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PROTECTION LANDSCAPE FOR RETURNEE WOMEN AND GIRLS

Afghanistan

This research brief by UNHCR Afghanistan examines the protection landscapes for female returnees arriving to Afghanistan from Iran and Pakistan, focusing on their experiences, needs, and specific challenges when accessing protection mechanisms, services or support.

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This report is published by UNHCR, in collaboration with the SSAR Support Platform under the chairmanship of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

COVER PHOTOGRAPH:
Shaqayeq, 12, sits quietly beside her family's belongings after returning to Afghanistan from Iran. Exhausted from the long journey, her face reflects fatigue and the weight of sudden change. The few items around her are all that remain from the life they left behind.

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Executive Summary

Women and girls living in Afghanistan today face systemic exclusion from education, employment, and public life. Flagrant violations of their most basic human rights and fundamental freedoms are occurring daily, with Afghanistan's de facto authorities (DfA) imposing severe restrictions on their freedom of movement, assembly and speech, and rights to education and healthcare, and more. A 2025 report by Richard Bennett, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, concluded that the restrictions imposed on women and girls in Afghanistan amount to gender apartheid which should be recognized as crimes under international law[1]. The situation is further complicated for Afghan women and girls facing intersectional discrimination and multiple vulnerabilities such as those with disabilities or those having experienced displacement. For Afghan women who were refugees in other countries such as Pakistan and Iran and are now returning or being forced to return to Afghanistan, their gender and returnee status are creating compounding and mutually reinforcing protection challenges. It is important for actors engaged in Afghanistan to understand these complex, inter-related challenges and vulnerabilities to plan interventions accordingly.

This research brief consolidates data on the protection of Afghan refugee returnees, with a focus on women and girls. It highlights key variations in their experiences in the context of returns from Iran and Pakistan. It examines how political shifts, policy changes, and community norms shape Afghanistan's protection landscape, exacerbating and in turn being exacerbated by the ongoing socioeconomic and humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, which has deepened since August 2021. Finally, it provides guidance for operational planning and prioritization for actors seeking to support returnee women and girls based on the most urgent needs and gaps, as well as a solid rationale for investing in community-based protection programs as a possible solution in the Afghan context. This is particularly crucial at a time where vital protection interventions are at risk in the face of funding shortages in foreign assistance and humanitarian aid. As the international aid community is forced to prioritise with less funding, intervention design should be driven by the kind of protection support that communities say they need, and increasingly rely on structures, capacities and learnings derived from the communities to be supported.

1 https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc5925-access-justice-and-protection-women-and-girls-and-impact

Key findings

Female returnees report concrete safety risks upon return. Female returnees, some of whom were born outside of Afghanistan, or have lived abroad for years or decades, face critical safety gaps upon return. UNHCR's 2024 Post-Return Monitoring Report found that at least 60 per cent of female respondents returning from Pakistan were concerned for their safety and that of their daughters, with at least 49 per cent of these concerns relating to restrictions on freedom of movement.

Most returnee women and girls lack access to vital civil documentation, obstructing their integration and access to services. Afghanistan's national identity card (Tazkira) is a fundamental pillar of inclusion and a prerequisite for successful, sustainable reintegration among Afghan returnees. Yet, 2 in 3 returnee households report that their household members lack civil documentation, with the problem most frequently affecting women and girls.

Since 2021, access to services for all women has significantly deteriorated due to restrictions on girls' education, bans on women's employment, and cuts in humanitarian assistance funding, with access challenges often amplified among female returnees. Female-headed households can be more difficult to locate in areas of return due to women's social isolation, increasing the risk of exclusion from assistance and services. Disparities are particularly pronounced in services like WASH, healthcare as well as information, counselling and legal support (ICLA). Returnee women notably report greater difficulty in accessing water compared to non-returnee Afghan women (21 per cent vs. 14 per cent), healthcare (22 per cent vs. 18 per cent), and legal services (28 per cent vs. 25 per cent).

Female returnees are excluded from social life, and present with more mental health issues and negative coping strategies compared to women who have not undergone displacement or return. Returnee women engage with other female community members – i.e. beyond immediate family – less than once per month (23 per cent), highlighting the severe implications stemming from the restrictions on freedom of movement imposed on women by the DfA in Afghanistan which are also often reinforced through informal social structures. Female refugee returnees report low rates of daily engagement (19 per cent). Most female-headed returnee households report reliance on negative strategies to cope with food insecurity, at rates higher than their peers in male-headed households.

Female-led returnee households are more likely to take on excessive workloads, yet most are food insecure. Members of female-headed returnee households were much more likely to report working long hours that impacted their wellbeing: 61 per cent compared to 31 per cent in male-headed households. This gender gap persisted regardless of return location or time of return. In addition to women-led returnee households being more burdened by excessive work, they also experience food insecurity more frequently, suggesting a more precarious situation than male-headed households.

Prioritization and complementarity in the protection response

This brief presents successful past interventions as well as suggestions for operational and policy improvements in support of at-risk returnee populations, in particular women and girls. In the extremely complex Afghan context, and at a time of shrinking resources and competing priorities, this brief's recommendations focus on working with communities, especially women and girls, building their capacities as first responders, and putting their needs and feedback at the forefront and as a backbone of all interventions. As such, the recommendations are framed to identify areas of complementarity between the aid community and displacement-affected communities.

This brief identifies four priority areas of action to respond to female returnees' protection needs:

- **Ensure more inclusive community-based monitoring, feedback and complaint mechanisms to identify and mitigate the effects of discrimination upon return.** In the absence of strong social networks and given the severe restrictions on their participation in public life, returnee women and girls are facing heightened challenges in accessing information and services. Strengthening inclusive monitoring and complaints and feedback mechanisms (CFM) in return areas would be a key recourse to identify address access constraints for women and girls across different sectors and monitor and adapt programming. UNHCR has observed positive results when investing in CFM, and learnings could be leveraged to scale up these interventions. The voices of women and people with disabilities in these mechanisms can be reinforced further.

  Access constraints for different population groups are currently monitored through regular collection and analysis of data through UNHCR's community-based protection monitoring (CBPM). Alongside this data collection, communities in areas of high return can lead on CBPM frameworks, providing more nuanced information directly from communities as well as increased opportunities for women and girls' engagement.

  Community outreach interventions supported by local community volunteers – including female returnees who are trained to collect data and provide feedback not only on interventions but also on community needs – can foster further transparency and communications between all actors: members of communities, service providers and humanitarian and BHN actors. Such initiatives help to leverage local knowledge, especially on access constraints for women and girls and encourage local solutions to increase their participation in services and community life.

- **Scale up community engagement and referral mechanisms to better inform communities on services available for returnee women and thus facilitate their access to support.** Referral mechanisms must be reinforced to ensure that returnee communities – especially women and girls – have access to information regarding available services. There is a clear need to map services for returnees across different sectors and to identify key entry points for information-sharing and engagement among different age and gender groups in return areas.

  Male and female community outreach volunteers representing different age groups and communities may play a crucial role to this end, alongside local faith leaders who can also provide support in sharing information and thus enabling women to know where to access help. A key opportunity exists in further engaging communities to build understanding on the

situation of returnees and the particular challenges that they face – thereby enabling more intra-community support for returnee women and girls. For example, community leaders can be given training, including basic guidelines and references to amplify messages that sensitize local communities and authorities to the needs of female returnees.

- **Invest in community solidarity initiatives, livelihoods and financial inclusion to mitigate discrimination affecting returnee women and girls and encourage their participation in decision making at the community and family-level.** In areas of high return, women's inclusion in decision-making at the family and community-level remains minimal. Yet, women want to find a way to voice their problems, while being protected from possible negative repercussions, and for community leaders and members to act on the issues presented to them. As this research highlights, female returnees benefit less from community solidarity and can thus be excluded from access to opportunities such as livelihoods. Decisions which directly impact women and girls are made in an environment characterized by women's marginalization and limited decision-making power.

  One pathway to address these concerns is to invest in women's self-help groups (SHGs). SHGs can be a cost-effective form of support which helps strengthen or rebuild social capital that returnee women may be lacking. This can in turn support access to livelihoods for returnee women, if combined with targeted interventions which strengthen access to finance, establish market linkages, and connect women returnee's reintegration with broader socioeconomic inclusion and empowerment schemes in Afghanistan. Such interventions must be complemented with basic human needs investment in community resilience and livelihoods programs as part of broader efforts to boost reintegration and social cohesion.

  To ensure a localized response and build community solidarity mechanisms that support women and girls, UNHCR will build on its work with communities and civil society organizations to promote inclusion, strengthen community ties between displaced, returnee and host community members and enhance social cohesion.

- **Build and strengthen returnee-led peer-to-peer models of support and expand spaces for women to facilitate these connections.** Despite the challenges detailed above, an Aghan woman's returnee status can at times also enhance the influence they have on their peers. For instance, in some regions, returnee women report greater influence than non-returnee peers thanks to the skills and knowledge that they have acquired abroad which earn them respect within their host community. Some returnees are leveraging the training which they have received in exile to help other women and shared their skills and knowledge for the benefit of the women and the broader community.

