential tool in ensuring that women maintain their health and well-being, even in the most challenging of circumstances. These kits provide essential items like sanitary pads and soap, ensuring women can manage hygiene needs, with comfort and without shame or fear of marginalization. They empower women by maintaining a sense of normalcy, reduce stress, and prevent health issues in unsanitary environments. By addressing women's specific needs, dignity kits promote gender equality and enable their participation in social and economic activities.

Child-friendly spaces

Child-friendly spaces provide a safe haven where children can embrace their childhood, engaging in activities like running, singing, and playing freely with their peers. These sanctuaries also offer essential services, including vaccinations and malnutrition screenings, while safeguarding children from exploitation and trafficking.



Setayesh, an Afghan returnee from Iran, obtained her National ID card (Tazkira) with UNHCR's assistance in Herat Province.

**Make a
transformative
investment to
help displaced
Afghan women
and girls live
in safety and
dignity**





Fatima Heidari, 40, a skilled woman working in a wool spinning centre founded by a UNHCR livelihood grant beneficiary. She is happy to work here and earn income to support her household expenses. Herat province.