



The Impact of the Food Crisis on Women and Girls in Afghanistan

November 2022



Afghanistan is in the grip of one of the largest and most severe humanitarian emergencies in the world, with over half of the population requiring humanitarian assistance to survive. Approximately [18.9 million people](#) across the country are at crisis or worse levels of acute food insecurity, with projections anticipating a deterioration in food access as a result of worsening economic conditions, climate change, and global impacts of the conflict in Ukraine.

Enduring gender inequality, compounded with recent restrictions on right to education and to work, have further impacted women and girls in their ability to access sufficient and nutritious food.

CARE conducted a study on how the food crisis in Afghanistan affects women and girls differently to better understand the gendered economic, cultural, and practical barriers to food security. This research highlights key findings on household food security, negative coping strategies women and families adopt, and shortcomings of humanitarian actors in gender-responsive aid delivery. The study is based on a comprehensive desk review of existing data since August 2021, a household survey comprising of 345 women respondents, completed in both urban and rural communities, a series of qualitative interviews with 18 women, 9 focus group discussions (FGDs) with men, and key informant interviews (KIIs) with food security specialists and humanitarian actors. The data was collected in urban and rural districts in 9 provinces in the north, west, south, and center of the country.



Key Findings

1. Women have a limited access to food

Household income has sharply decreased

The potential for women to earn an income in Afghanistan has deteriorated considerably since August 2021. . **87.2% of survey respondents reported that since August 2021, they had experienced a considerable decrease in their household income.**

Household income has significantly decreased across the country, with all surveyed households reporting a decrease in the province of Khost, and 90% of households reporting a decrease in the provinces of Balkh, Ghazni, Herat, and Parwan. Only 11% of families suggested they had an increase in income. The most common reasons mentioned by respondents for the decrease in income were: inability to access cash (mentioned by 75% of respondents), and loss of employment (60%).

Female heads of household suggested that their access to income has drastically reduced since August 2021 due to the economic crisis and reduction of employment and livelihoods opportunities, worsened for women by mobility restrictions. Yet even before then, many women already found it difficult to meet their household's basic needs even with employment (some respondents reported that they used to work as teachers, tailors, and cleaners).

"My husband died five years ago, and now I am the head of my family. I used to sew so I could provide for my family... recently I had to sell my sewing machine because we needed food and the demand for tailoring is almost non-existent. I don't know what we will do now." (Woman head of household, Herat)

Similar situations were noted among male-headed households, with men losing their positions or having reduced salaries.

“We had money and we didn’t have an economic crisis in our family. The average money we spent was 10,000 AFN (about USD 110). Now though, we can hardly meet any of our basic needs.” (Woman, Balkh)

“Before the political change, we could support our children, our pregnant women and our elders. We were able to support our family and pay our expenses on our own. I was a member of the provincial parliament, my sons were police officers, and my husband wasn’t working because he had a disability...After the political change, our entire family income has become zero.” (Woman, Khost)

“My brother and I dropped out of school so we could earn an income. I was in 7th grade and my brother was in 3rd grade. My brother works at night now and I work during the day. There was no one else to support us because of my father’s sickness.” (Woman, 18, Khost)

Women are consistently excluded from employment opportunities as a result of gendered views of men’s and women’s societal roles. The current economic crisis has caused unemployment to skyrocket across the country, with the few jobs available in labour, agricultural, and trading sectors frequently prioritized for men. A combination of societal attitudes towards women’s role outside of the house and limited job opportunities in-country leave women with fewer employment options.