  Women's peer-to-peer support models could be developed in return areas and could provide a cost-effective and sustainable way to formalize a role that women are eager to play. The aid community can facilitate this by creating platforms to foster information exchange, social support, mentorship, and job placements. This could contribute to reducing women's isolation, improving their access to information, and enhancing skills-sharing within communities.

  It is important to establish, support and encourage local platforms for dialogue and exchange among women – women community and business centres, women's dialogue groups or women's self-help groups – to maintain a safe space for women to find solutions, among themselves or with others.

Introduction

Recent humanitarian crises in Afghanistan, and the increasing rate of returns – including forced returns – from Pakistan and Iran since 2023, have exacerbated humanitarian and protection needs, particularly for women and girls.[2][3] These displacement dynamics are part of broader, complex humanitarian and human rights crises in which women are seeing their basic rights and freedoms increasingly restricted, their participation in public life barred, and their decision-making power curtailed.

Female returnees, some of whom were born outside of Afghanistan, or have lived abroad for years, decades or generations, face critical safety gaps upon arrival. UNHCR's 2024 Post-Return Monitoring Report found that at least 60 per cent of female returnees from Pakistan were concerned for their safety and that of their daughters, with at least 49 per cent of these concerns relating to restrictions on freedom of movement.[4]

The population growth brought by the increased returns, along with the strained capacity of aid organisations to support, has contributed to key challenges in areas of high return such as lack of access to adequate shelter, sustainable livelihood opportunities, basic civil documentation, or water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities. These challenges are often exacerbated among female community members who face additional obstacles compared to their male counterparts, often tied to restrictions on freedom of movement, and higher levels of social isolation.

Female returnees face a range of protection risks, many of which are higher among minority and ethnic groups and for women with disabilities.[5] Registration status in countries of asylum (i.e. before return) also tends to impact access to basic services and livelihood opportunities. Women who were in irregular situations in Pakistan or Iran often experienced a double marginalisation, excluded from key services such as education due to their undocumented status, and isolated within social institutions – namely their families and communities – due to their gender. These women are particularly vulnerable following return and will struggle to access services and livelihoods opportunities in Afghanistan.

It is more difficult to ensure the meaningful engagement of female-headed households in areas of return due to women's isolation and the fact that many work from their homes, increasing the risk of exclusion from assistance and services. Access to protection and other services for returnee women and girls is further hindered by edicts and decrees issued by the DfA, which impose burdens on women's freedom of freedom and assembly and complicate the recruitment of female staff in the UN or NGO sector. This creates additional challenges in the delivery of interventions including Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS), and protection services, given the sensitivity of the discussions with service providers in these sectors, and the risk that women and girls will forego these services in the absence of female service providers.

2 *UN Women. Situation of Afghan Women | August to October 2023. Summary report of countrywide women's consultations, December 2023*
3 *UNICEF, Statement by UNICEF Afghanistan on the devastating floods in northeast of Afghanistan, 12 May 2024.*
4 *UNHCR (2024), Post-Return Monitoring Report*
5 *ACAPS (2024), Afghanistan: Understand the key human safety and security issues that returnees to Afghanistan are facing.*

Multiple barriers impede women and girl returnees from accessing services and information. According to the UNHCR-led Community-Based Protection Monitoring (CBPM) conducted in 2024, over two-thirds (69 per cent) of all returnee households reported that family members lacked civil documentation. This issue disproportionately affects women and girls. A key challenge is obtaining Afghan national identification cards (Tazkira), with the E-Tazkira reported as the most commonly missing document among returnee households headed by women. The majority of returnee women reported that the key reason for the lack of documentation is to never have obtained it in the first place (72 per cent). Securing a Tazkira often requires supporting information or endorsements from family members, peers or other individuals forming part of a person's social capital, which may have been lost while in protracted displacement, depleted following return, or harder to access for women in light of their social isolation. The limited level of preparedness preceding returns, the limited absorption capacity of host communities in Afghanistan, and the proliferation of policies limiting women's participation in public life undermine their ability to meet these requirements. Around 1 in 3 women heads of households returning (31 per cent) furthermore reported that one of the main reasons behind the lack of documentation is limited knowledge about the procedures required to obtain it.[6] Furthermore, there are increasingly stringent requirements for women to be accompanied by a mahram (male chaperone) for movements outside the home, which hinder women's ability to reach key services as well as the work of aid organizations, despite the efforts of UNHCR and other actors maintain a national female workforce.

This brief analyzes and presents key data and findings to inform and strengthen programs for Afghan women and girls. The research brief aims to:

- Consolidate and present existing data on the protection situation of returnee women and girls in Afghanistan, highlighting protection risks and challenges affecting female returnees.

- Inform policy, practice and programming of UNHCR, UN agencies, humanitarian and basic human needs partners, civil society, donor partners and the wider international community targeting Afghan women and girls, and as part of the response to the Afghanistan displacement situation.

This research brief is part of broader efforts by UNHCR – as the UN's protection agency – to monitor and report on the protection situation of returned, displaced and host community women and girls in Afghanistan and deliver evidence-based interventions to advocate for their rights and freedoms and support their inclusion and empowerment as key drivers of socioeconomic improvement and stability in Afghanistan.

UNHCR in Afghanistan

As part of its Afghanistan strategy for 2025-2027, UNHCR is orienting its interventions to addressing and responding to the reality of increasing returns to Afghanistan. Returns have the potential to usher more stability and economic growth, or, to the contrary, further destabilize the country. How returns are handled will make the difference. With large-scale

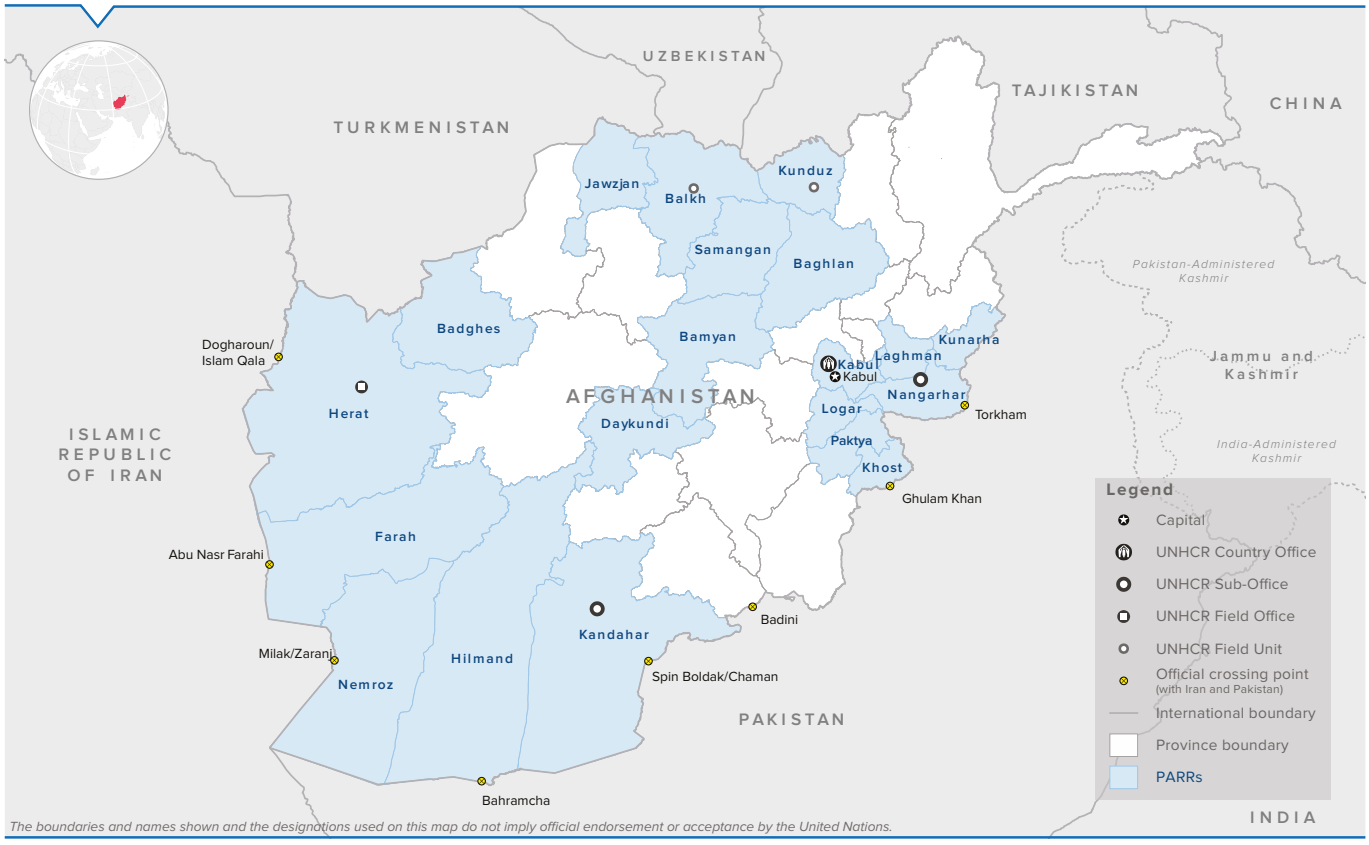
6 UNHCR CBPM data, 2024.

returns, the additional strain that will be placed on service provision, labour market integration and social cohesion will be severe, not only because of the structural challenges within Afghanistan, but also given the spatially concentrated profile of returns and the magnitude of population increases in some areas. A total of twelve districts will face return inflows of Afghan refugees larger than half of their current population. Without additional investment and planning for reintegration, risks of social tensions, economic shocks and onward displacement are high.

