



# Afghanistan

## Gender, Justice and Security Hub

The Gender, Justice and Security Hub (GJS Hub) brings together researchers, practitioners, and activists through a collection of projects to advance gender justice and inclusive peace in conflict-affected societies. We work in seven focus countries: Afghanistan, Colombia, Kurdistan-Iraq, Lebanon, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka and Uganda with projects in 17 additional countries across Africa, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East and South Asia.

Spanning from gendered migration, masculinities and sexualities to land rights and transformative justice, each project amplifies the voices of women and marginalised groups. The Hub's work aims to advance Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality; SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions; and the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda.

---

## Country Context

### Protracted and Ongoing Conflict

Afghanistan has endured many decades of violence, including Soviet occupation, civil war, international military intervention, and Taliban control. This protracted conflict and political instability has roots in foreign interventions and ideological struggle and is influenced by ethnic and religious tensions. The Soviet-Afghan War in the 1980s, followed by civil unrest and the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s, led to extensive and often extreme violence, including against civilians. More recently, the U.S. led invasion in 2001, which sought to dismantle al-Qaeda and remove the Taliban from power, resulted in a long-term military occupation, more political instability, and more violence. Within the broader struggle for peace, the struggle for gender equality and women's rights remains critical, but in this highly patriarchal and unstable context it remains an immense challenge.

### Fraught Progress Toward Peace

Peace in Afghanistan has been intermittently negotiated through international diplomacy and various agreements, including the Doha Agreement of 2020, a power-sharing arrangement signed by the U.S. government and the Taliban, which included provision for the full withdrawal of all foreign troops. In the decades before this, the Afghan government,

with international support, made attempts at reform, including initiatives to address human rights, improving governance, and some measures to address entrenched patriarchal gender norms and the marginalisation of women. However, corruption, lack of infrastructure, and ongoing violence hindered these efforts.

### Taliban Control

On August 15, 2021, the Taliban captured the capital city, Kabul, marking a crucial turning point in the Afghan conflict. It came as the U.S. was in the final stages of military withdrawal, ending a 20-year presence in the country. While the Taliban victory ended the war, violence has persisted, and civilian casualties have continued. The consequences of conflict remain for the Afghan population, with many displaced and in need of humanitarian assistance. This event has profound implications for Afghanistan's future, and for gender, justice and security in the region.

### Rolling back Limited Progress on Gender

Under the Taliban regime, there have been significant rollbacks of women's rights and freedoms. The slow but important progress that had been made in the last two decades, including gains in education, employment, and political participation for women and girls, faces severe

threats. Gender-based violence and restrictions on women's movement and autonomy are becoming more widespread, while retrenchment of patriarchal and conservative gender norms put women and the LGBTQ+ community at severe risk of discrimination, marginalisation, and violence.

## The GJS Hub in Afghanistan

The Hub's work in the region has used a range of research methods, including qualitative interviews and policy analysis, to explore the intersection of gender, justice, and security. Projects also used several innovative participatory methods, such as storytelling, photography, and other forms of visual art. These approaches sought to create space for women and communities, especially those who are often marginalised, to articulate their experiences of conflict in ways that traditional research methods may not have encouraged.

### The Challenge

**Large-Scale Displacement and Loss of Homes.** At the outset of the Hub's work in Afghanistan mass displacement had resulted in loss of homes and widespread community insecurity. This displacement presented significant challenges to individual and community well-being and the continuity of daily life.

**Cultural Identity Preservation Amidst Displacement.** Displaced communities face the challenge of preserving their cultural identity, including language, narratives, and traditional crafts, which are at risk of being lost in the process of displacement and resettlement.

**Economic Instability and Lack of Sustainable Livelihoods.** Displaced populations, particularly women, face economic instability with limited access to income-generating activities. Providing sustainable livelihood opportunities is essential to address poverty and economic dependency.

#### Gender-Specific Challenges in Conflict Zones.

Women in conflict and displacement settings in Afghanistan encounter unique challenges related to safety, reduced decision-making power, and restricted access to resources, all of which are exacerbated by the patriarchal cultural and social norms in the country.

#### Peacebuilding and Reconstruction Capacity.

In Afghanistan, there is a crucial need for peacebuilding and reconstruction. The Hub projects aimed to explore how culture-specific knowledge, particularly women's skills in crafts, could contribute to these efforts.

#### Health and Hygiene Accessibility.

Access to basic health and hygiene facilities is a major challenge, more so for women and girls who have specific health needs and face difficulties due to displacement.