“In general, women do housework and chores and cannot contribute to the economic income of their families. Also there are no economic opportunities for women. Some of the most appropriate work for women to contribute for their household incomes are; tailoring, livestock keeping, making handicrafts, and making dairy products. Some heavy works are not appropriate for women like agriculture, selling items in the market, and other physical works.” (man, FGD, Balkh)

“If women contribute with men in livelihood of family, that would be a good thing, but it should be in a way that does not hurt the dignity given to women.” (Man, FGD, Herat)

As a cleaner in Kabul highlighted:

“Me, my sister and my two female cousins used to have jobs as cleaners for rich families. Because we cannot read and write, this was one of the few things that we could do to earn money for our families. But since August 2021, most of these families have left the country or they don’t have money anymore. We all lost our jobs. There are not families here anymore that want our services. People can’t afford it or they are just not here.” (Woman, male headed household, Kabul)

Another woman from Balkh province responded that she had previously taken on in-house tailoring as a more socially appropriate employment opportunity for her in her village. However, the economic crisis impacting families country-wide has reduced the ability for households to spend on non-essential services, leading her business to close. She highlighted that in her community, there were no alternatives for women to earn an income, because there were no other areas which were suitable for them to work.



Women’s access to food is impacted by mobility restrictions

Under the current policies of de-facto authorities, women are required to travel with a *mahram* (male guardian) when travelling more than 70 kilometres away from their homes. This also applies while travelling abroad, to another province or district, or travelling outside of their local community. However, the application of this policy varies from place to place. In some districts, women reported that they had been told by the local authorities not to travel outside of their homes, even to local markets, without a *mahram*. The discrepancy in the application of this law at the local level further inhibits women’s movement and creates additional stress on women when deciding whether to leave their homes for essential goods, work, travel, or other purposes.

The enforcement of *mahram* policies has dissuaded families from allowing women to travel outside of the home. As a result, women’s access to food has been significantly restricted. Some participants to semi-structured interviews CARE conducted noted that they used to be comfortable going to markets to buy food, but now have anxiety and fear about such movements. As a result, families, and women are reducing their movement outside of the house, and are relying more on other male family members to manage food-related tasks.

“I used to go to the market after work every day. I went to buy the vegetables and I knew the best places to buy flour and rice. But now, I’m just scared to go outside. I don’t know if someone is going to say something to me. I don’t want to get in trouble. So, I send my son or my husband now.” (Woman, male-headed household, Kabul)

Distribution of food inside the household is unequal

81% of women reported that they had had to skip a meal in the last two weeks.
In 95% of households, women said that they and/or other household members had reduced food consumption overall.

Women reported eating less food than other household members. 81% of the surveyed women suggested that they had had to skip at least one meal in the two weeks before being interviewed. When compared to other research findings, there was a common pattern that when there was insufficient food in the household, women preferred feeding their children over themselves.

“Of course, my children are my priority. My husband and I make sure that they are fed first. When we know they have had enough to eat, then we will eat what is left.” (Woman, male headed household, Kabul)

This behavior was connected to both the individual preferences of women to skip meals in order to provide for their children first, as well as the social pressure for women to put their children’s needs over their own. In the context of Afghanistan, women are considered the ‘nutritional gatekeepers,’ deciding what and how much children eat. Socially defined expectations for motherhood in Afghanistan see mothers as the most common person to prepare food for children. A child’s health, therefore, is perceived to be a direct reflection of the care a mother takes with her children. If a child is sick or considered malnourished, this is commonly associated with how a mother raises and cares for her child, more so than the child’s father. This then compels women in families, rather than men, to skip meals more often.

Nevertheless, interviewees also noted that men prioritized the food needs of their children and wives over their own. **29% of women interviewed indicated that adults in the household reduced their consumption of food to prioritize their children.** Women largely cited that their husbands were committed to ensuring their wives’ food needs as well, and that they attempted to put first their wives’ eating over their own.

“My husband will not eat anything until our children have eaten and he has seen me eat. He says that it is his job to make sure we have food and if he can’t get it then he will be the last one to eat.” (Woman, male headed household, Kabul)

“In families, priority is given to children to prevent from malnutrition and due to mother’s kindness children are first to fulfil their food requirement. Also, good quality and quality food is given to pregnant women because they needs to eat quality and good amount of food to deliver a healthy baby. (Man FGD, Balkh)

Some women interviewed also felt it was their responsibility to ensure their husband was eating sufficiently and prioritized his eating over their own. This appears to reflect individual preference and care for their partner. It may also be associated with gender roles prescribed to women, such that they are responsible for taking care of the food and health needs of the family.