UNHCR is thus focusing on supporting returnees in their safe, dignified and voluntary return, and their sustainable reintegration back home. Linking humanitarian assistance with durable solutions, UNHCR will deliver on protection, shelter, and livelihoods – with cash-based assistance as key modality, and through a comprehensive and coordinated three-levelled response starting in countries of asylum, providing immediate assistance at the borders, and advancing sustainable reintegration through an area-based approach in locations where returnees settle.

As a part of these efforts, UNHCR has refocused its approach to Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration (PARRs), transitioning from 80 district-level PARRs to 20 province-level ones – after an in-depth review conducted in 2024. The hope is that the PARRs can serve as models for a modular and predictable approach, delivering basic

Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration (PARRs)



Author: UNHCR Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific (RBAP), Data, Identity Management & Analysis unit (DIMA)

services and livelihood opportunities to both returnee and host populations, in complementary partnership with sister UN agencies and other stakeholders, to boost absorption capacity, and advance socioeconomic conditions for the entire community.

UNHCR is well-placed to lead efforts on durable solutions for returnees, given its 35 years of presence in Afghanistan and deep-rooted community acceptance, as well as its global experience building partnerships and coordinating responses to displacement situations, and its long-standing political and advocacy structures such as the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR), which embed the response in Afghanistan within a broader regional and global framework for solutions.

Protecting and empowering women and girls remains a cross-cutting priority. In 2024, 52 per cent of UNHCR beneficiaries were women. Across all its interventions, UNHCR works to ensure that aid is delivered for women by women, and that female returnees are supported to be agents of change for Afghanistan.

Methodology

This protection brief primarily draws on publicly available UNHCR data sources, with additional data extracted from UN Women and IOM data collection exercises. The data review was complemented by key informant interviews as well as case studies conducted with returnee women and men in Kabul, Herat, Nangarhar and Kunduz provinces.

This brief first utilizes available data to outline the protection landscape for returnee women and girls in Afghanistan and highlight key risks that they face and key gaps in response that must be addressed. Section 3 provides a detailed analysis of major protection risks, while Section 4 explores operational and policy implications and recommendations. The brief ends with key elements of UNHCR's protection programming which provide a foundation to address the findings of this brief. Details on the data and methodology applied for this brief are outlined in Annex 1.

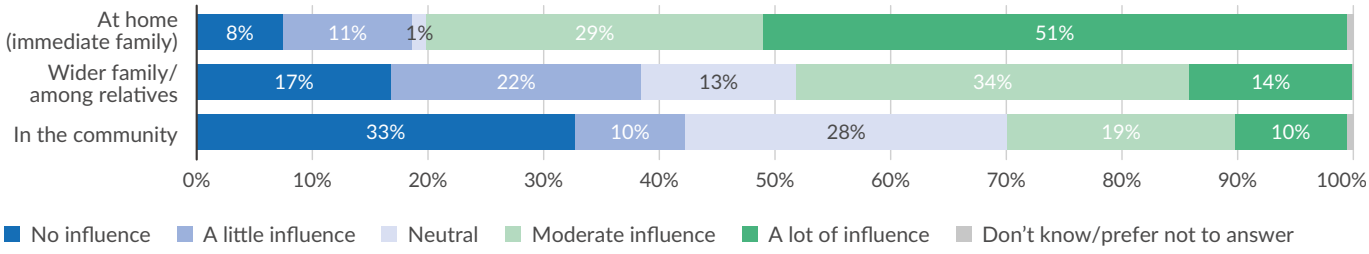
1. The Context

Overview

The 2024 REACH-UNHCR Socio-Economic Vulnerability Assessment (SEVA) exercise shows that community representation remains heavily dominated by traditional male leaders such as the “arbab/malik”, respectively highlighted as key figures of authority by 79 per cent and 48 per cent of participants in Badghis and Baghlan, while provinces like Balkh and Bamyan show greater reliance on *“shura members”* (93 per cent and 47 per cent, respectively). The inclusion of women as decision-makers is limited, with most provinces reporting “no involvement” as the dominant response. In certain provinces including Badghis, Balkh, and Helmand, over 90% of responses suggest a complete absence of women from decision-making processes. Even in provinces with slightly higher inclusion, such as Bamyan and Daykundi, only 28 per cent and 13 per cent of respondents (respectively) reported having “few” women in decision-making roles.

Nazira Salihi returned to Afghanistan with her three children and mother-in-law, just days after her husband was deported. Now reunited, the family faces an uncertain future. Nazira is especially worried about her two daughters and the growing restrictions on women in the country. With no opportunities to work and her husband unable to find employment, they are struggling to rebuild their lives and fearful of what lies ahead. © UNHCR/Oxygen Empire Media Production

Figure 1. How much influence do you have on decision making in the following areas? Returnee women only



Source: UN Women, 2024

According to the UN Women data, on average, 19 per cent of returnee women across Afghanistan report no or low levels of influence at home, compared with 16 per cent of women who have never been displaced, indicating that being a returnee does not significantly impact women's influence within the household. However, women's influence declines more noticeably at the extended family and community levels. Around 39 per cent of returnee women report limited or no say in decisions involving their extended family, and 42 per cent report the same at the community level. While exclusion from community decision-making is a consistent trend across the country, female returnees in the northern region appear particularly affected, with 41 per cent reporting no influence, compared to 27 per cent in the western region.

When looking at information obtained from individual interviews with returnee women, the biggest difference remains between experiences in exile, versus those following return. A returnee in Kabul explained how she felt that had more authority while living in Iran for 16 years, and could access minimal living standards, notably due to her husband working full-time in a stable job. Upon return, her biggest loss relates to dwindling levels of authority within her family. She explains that in exile, Afghan women and girls felt more protected from traditional harmful practices than in Afghanistan. In Iran, she felt that her husband could not force her or her children to accept child marriage, and that social services would have intervened against potential forced marriage for children. The perception of relatively better status and social protection in countries of asylum reveals the deep fear experienced by returnee women about the apparent lack of available recourse in Afghanistan in case of disputes in family or social settings.[7]

Women's influence in the family and the wider community is limited in Afghanistan. However, due to the contrast between the circumstances in Afghanistan and countries of asylum, returnee women often find it harder than their peers to accept these limitations following their return.

7 *Girls can be legally married from the age of 13 in Iran (boys from the age of 15). More information on Iran's policy and practice available at: All Human Rights for All in Iran (2016), Child Early Marriages and Child Mothers in the Islamic Republic of Iran.*

“I tell my husband: There is no difference between men and women”

My name is Heba*. I am 30 years old and a mother of five—two daughters and three sons. I was deported from Iran and live in Kabul with my husband and children in a rented house. My in-laws live elsewhere. My husband does not work, and I try to earn a little by sewing for neighbours, but it is not enough. Sometimes, we cannot afford food. When winter comes, we do not have the means to keep the house warm for the children. Life is very difficult.

In Iran, life was also hard, but at least we had money, food, and education for the children. My daughters went to school, and I learned tailoring at a training centre. Then everything changed. A man was killed in a fight, and after that, they did not want Afghans there. They came at night and forced us out. They did not care that families were separated. My husband was at work when they took us, and he arrived only a week later. They tore up our documents, beat people, and insulted us. They pushed us out like we were nothing.

When I arrived in Afghanistan, I thought I would feel relief being back in my own country. But it was worse than I imagined. There are no jobs, and there is no support. I went to get a national ID card so I could access help, but they told me I needed a male guardian. Then they said I had to pay 10,000 Afghanis, which I cannot afford.

Without documents, I have no rights. I cannot work, and I cannot access services. But the worst part is, there is no future for my daughters. In Iran, they were going to school, but here, they are not allowed. My eldest daughter is 14, and my husband’s family has decided to give her in marriage. I do not accept it, but here, women have no voice. In Iran, if my husband tried to do something like this, the teachers would step in. But here, men make the decisions, and no one will stop them. They did not even ask me what I thought.

I tell my husband: “There is no difference between men and women. Sometimes when men cannot figure out a problem, women will.” I have begged him to stop this marriage. I told him that if he makes 3,000 Afghanis a month, I can make 500, and at least that will help us survive. When my youngest son got sick, we had no money for treatment. My husband had to borrow money, and now he believes marrying off our daughter is the only way out.