**Integration and Social Inclusion.** The integration of displaced people into new communities or regions while maintaining also their cultural identity poses a complex challenge, especially in terms of social inclusion and acceptance.

### Key findings

- **Cultural Identity and Craft: Women's craft, especially embroidery, plays a crucial role in preserving cultural identity.** Embroideries, like charmadozi and khammakdozi, are an important source of income but also carry immense cultural significance, representing a form of tacit knowledge passed down through generations, and helping women maintain a sense of community and identity amid conflict and displacement.
- **Adaptation During COVID-19:** The pandemic forced changes in research methods and support strategies for Afghan craft practices. It also highlighted the resilience and adaptability of these cultural practices, even under challenging conditions like reduced funding and increased health risks. The project's adaptation to these circumstances shows the enduring relevance of craft in crisis situations.
- **Economic Challenges and Opportunities:** With the economic fragility and shrinking economy in Afghanistan, the project's focus on livelihoods became more critical. Women increasingly joined the craft project, seeking income generation through craft sales. This economic participation provided not only financial support but also a sense of empowerment and community involvement.
- **The Gendered Impact of Displacement:** There are differences in asset ownership, decision-making authority, and access to services for women and men. In particular, women faced greater challenges indicating a need for gender-specific support and policies in displacement scenarios.
- **Mental Health and Well-being:** Both men and women reported high levels of anxiety and concern for the future, reflecting the widespread mental health challenges among displaced populations. This finding underscores the need for mental health support tailored to the unique stresses of displacement, uncertainty, and ongoing insecurity.

- **Health and Hygiene Access:** Access to basic health and hygiene facilities, especially for women, remains severely limited. The lack of sanitary products and clean water access poses significant health risks, and there is a critical need for improved health and hygiene infrastructure throughout Afghanistan.
- **Educational Gaps and Early Marriage:** Girls in Afghanistan have less access to education than boys. Early marriage remains a common reason for non-attendance of school, limiting future opportunities for women and perpetuating cycles of gendered poverty and dependency. This issue calls for targeted interventions to keep girls in school and address cultural practices, including early marriage.
- **Challenges for Afghan Migrant Women in Pakistan:** Afghan migrant women in Pakistan face numerous barriers, including legal uncertainties, social isolation, and limited integration opportunities. Despite living in the country for extended periods, they often struggle with precarious legal status, impacting their access to education, healthcare, and employment.
- **Economic Challenges for Returnees:** Returnees to Afghanistan encounter various difficulties, such as finding employment and dealing with bureaucracy. Women face greater economic challenges in reintegration, often due to gender norms and limited job opportunities aligned with their skills and education.
- **Discrimination and Safety Concerns for Returnees:** Returnees report discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, language, and political views. Women are particularly vulnerable to safety concerns, facing harassment and feeling unsafe, especially in public spaces or when traveling alone.

## Recommendations

### Policy Makers

- **Economic Empowerment:** Develop and support programs for the economic empowerment of displaced women, particularly in the craft sector.
- **Educational Programmes:** Implement policies and programs to prevent early marriage and promote girls' education.
- **Mental Health Services:** Establish mental health services that are accessible to displaced populations, with a focus on addressing the unique stressors for these communities and to women and girls in them.
- **Legal Protection for Migrants:** Strengthen legal protections for Afghan migrants, especially for women, and facilitate their integration and access to public services.

### International NGOs and Relief Agencies:

- **Women's Health:** Prioritise women's health initiatives, including antenatal and reproductive health services.

- **Basic Needs and Sanitation:** Advocate for and provide access to clean water, sanitation facilities, and food security to mitigate health crises. International Community and Host Countries:

### International Community and Host Countries:

- **Support for Afghan Migrants and Returnees:** Assist Afghan returnees and migrants in terms of job placement, social integration, and addressing poverty.
- **Reducing Discrimination in Education:** Review and amend community education policy and practices to combat discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, and language.
- **Skill Utilisation:** Identify and utilise the skills and qualifications of Afghan experts, particularly those who have been displaced, to contribute positively to their host communities and homeland.

### UN Agencies and Humanitarian Actors:

- **Peace and Reconciliation Advocacy:** Advocate for peace processes in Afghanistan, especially focusing on women's inclusion, while encouraging engagement with Afghan people who have existing relevant skills and experience.
- **Awareness of Rights and Access to Justice:** Raise awareness and improve understanding of women's rights and refugee rights and provide support in seeking access to them.

This country brief draws on findings and recommendations from the following projects: [Culture and Conflict](#); [Gender and Forced Displacement](#); [Return, Reintegration and Political restructuring](#); and [Gendered Dynamics of International Labour Migration](#).