“I know my husband wants me to eat before him and make sure I have enough food. But I want him to eat. Sometimes I tell him that I have eaten when I haven’t so that he will eat. I will eat if there is anything left after that.” (Woman, male headed household, Kabul)

This unspoken hierarchy of eating does not appear to be an action which is dictated by men, but rather a result of the socio-cultural norms which identify women are the caregivers in a household. This is likely to explain why, when women live in joint families, the newest female in the household

(generally a daughter-in-law) is likely to be more food insecure, as she has the role of ensuring all other senior members of the household are cared for first.

Similarly, FGD respondents were split in terms of potential difference between food distribution towards boys versus girls. Some respondents reported no difference, while some indicated that boys received more food as they are more physically active or working outside the home, and some indicating girls received more food because staying at home, they have less opportunity to receive food outside the home, contrary to the boys.

“Boys are prioritised and eat better than girls do because usually mothers love their sons more than their daughters. Also, the boys go outside and do some work as well so need to eat more.” (Man, FGD, Kabul)

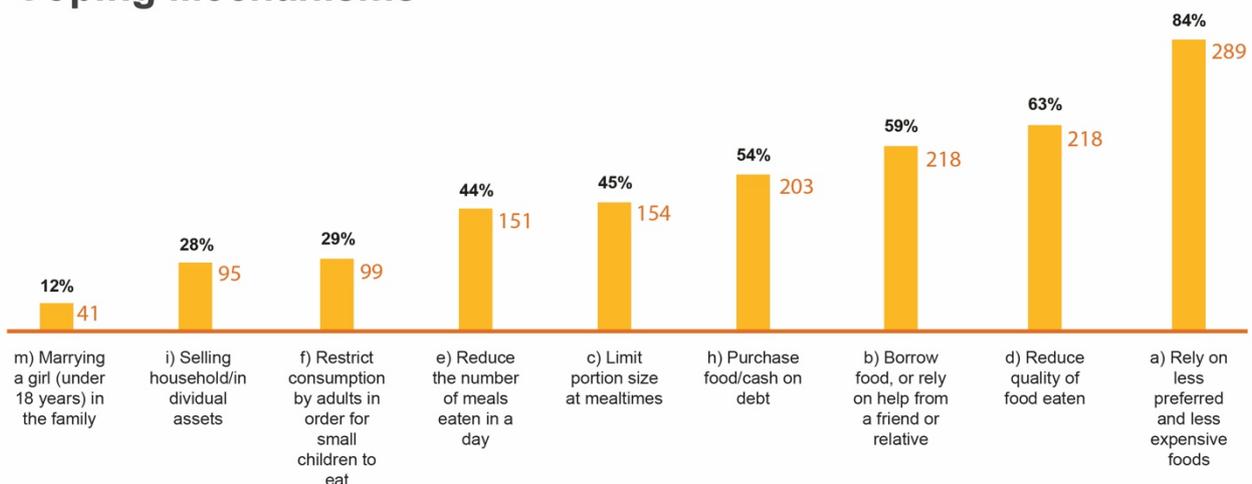
It is important to highlight that there is often a relationship between food insecurity, hunger, and gender-based violence. Mistreatment of women in the household and denial of access to food, based on a person’s gender, is generally considered as gender-based violence. However, an in-depth analysis of these linkages is not considered in this study. The unequal distribution of food is largely an implicit result of socio-cultural pressures of women to care for their families before themselves, rather than an explicit practice within society.



2. Increase in Negative Coping Mechanisms

Households increasingly adopted strategies to manage food insecurity that left families more economically vulnerable and with less access to sufficient, nutritious foods. High-risk coping mechanisms particularly impacted women and girls, with 12% reporting early and forced marriage of girls. Other frequently discussed strategies include: taking out loans beyond what families can pay back, selling valuables or mahr (gold and jewelry received by the bride when marrying), or opting for dangerous cooking methods, such as burning plastic instead of using gas.