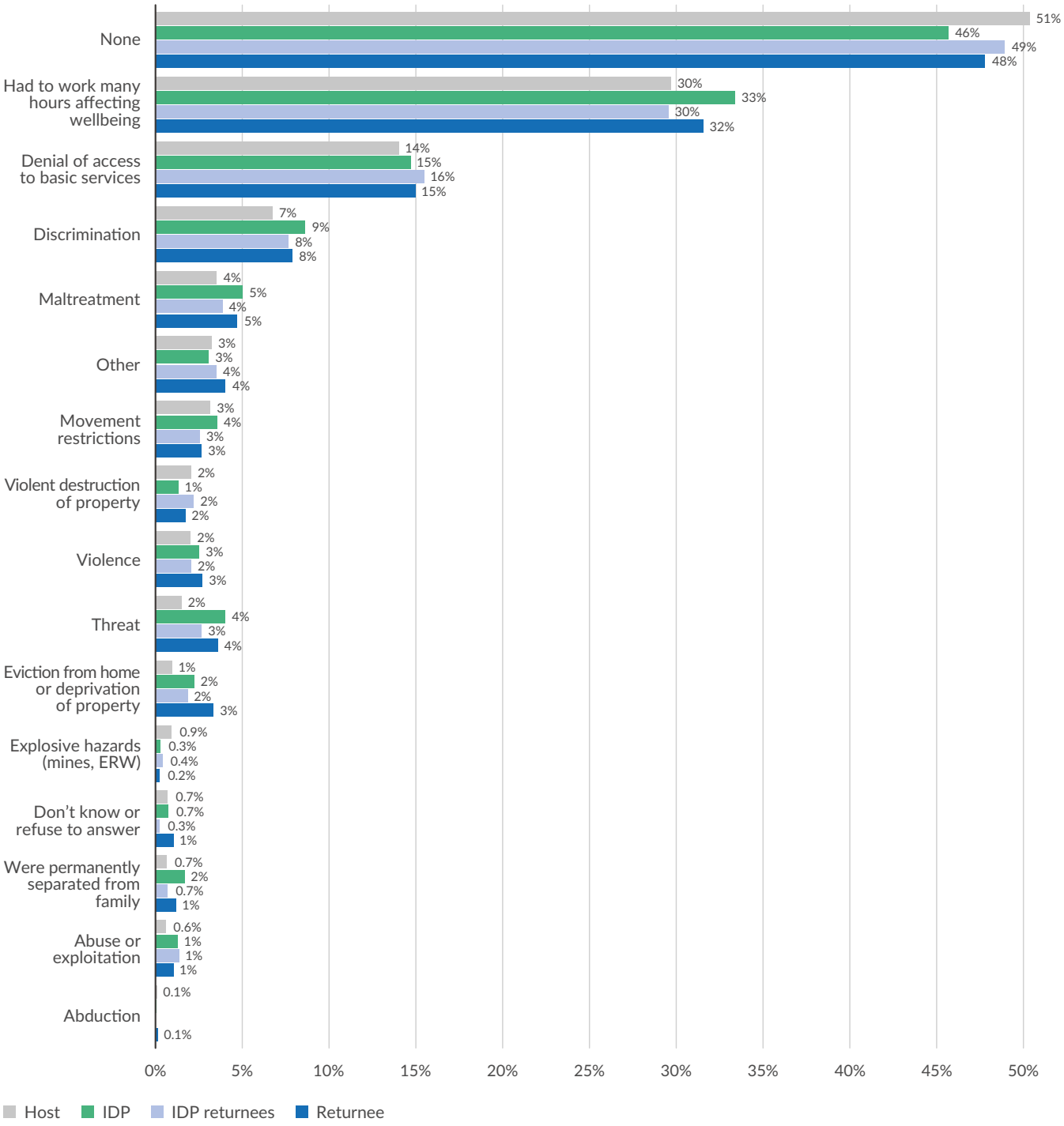
Women are suffering in silence and alone. I want to fight for my daughters, but I have no protection. I tried to stop this marriage, but I cannot do it alone. I dream of enrolling my daughters in Islamic courses, if I can afford it, so at least they can keep learning. I even tried to gather teachers to start a small school, but no one supports ideas like this.

I want to work, but they do not allow women to work. In Iran, I worked with a doctor and helped with pregnancy cases. But here, when I went to a clinic to offer my skills, they would not even talk to me. The manager was a man who told me I needed a male relative to speak on my behalf.

I know there are organisations that help women, but I do not know how to reach them. No one has helped us. If there was any support for women, I would be the first to ask for it. I dream of starting a tailoring course for women in my community. Even making a small income would give us power. The biggest problem is that women here know everything, but no one supports them.

Workload, discrimination, mistreatment

Figure 2. Were any members of your household subject to any of the following in the past 3 months? By displacement status



Source: REACH-UNHCR, SEVA, 2024

Nooria, 28, holds her 3-month-old son Parsa as she arrives at the Islam Qala border crossing in Herat province with her four children. Forced to return from Iran, she had once dreamed of a better future, one where her children could grow up safely and get an education. “I wanted them to study and have a chance at life,” she says. © UNHCR/Oxygen Empire Media Production

Members of returnee female-headed households were substantially more likely to report working “many hours affecting their wellbeing” (61 per cent) when compared with male-headed households (31 per cent). This significant gap persisted regardless of time of return or country of exile, indicating a pattern of higher workload among female-headed returnee households.

Although differences were relatively minor, returnee households experience maltreatment, threats, eviction from home or deprivation of property more frequently than their peers in the host community. Returnee households arriving from Iran reported overworked household members (35 per cent) and being denied access to basic services (18 per cent) more frequently compared to returnees from Pakistan (30 per cent and 13 per cent, respectively). Meanwhile, returnees from Pakistan reported experiencing discrimination (10 per cent) more frequently than those from Iran (5 per cent). These challenges are likely to disproportionately affect women and girls, who often are primary caretakers of other household members and face intersectional barriers in accessing basic services.

Female-headed returnee households that have been in Afghanistan longer are more likely to report not having experienced any adverse treatment, compared to more recent returnees. However, the gap in excessive working hours between female and male-headed households remains, regardless of date of return. Members of both recent and longer-term female-headed returnee households are more likely to work long hours to the detriment of their wellbeing. This reflects the **difficult financial situations faced by female-headed households, and the additional workload they often assume to support their families.**

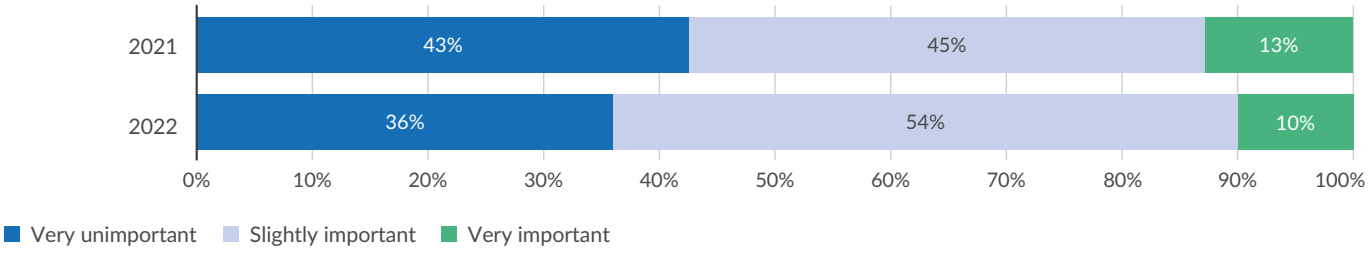
Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS)

Returnee women are often more isolated than their peers. UN Women 2024 data suggests that only 1 in 5 female returnees (19 per cent) engage daily with other female community members beyond their households. Most female returnees engage with other women outside the home – and beyond their close relatives – less than once a month (23 per cent), underscoring a risk of community disconnection and social isolation. While isolation among women is prevalent across population groups, returnee women are slightly more at risk: 26 per cent of returnee women leave their homes less than once a month, compared to 21 per cent of non-returnee women.

This, in turn, poses risks to their mental health and may also hinder their access to information, community-based protection, and referral mechanisms.[8] Mental health problems are reported by a significant proportion of returnee women. Among female returnees surveyed in August 2024, 40 per cent report "very bad" mental health, compared with 31 per cent among women without a history of displacement. Between August and December 2024, 43 per cent of returnee women reported worsening mental health, compared to 36 per cent of female host community members (Figure 3). The largest disparities between returnees and host communities are found in the central and central highland region.[9]

Psychosocial distress among returnee women is primarily linked to economic hardship and food insecurity. According to the UNHCR community-based protection data, 63 per cent of female heads of returnee households report that either themselves or someone in their family is experiencing stress which affects their daily life. The lack of employment and severe economic hardship (85 per cent), food insecurity (67 per cent), and physical health problems (36 per cent) are the leading causes of psychosocial distress reported. Other significant factors include access to services (36 per cent), children being out of school (22 per cent) and child labour (18 per cent) (Figure 4).

Figure 3. Percentage of female respondents reporting changes in mental health in December 2024 compared to August 2024, by displacement status

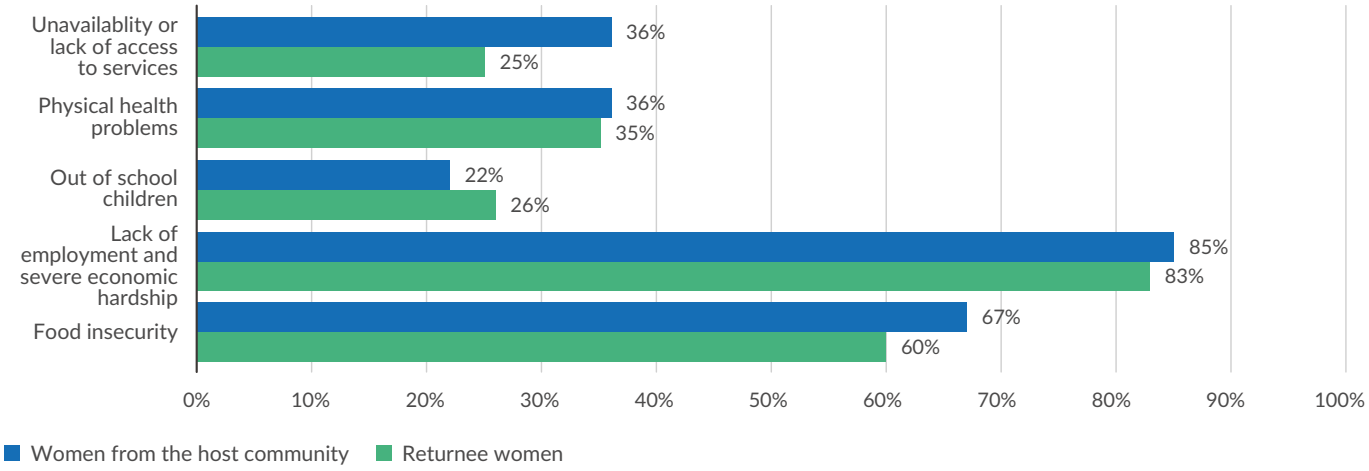


Source: UN Women, 2024

8 *UN Women – Samuel Hall, Women's survey, round 2 (December 2024).*

9 *Ibid. These figures refer to a share of respondents who self-reported 'very bad' mental health when asked "In your opinion, on a scale ranging from very bad to very good, how is your mental health (e.g. feelings of anxiety, isolation, depression) today?"*

Figure 4. Top reasons for stress among women, returnees vs. host community members



Source: UNHCR CBPM, 2024

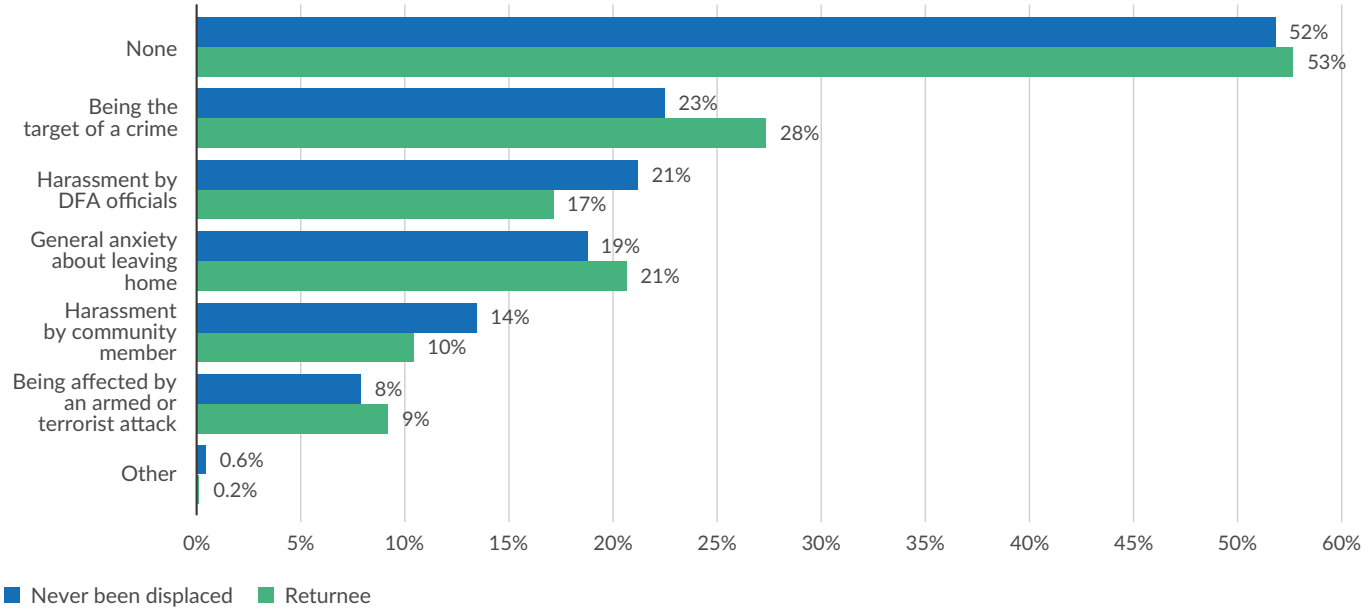
While stress factors are similar to those identified by women from the host communities, returnee women are more negatively affected by limited access to services, particularly for those without a male relative acting as guardian (referred to as “mahram”) to accompany them.

Safety concerns are reported by Afghan women across the country, regardless of status, with the top concerns expressed being about targeted crime, harassment and general anxiety about leaving home. Women in the southern region report the highest levels of targeted crime (33 per cent) and the central highland region show the highest rates of harassment (34 per cent) and of general anxiety (24 per cent).[10] Returnee women report higher concern levels than host community women when it comes to targeted crime, general anxiety about leaving home and terrorist attacks (Figure 5).[11]

Reports indicate that, even with a mahram, returnee women feel increasingly unsafe leaving their homes. Perceived safety levels dropped from 89 per cent to 69 per cent between the summer and the fall of 2024. Only 41 per cent of women feel “totally” safe leaving home alone. However, safety perceptions increase dramatically to 83-90 per cent when accompanied by a mahram. The south-eastern, northern and western regions exhibit the largest gap in perceived safety when alone versus when accompanied by a mahram.[12] Regardless of variances in perceptions on safety concerns, the stark reality is that mobility among returnee women remains very low, with only 19 per cent leaving their homes on a daily basis.

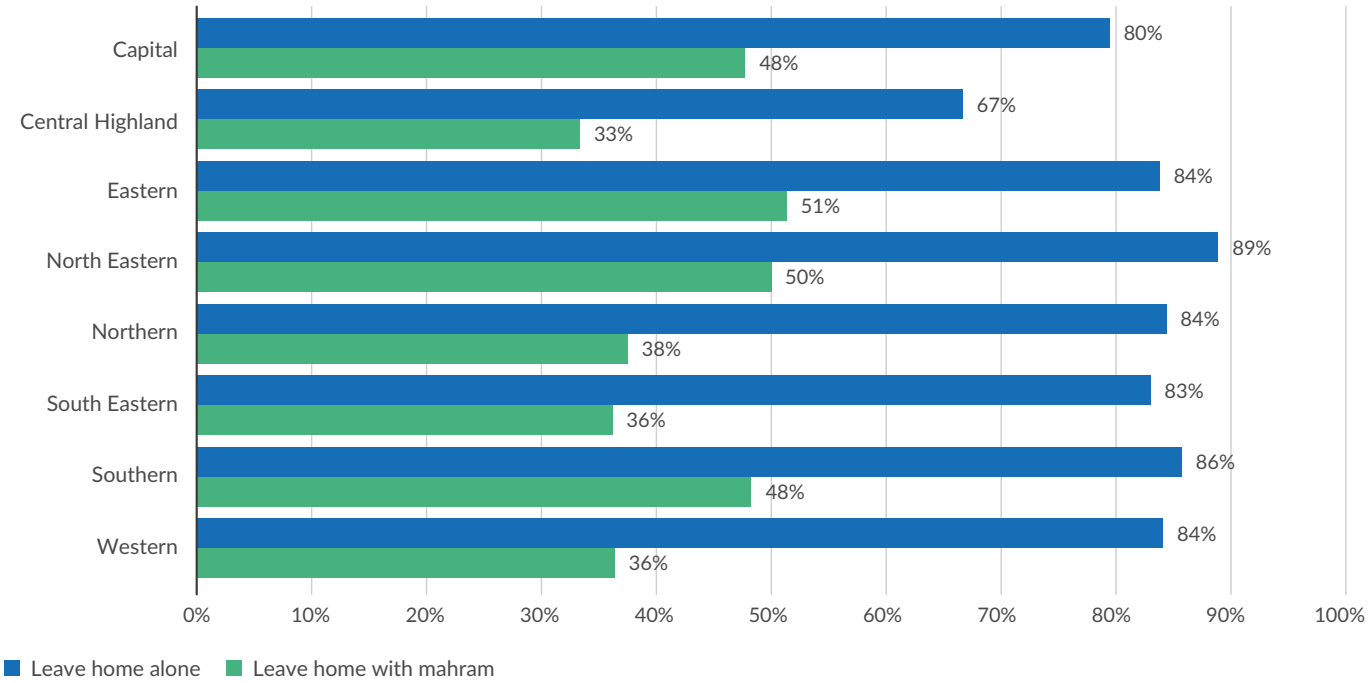
10 UN Women, Women’s survey, round 2 (December 2024).
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.