Coping Mechanisms



Households are relying on less and lower-quality food

Access to quality food was a particular challenge for many households across the country. This is largely associated with the higher cost of food and the decrease in households' income. Food is mostly available across the country, except for some remote districts.¹ Food prices, however, have increased to the point in which many families cannot afford the food necessary to sustain a sufficient diet. According to the Joint Market Monitoring Initiative (JMMI), the cost of flour has almost tripled since the regime change, as has the cost of oil and gas – all of which are pertinent to food security in a household. Traders interviewed as part of the JMMI in April suggested that prices had almost doubled for most items since January 2022, which they associated with increased costs in supplies and increased transportation costs.²

“Since the collapse of the previous regime and inflation, the prices of everything seem almost double. A bag of flour for 50kg was 1,200-1,300 AFN but now it costs 2,500-3,500 AFN. How can we possibly meet our food needs with just 6,000 AFN?” (Woman, male headed household, Ghazni)

“Before, one 10-liter oil can price was 700 AFN and now its price is 1,800 AFN. Yesterday I went to the city I purchased 50 Kg flour the price was 2,500 AFN (...) since the new regime has come, everything has become twice as expensive as before, there is no jobs. If you ask the trader he says that taxes are now very high because we purchase with high prices. Its impact is only on vulnerable and poor people.” (Man, FGD, Kandahar)

When asked how they were coping with the food crisis:

- 84% of women survey respondents indicated relying on less preferred or less expensive food,
- 63% of respondents indicated they had to reduce the quality of food consumed,
- 44% of respondents highlighted limiting the portion size at mealtimes,
- 44% of respondents reported reducing the number of meals in a day,
- 28% of respondents indicated reducing the food consumption of adults to prioritise children.

“My sister, she is very poor. When she has money to buy rice or flour, she looks for the worse type of rice and flour she can buy because it is the cheapest and it is all that she can afford.” (Woman, male headed household, Kabul)

The reliance on low-quality food does not appear to be isolated or more common among women. Males were just as likely to rely on poorer quality food, with a focus on simply feeding their household rather than ensuring nutritious food is available.

“Since the regime changed, about 85-90% of people have lost their jobs and now do not have any income. Before people could eat meat, vegetables and fruits, but now they are not able to buy such things (...) since the regime has changed, we and our family members have not seen the colour of meat”. (Man, FGD, Khost)

“Before August 2021 we would cook 3-4 food items per meal (rice, chicken, meat etc). Now we only cook one item. The food is just too expensive now. Some nights we would eat nothing and go to sleep hungry.” (Woman, male headed household, Parwan)

Moreover, women highlighted that under the current economic conditions, meat and fruit were luxury items, and not possible for them to buy. The purchase of vegetables depended on which vegetables were cheaper on the day of shopping, and many found themselves, or a male from their household, negotiating with store owners to purchase older vegetables at cheaper prices. It did not appear to be uncommon, however, for some families to rely exclusively on rice, flour and oil.

¹ Reach, 2022, ‘Joint Market Monitoring Initiative: April 2022,’ Kabul, Afghanistan

² Ibid.

Men overwhelmingly held decision-making power around household money spending, including purchasing food. This reflects traditional gender roles in Afghanistan where men typically hold the role of providing for and feeding the household.

“The general practice is that the household heads decide how to spend money. And the fathers or elder brothers are generally the household heads, as they are the experienced ones in the families. (...) The decisions around food items, its type, quality and quantity, belong to women, especially older women such as mothers and mother-in-laws. But it is also worth mentioning that the older women consult with other family members such as her husband, daughters and daughter-in-law, as one woman cannot remember all needed things.” (Man FGD, Khost)

“Father and if they have elder son then, it is the responsibility of them to ensure the availability of sufficient food at home. Even if there is an elder son, he gives the money to the father as the father is the elder member in the family and he decides to fulfil the family needs. (...) Because they are the ones earning money and they are the elders of the family”. (Man FGD, Kabul)

Women were primarily responsible for the cooking and feeding, therefore having say on, but not frequently having decision-making power on household food needs. Women are mentioned as decision-makers for money spending when it is a woman-headed household.

“Request from mother and approval from father. Because mothers are at home and they know what food items needed for their family members but mostly father decides the quantity and quality of food it depends on the income of the head of households”. (Man FGD, Kabul)

Selling Assets and Mahr

One of the most noted coping mechanisms included selling assets. This could include selling any household goods, furniture, cooking utensils, clothing and even jewelry.

“I had to sell everything that wasn’t absolutely necessary in my house. I sold our TV, the big pots in my house, any of the dinner sets I got when we were married, some of my nice dresses and my jewelry. My husband had nothing of his to sell, so we had no choice.” (Female, Kabul)

28% of women interviewed said that they were forced to sell their valuables, for some including their ‘mahr’ (gold and jewelry received by the bride when marrying), which is often the only valued asset they own.

Women reported that they were often forced to sell their jewelry, which is often the only valued asset to which women are entitled. Under Islamic marriage, a groom is required to pay *mahr* to his fiancée, at a value set by the bride’s family. This is often given to brides in the form of gold, but can also be given in home goods, furniture, or land. Mahr is the sole property of the bride, and establishes a woman’s financial independence from her family and her husband, who has no legal claim to his wife’s mahr. The loss of this asset can thus put women in an even more precarious position as they lose to this independent financial assets, in turn becoming even more dependent on their husbands or in-laws.

Both men and women raised concerns about losing productive assets, such as land, houses, livestock, and identified the sale of these as a last resort solution. While this provides temporary relief in the form of cash, sale of productive assets can lead to the loss of long-term livelihoods or income-generating activities, ultimately negatively economically impacting the household.

Early Marriage

Another extreme coping mechanism has been the early marriage of girls. **Out of the 345 women interviewed, 41 indicated that severe levels of food insecurity had forced them to marry one of the girls of the family under the age of 18 in the past.**

55% of the survey respondents indicated that child marriage was one of the main safety and security concerns facing girls in their community.

Harmful Cooking Practices

Overall increases in the price of food and fuel, as well as more limitations on livelihoods opportunities, have resulted in families giving less priority to safer cooking practices. In addition to selling household goods, women have reported using harmful cooking practice that could detrimentally impact the health and wellbeing of household members. For example, a woman reported that she was now burning plastic or paper instead of gas to cook bread and rice.

Organ Trafficking

In the most extreme circumstances, households are resorting to selling their organs. One woman interviewed described how she and her husband both offered their kidneys to a woman in the final stage of kidney failure, in return for money.



3. Humanitarian responses are too often gender-unaware

Women reported issues related to aid delivery location, how aid is delivered, and who is delivering humanitarian assistance. It was often discussed how consultation and feedback mechanisms were inappropriate and did not allow for meaningful, inclusive engagements of women and girls. The lack of female humanitarian staff to ensure a gender appropriate delivery of aid was also mentioned as a barrier to access.

Interviews conducted for this research revealed that the lack of attention to gender equality in the humanitarian response was attributed to: 1) limited number of gender focal points and experts to ensure gender is incorporated at all stages of sectoral interventions, 2) limited capacity among organizations to identify and integrate gender in their preparedness and response efforts, 3) limited contextualized understanding of gender in Afghanistan, and how to navigate gender equality as such, 4) limited availability of female staff who can provide support for design and implementation.

Only 34% of women respondents suggested that they had received some form of support in the last year. Of those women who received support, **less than 15% had been consulted** on the type of assistance they needed prior to receiving it.

A major reason why women and girls struggle to receive and benefit directly from humanitarian aid is largely because they are not directly consulted and engaged in humanitarian response. In November 2021, a CARE Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment (MSNA) found that 64% of Afghan women surveyed were not involved in community-level decision making. The same study found that while 70% of men reported that they had been consulted about their needs, nearly 70% of women had **not** been consulted.

As result, responses often fail to adequately meet the needs of women and girls. **Only 19% of the women surveyed reported that the humanitarian assistance they received had been adapted to meet their specific needs.**

In addition, the women interviewed for this study also indicated that the modalities of delivery have sometimes been inadequate. Examples shared included: the delivery of aid in mosques, which are often not accessible to women; the distribution of aid through male humanitarian workers, which can be culturally inappropriate; and distance of aid distribution points which can be costly or require and require women to travel outside of their community accompanied by mahram.