Figure 5. Safety concerns of women, by their displacement status



Source: UN Women, 2024

Figure 6. Percentage of returnee women who feel totally safe leaving home in each region, by whether they are accompanied by mahram



Source: UN Women, 2024

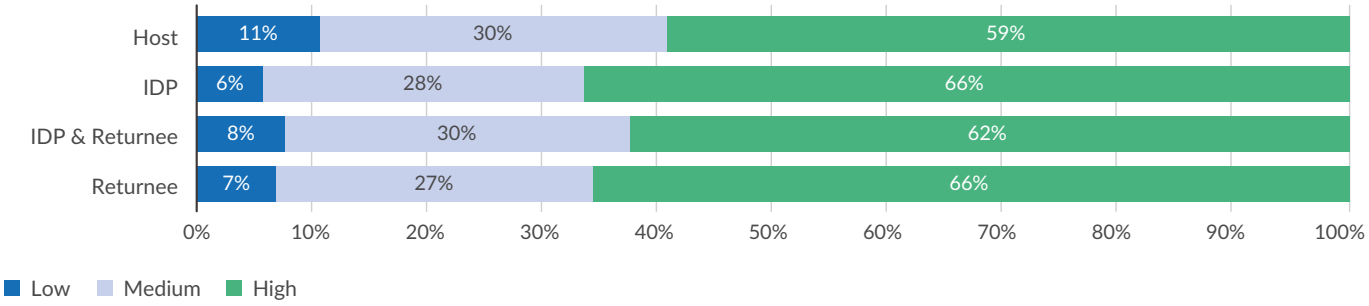
Access to assistance and services

Female-headed returnee households are more food insecure and less likely to have their children in school compared to their male counterparts.

While food insecurity also affects host communities, returnees tend to be more severely impacted. They report a greater dependency on negative coping strategies, as indicated by high reduced coping strategies index (rCSI) scores among returnee households (66 per cent compared to 59 per cent in host communities). Coping strategies can include eating lower quality foods, limiting portion sizes, reducing the number of meals per day, and adults restricting their own intake for children (Figure 7).[13]

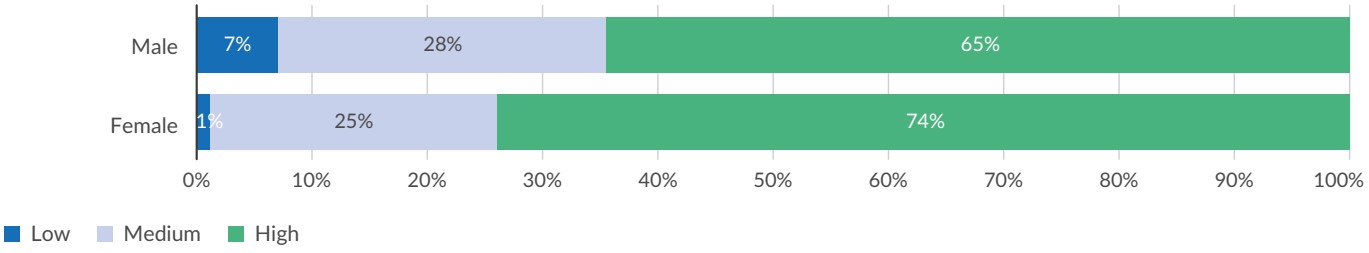
The situation is significantly worse for returnee female-headed households who are more likely to have high rCSI scores (74 per cent) compared to male-headed households (65 per cent). While food insecurity was widespread among returnee families overall, gender disaggregation of data shows lower stress levels among male-led households.

Figure 7. rCSI score categories by displacement status



Source: REACH-UNHCR, SEVA, 2024

Figure 8. rCSI score categories for returnees from Pakistan and Iran, by gender of household head



Source: REACH-UNHCR, SEVA, 2024

13 *The Reduced Coping Strategy Index (rCSI) is a food security indicator that measures the frequency and severity of coping strategies households use when they do not have enough food or money to buy food. It is based on five standard behaviours and their assigned severity weight. A lower rCSI score is associated with better food security.*

Access to services has declined since August 2021, with returnee women facing greater challenges. The worst deterioration is on access to education, with over 75 per cent of returnee women reporting limited access – in line with the access constraints reported by the rest of the Afghan population.[14] Education in Afghanistan faces multiple compounding challenges including insufficient investment and subpar education infrastructure. Women and girls face the greatest obstacles, with the DfA imposing severe restrictions on their participation in the economy or public life, and an outright ban on girls' education past the age of 12. Female-headed returnee households are far less likely than male-headed ones to have at least one of their children enrolled in school (32 per cent compared to 54 per cent), with lower levels of enrolment among girls. The most common reasons for children being out of school are the distance to school, overcrowded or inadequate school facilities and, in the case of girls, early marriage.

Access to public spaces, which conditions access to services, is the second area experiencing the most deterioration since 2021, with similar levels reported by female returnees (39 per cent) and host community members (38 per cent).[15]

Disparities in access to essential services between female and male-headed households are more pronounced in sectors like WASH, healthcare, and legal services. 1 in 10 (11 per cent) female-headed returnee households report that at least one family member had been refused services in the past year.[16] In certain sectors, returnee women report more access issues than host counterparts, for example in accessing water (21 per cent vs. 14 per cent), healthcare (22 per cent vs. 18 per cent), and legal services (28 per cent vs. 25 per cent). These access challenges are corroborated by UNHCR community-based protection data, with 30 per cent of returnee households headed by women reporting that they were unable to use healthcare services due to the unavailability of services in their area or due to their inability to afford related costs. These figures were even higher when it came to accessing psychosocial support, with 49 per cent of female-headed returnee households reporting an inability to obtain help on such issues. Furthermore, 39 per cent of women-headed households reported that their household members do not have easy access to drinking water, and 28 per cent did not have access to a toilet.

Worryingly, the trend is towards tougher enforcement of restrictions, with limitations on access to public spaces increasing from 38 per cent in August 2024 to 74 per cent in December 2024. The 2024 UN Women study indicates that returnees are 10 per cent more likely to have restrictions enforced compared with host community members.[17]

14 *UN Women, Women's survey, round 2 (December 2024).*
15 Ibid.
16 *Services refused include water/WASH, and shelter. See: REACH-UNHCR, SEVA data, 2024.*
17 *Ibid.*

“My husband allows me to work now, but there are no jobs”

My name is Arezo, I live in Shahidan village in Nangarhar with my husband and five children.

We are refugees who returned from Pakistan, hoping for a better life, but there are no opportunities here. My husband sells vegetables from a cart, but most of his income is spent on transportation. If we eat in the morning, we cannot afford food at night. Sometimes, my children cry from hunger, and there is nothing I can do but wait for them to fall asleep on empty stomachs.

I studied up to grade 14, but the Islamic Emirate does not allow women to work or study. I wanted to be a doctor. I passed the Kankor (university entrance) exam and was accepted into the medical faculty in Kabul. My father supported me, but my husband, whom I was forced to marry, refused. Later, I had another chance to study medicine in a private institute, and my teachers told him I was talented, but he still said no. Now, he regrets it: “If I had let you study, you would have been able to work and support us.” My husband now says that I could contribute if I worked, but opportunities do not exist.

There should be projects for women like tailoring, carpet weaving, and literacy programs. Men alone cannot support their families. I sent my CV for a tailoring course, but I was never selected. The community leader gives these opportunities to people he knows, and the poor are left out. Even when organisations distribute aid, only those with connections receive it. I have never been called for support, though my house is near the community leader’s home. My husband barely allows me to visit the organisation’s office, and I am not allowed to speak to the community leader. Life here is difficult, especially for women.

Girls are forced into marriage, often as second wives or to older men, just as I was. Families sell their daughters for 200,000 to 400,000 Afghanis. Among Pashtuns, women do not go to court, even when they are abused. Domestic violence is common. My husband beats me, and he recently beat my daughter severely. When I tried to stop him, he hit me. Many women in my community have taken their own lives because they see no way out. We must bear everything in silence because if we speak, people will say bad things about us. The jirgas [tribal councils usually made up of elders] do not help either.

There is no safety here. Most women face mental stress because of the lack of jobs. Without work, men take their frustrations out on their families. If women had jobs, it would ease this burden. Even the homes here are unsafe. They are made of bricks but not built properly, so they collapse during floods and earthquakes. The government does nothing to help, but UNHCR sometimes provides support if they are informed.

Water is also a serious problem. There is just one well, and it is not enough. In the summer, people must buy water from tankers, but many cannot afford it. Some are forced to beg for water from neighbours. Without access to clean water, life is even harder. We want opportunities. If there are jobs, I will take them. We are still waiting for assistance. We registered with the refugee directorate, but there has been no news.

2. Drivers and characteristics of protection risks among returnee women and girls

Experience of return

Since September 2023, UNHCR estimates that more than 3 million Afghans have returned or been deported from neighbouring countries – with over 1.5 million in 2024 alone – many under coercive or involuntary circumstances. The experience of return – as shared by returnees upon arrival in Afghanistan – points to harrowing, traumatizing journeys, and fear and anxiety about what lies ahead in Afghanistan. Afghan women having recently returned highlighted a shifting – and deteriorating – context for Afghans in countries of asylum. Returnees share growing incidents of discrimination and ill-treatment. Afghans could no longer leave their homes as they were afraid of deportation measures and arrests, and gradually, their children could no longer study. The returnee women interviewed shared that the family had often made the decision to return to avoid arrest and deportation, citing fear of police harassment, kidnapping or family separation. Some claim that they had directly pleaded with local authorities to avoid being sent back during winter. In Herat, women returnees highlighted the difficulties of returning during the cold season, such as living in tents and/or informal settlements with no protection from the harsh weather. Another key challenge lies in the lack of information and preparedness experienced by returnees in contexts of forced return, with returnees often being unable to gather belongings and documents and having to leave everything behind, leading to additional stress and anxiety[18].