Of the women who received support and indicated support was not adapted, **97% indicated they were not able to report the issues to humanitarian actors.** Further anecdotal evidence shared by respondents emphasized those existing mechanisms are not always appropriate or relevant.

Restrictions on female aid workers

The combination of new restrictions on women's right to work, practical difficulties regarding mahram requirements - particularly for women without male family members; safety and security concerns while traveling to and from work; lack of family support; and conservative male staff attitudes within humanitarian organisations has resulted in many female humanitarian staff being obliged or preferring to work from home. This, in turn, has led to increasing difficulties to hire and retain female aid workers, which ultimately undermines the humanitarian community's ability to reach women and girls.

Conclusion

Women and girls across Afghanistan will continue to face greater vulnerability and marginalization regarding their food security status, as a result of numerous inter-connected barriers which make them likely to experience severe food insecurity.

The current conditions of the country will continue to imperil millions of people's lives and livelihoods, putting families at urgent levels of food insecurity. The effects of the economic crisis, largely attributed to ongoing sanctions of Afghanistan and the impact of the conflict in Ukraine on global food prices, will continue to put heavy strain on households' access to food. Women and girls continue to be the most marginalized across the country, facing severe levels of food insecurity and significant barriers to economic opportunities. **This puts women and girls at greater risks when it comes to adopting negative coping mechanisms such as selling independent financial assets, forced child marriage, organ trafficking, and unhealthy cooking practices. Current humanitarian response efforts, though commendable for their commitment to supporting women and girls, are too often gender-unaware in their design and delivery.** Consulting and involving women and girls in the planning and implementation of food security interventions is critical to ensure a safe, adequate and principled response.

Recommendations

To donors and member states

- Providing and facilitating humanitarian aid is not sufficient unless it is paired with urgent action to address the economic drivers of the crisis. Donors and member states must act immediately to prevent further socio-economic collapse and **a further worsening of the food security situation**, by resuming development aid in support of basic services- via the Afghan Reconstruction Trust Fund and other means; and by exploring options such as engaging with the Central Bank to increase liquidity and macroeconomics stability.

To humanitarian actors

- **Ensure that, at a minimum, all food security and humanitarian interventions are gender-responsive and, where possible, gender transformative.** The provision of assistance should always be conducted through an age, gender and diversity lens, be informed by gender analysis and by protection and GBV risks assessments.
- **Regularly consult women and girls and other at-risk groups** on which food aid modalities (e.g., cash, in-kind, hybrid) and implementation strategy (e.g. selection of distribution points, composition of basket, etc.) they would find most appropriate and safest for a given context, solicit feedback and adjust programs accordingly. Monitor women and girls' access to food aid on a regular basis and roll out women-friendly feedback mechanisms.
- **Ensure Gender Equality and the Empowerment and Protection of Women and Girls is central to the response**, including through;
 - Supporting the hiring and retention of women aid workers through the adoption of flexible HR policies designed with female staff (such as allowing female staff to have mahrams and covering related costs, adjusting office set-up, etc.)
 - Regularly consulting women and girls on which food aid modalities they find most appropriate, and rolling out women-friendly feedback and reporting mechanisms. For in kind interventions, opting for women-friendly sites, days and times to maximize women's access, while considering any risk factors.

To humanitarian donors

- **Adequately resource gender-responsive food and nutrition security interventions** and when possible and safe to do so, gender transformative approaches as suggested above. Along with funding for food and nutrition interventions, **address the “intersecting” impacts of the food crisis**, such as increased protection risks, by adequately funding protection and GBV programming.
- **Hold your partners/grantees accountable to principled humanitarian action**, especially with regards to the effective and meaningful participation of crises affected women and girls as well as the participation of female staff in all steps of the interventions, from design to close out and evaluations.
- **Ensure all funded proposals for food security interventions are informed by a gender analysis**, a protection and GBV risk assessment, and the use of Sex, Age and Disability-disaggregated data and an assessment against the IASC Gender and Age marker.



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