The experience of post-return reception services was well received by qualitative interview respondents, but interviewees expressed the severe difficulties they faced upon arrival, as well as the deep concern about the reality of reintegration as a long-term, much more challenging process.

> *“When we returned to Afghanistan, we received good support services, including legal assistance. My children applied for their ID cards. Also, vaccination cards for our children are provided at the clinics.”*
>
> **Female returnee in Herat**

Many respondents spoke of their shock on return, finding roads unpaved, no clinics within a close distance, and their inability to afford the cost of transportation. Returnees shared the sharp contrast with their living standards in exile – such as a proper house, relatively consistent access to electricity and gas, effective transportation networks, and access to livelihoods. Most returnees report financial difficulties upon return with families lacking funds for even the most basic items such as food and rent. One woman shared that her husband decided to force her daughter into early marriage and use the dowry money to support the family’s reintegration process.

> *“There we had all the facilities, and everything was well equipped. Here, we have nothing.”*
>
> **Female returnee in Kabul**

18 ADSP/Samuel Hall 2024, *Briefing note, Solutions for Afghan nationals ordered to return from Pakistan*

At the UNHCR Encashment Centre, families who recently returned from Pakistan receive health consultations, vaccinations, and essential medicines. These services are crucial in helping them recover from their long journey and start a healthier life back in Afghanistan. © UNHCR/ Oxygen Empire Media Production

Women returnees expressed that their well-being was being negatively impacted by their living conditions upon return, including overcrowded accommodation and the lack of recreational activities. Female-headed households shared further challenges in finding adequate shelter, with women sharing difficulties in securing money for rent as a single-income household. Other families reported that they struggled in accessing key documentation required to receive support. UNHCR data finds that two-thirds (69 per cent) of returnee household lacked civil documentation, with women and girls most impacted.

In this context, UNHCR strives to deliver core protection services immediately upon arrival and in areas of return to support returnees to recover after their difficult experience and as they settle back in Afghanistan.

Key Protection Needs and Risks

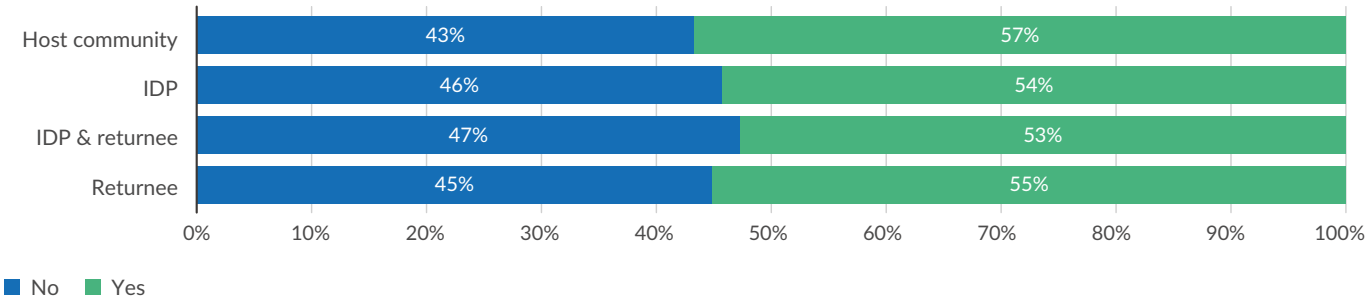
This section is not a comprehensive overview of all protection risks but aims to provide a snapshot of some of the key needs to inform further dialogue and planning.

1. Information and awareness about available services

Building awareness about available protection support is a key first step. Data shows that 45 per cent of returnees are aware about how to access protection services, similar levels to host community members.

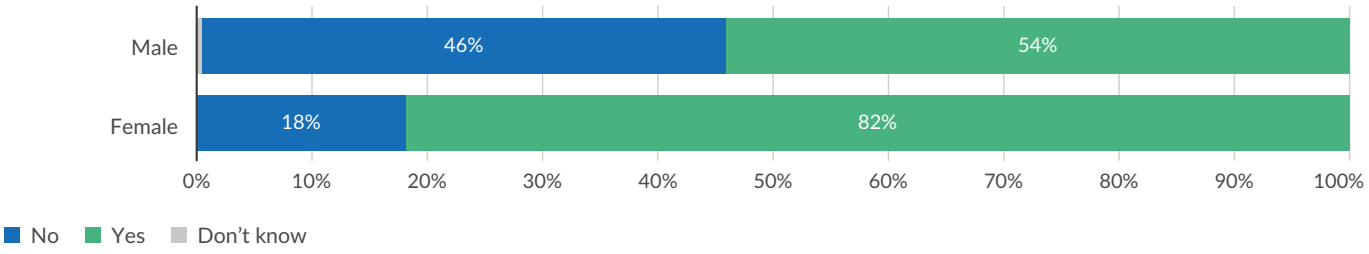
Female-headed returnee households were substantially more likely to be aware of specific services for female survivors of violence and general protection services (82 per cent) than male-headed returnee households

Figure 9. Do most members of your household know how to access protection services if needed? By displacement status



Source: REACH-UNHCR, SEVA, 2024

Figure 10. Do most members of your household know how to access services for female survivors of violence or protection services if needed? By gender of returnee head of household



Source: REACH-UNHCR, SEVA, 2024

(54 per cent) (Figure 10). On average, returnee households from Iran were more frequently aware (51 per cent) of these services than returnees from Pakistan (41 per cent).

2. Discrimination and stigmatization

Female returnees recounted experiencing varying degrees of marginalisation and limited access to decision-making mechanisms and platforms at community level. This is most pronounced in the qualitative data among returnees from Pakistan, who felt they were treated differently because of their status. In Kabul, Nangarhar and Herat, where returnees from Pakistan were interviewed, women reported being treated differently by elders in their areas, whether community leaders, local community representatives or religious leaders. Female returnees explained that they must go through community leaders to receive assistance, even from external organisations. Community leaders often maintain and reinforce traditional gender norms, roles and restrictions. Women said they were often prevented from (openly) expressing their needs, while male returnees were less restricted – although they were still required to go through local leaders, host community members or others to access support channels and decision-making fora.

> *We are not included on the lists for tailoring or other training courses that are offered in the area.*

Female returnee in Jalalabad

Discrimination and exclusion reportedly extended to access to livelihoods and skills-building opportunities. Women shared that they are being excluded from training courses, or that they are treated differently from other community members, which they linked to displacement and poverty. Many of the women interviewed shared their deep disappointment and regret about having access to vocational courses while in exile and now being unable to further hone or utilize their skills in Afghanistan.

Returns have created social tensions due to the growth in population in certain areas, which pose reintegration challenges in a context of increasing competition over resources and overstretched services including, worryingly, health services. Previous research conducted by IOM/Samuel Hall confirmed that community health[19] is on the decline across Afghanistan since 2021,[20] with decreased capacity across communities who are grappling with additional economic and social pressures. For returnees, obstacles in accessing key services such as health are felt to be directly linked to their inability to get peer support due to their status as returnees which marginalizes and excludes them.

3. (Re)adapting to customary laws and social norms

Upon return, as families face difficult choices, a gender divide is exacerbated, with women feeling that they are increasingly silenced in family and community decision-making. Women reported that they found themselves isolated in terms of decision making, giving rise to concerns over what their isolation implies in terms of protection risks for their children. A case study participant in Kabul explained that she would like to earn an income so that her husband will not marry off their daughters for financial gain. A key feature of women's lived experiences upon return is their inability to influence decisions pertaining to their children or their families without the support of men.

> *Even if I disagree, the decision belongs to him and his family in the situation where in-laws are present in Afghanistan, upon return. I don't even have the authority of my children, which scares me.*

Female returnee in Kabul

Men are also adjusting to life back in Afghanistan, facing uncertainty about their individual rights and freedoms and available opportunities, and often also feeling that they hold more responsibility and power over the rights and opportunities for female family members compared to before turn.

19 *Community health refers to collective wellbeing of the individuals and households which make up a given community. It reflects various factors and variables – such as access to basic services, dietary diversity, socio-economic conditions – which may denote characteristics in common among community members. Considerations for these elements, and their potential impacts on health, comprises a key aspect of preventive healthcare.*

20 *IOM/Samuel Hall (2022), Research Brief: Displacement trends and challenges in Afghanistan since August 2021: Mental Health.*

Women reported that, in exile, spouses shared decision-making responsibilities, but, upon return, their husbands became more controlling and gave less weight to the views of female household members in decision-making processes. A participant in Jalalabad reported that her husband does not let her consult the elders or reach out to organisations. She experiences barriers in terms of how she can express her needs and convey them to the local leadership, with implications in terms of her ability to access aid and be considered for assistance.

Decisions which directly impact women and girls are made in an environment characterised by women's marginalisation and limited decision-making power. Case studies reveal a context of poverty and lack of protective systems upon return that drive men and in-laws to resort to harmful coping strategies such as child labour or child marriage. The dramatic impact of the dire socio-economic situation on women and children is also highlighted in UNHCR's data, according to which 14 per cent of women-headed households reported that child marriage was among the coping mechanism adopted by families to deal with financial hardship. Furthermore, women heads of households indicated that they had to borrow money (93 per cent), skip meals (47 per cent) or send their children to work (24 per cent) to make ends meet. The longer-term consequences of such decisions are deeply concerning, with women reporting instances of young girls and their newborns dying due to complications at childbirth. This reflects past research which found that younger mothers are at increased risk of a range of health issues during pregnancy and childbirth.[21]

Community awareness programmes have shown a degree of success in spread vital information through religious leaders, with some women sharing that they and their community members learnt about these issues through the local mosque and imam, as well as through the internet and media.

4. Land tenure and housing rights

Women reported being unable to reclaim their land upon return due to customary laws and limitations to women's rights with regards to inheritance. UNHCR research has found that women returnees are more likely to encounter issues related to inheritance and property rights, compared to returnee men: 21 per cent of surveyed returnee women experienced rental disputes compared to 16 per cent of men. Further, 12 per cent of returnee women reported threats of eviction (9 per cent among male respondents) and 8 per cent reported inheritance issues (6 per cent among men). Some female returnees interviewed reported being unable to reclaim land or housing that had been seized by male relatives during their absence. One case study participant had hoped to return to the home she inherited from her father in Baghlan but was blocked by her uncle who had taken possession of the property in her absence. She now lives in Kunduz, in overcrowded conditions with two other families, and struggles to rebuild her life in an area she does not know. Women in these situations often face additional barriers in seeking legal recourse for forced evictions, due to a lack of representation and ongoing gender-based discrimination within formal justice mechanisms.

21 Chakole S, Akre S, Sharma K, Wasnik P, Wanjari MB. Unwanted Teenage Pregnancy and Its Complications: A Narrative Review.

5. Living conditions, exploitation, abuse and domestic violence

Research from 2014 linked experiences of internal displacement with increased incidence of domestic violence in Afghanistan.[22] Research from 2022 found that this risk was common among returnee women, whose levels of exposure to domestic violence increased because of socio-economic isolation and the disruption of support networks brought by return.[23] This also leads to worsening mental health which, combined with limited access to MHPSS services, may further increase the risk of domestic violence. [24]

These trends persist now among returnee and displacement-affected women who, according to a recently published UN Women report, are most likely to remain in conditions of protracted precarity following displacement, increasing exposure to violence.[25] Interviews with returnees conducted for this brief show that restricted freedom of movement, and women's confinement to their homes during displacement or upon return, contribute to tensions within the household, notably between wives and husbands. Women's inability to go outside without a mahram, and lack access to most public spaces, confine them to the home, including for work. This is further complicated by the dire living conditions most returnees face upon return, which might make home-based jobs impossible due to space limitations. Many are forced to live with distant relatives for extended periods of time, for example. Women's options to earn their own income, or participate in public life and decision-making processes, are thus limited. This can keep the needs and issues of returnees, especially women and girls, "hidden" or less visible than those of male community members.

Overcrowded or sub-par living conditions risk giving rise to exploitation or abuse. Respondents spoke of households with 5-7 members living in one room, using one common bathroom. UNHCR data confirms that 51 per cent of returnee households reported live in overcrowded shelters, and that 37 per cent of households report a lack of privacy. This points to increased threats to the dignity and safety of women and girls, as these factors can contribute to higher rates of intimate partner violence and place a severe psychological burden on women and girls who are restricted to spend time indoors. Beyond protection risks, this also underscores concerns linked to sanitation and hygiene.

Interviews revealed that women tend to justify their husbands' abusive behaviour as stemming from lack of education and income. A case study participant in Nangarhar shared that unemployment upon return leads men to devalue their families and leads them to violence. Very few women feel that they can report cases of domestic violence or abuse. A respondent who reported her husband to the police shared that she is now subjected to social stigma, rumours and gossiping, as a single woman living alone with her daughter, which are significantly impacting her ability to access assistance, as she reports being refused support by local leaders.

22 *Majidi, N. (2014) Resilience in Displacement: Building the Potential of Afghan Displaced Women. Journal of Internal Displacement.*
23 *IOM / Samuel Hall (2022), Unpacking the Realities of Displacement Affected Communities in Afghanistan Since August 2021.*
24 *Ibid.*
25 *UN Women (2024), Gender Country Profile: Afghanistan.*

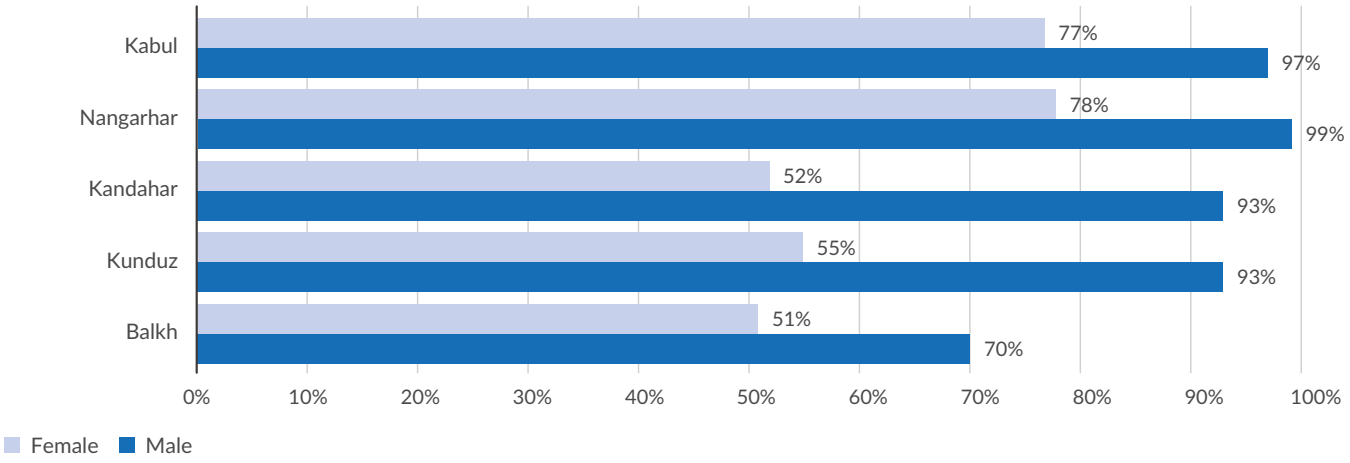
6. Legal identity, civil documentation and access to rights

Returnee status, and other vulnerability factors such as gender and lack of education, correlate with reduced access to documentation.[26] Challenges surrounding lack of legal documentation and civil identity are widespread in Afghanistan. Overall, women are less likely than men to possess a Tazkira, and only 21 percent of returnees interviewed said that all their children had a Tazkira. Similarly, 2 in 3 returnee respondents in UNHCR's 2024 household survey reported that someone in their household lacks civil documentation. Some female returnees reported that their documents – Afghan passports or valid Afghan residency permits in countries of asylum[27] – were confiscated or destroyed by authorities and/or law enforcement officials in Iran or Pakistan.

UNHCR and other organisations work to address this situation. Among others, UNHCR's legal assistance program targets returnees and other vulnerable individuals in Afghanistan, and provides cash support for legal aid, to facilitate their documentation process and transportation.

A lack of documentation undermines female returnees' access to services, namely education, healthcare, legal services, and social security benefits[28]. The Tazkira in Afghanistan is considered a 'pillar of inclusion'[29] and vital to reintegration for Afghan returnees. Women report that, without civil documentation, they are unable

Figure 11. Percentage of returnee respondents who report having a Tazkira, by gender and province



Source: UNHCR CBPM, 2024

26 *UNHCR post-return monitoring report (January 2024).*
27 *RFI Driven out of Iran, Afghan refugees tell of ordeal*
28 *UNHCR Post-return monitoring report (2025, forthcoming report based on December 2024 data).*
29 *Samuel Hall (2023) The 'Pillar' of Inclusion: How Legal Identity and (its lack thereof) shapes access to aid, employment and financial transactions in Afghanistan*

to receive support in publicly administered services. Holding a Tazkira is needed to access a range of services, including obtaining a SIM card and enrolling children in schools. The cost of obtaining a Tazkira can be prohibitive for vulnerable returnee families: one Tazkira costs 500 Afghanis, which can add up to 3,500 Afghanis (around 47 USD) for a family of seven. Those living outside large cities also need to cover transportation costs, including the cost of the accompanying mahram acting as an additional barrier for women. A Tazkira is also required to take part in formal justice systems, which can also act as an obstacle for returnees who face conflicts over land ownership or inheritance.

Thousands of Afghans cross back into their homeland through the Islam Qala border in Herat province, following a sharp rise in mass returns from Iran. In recent weeks, the number of returnees has surged dramatically, many arriving with few belongings after being deported or forced to leave due to growing insecurity. The border has seen unprecedented crowds, with some days recording over 30,000 people returning in urgent and difficult conditions. © UNHCR/Oxygen Empire Media Production

Returnee women are reporting challenges in accessing basic services without civil documentation. A woman in Herat explained that she has not been able to obtain a health card and has not yet been given any solutions, despite referring the issue to a community elder. Interviews reveal that women tend to seek out informal local solutions rather than requesting assistance from relevant authorities. Two in three returnee households reported that they rely on approaching elders (65 per cent) or family and relatives (55 per cent) as their preferred dispute resolution mechanisms.[30] However, a gender-disaggregation of the data highlights notable differences between returnee women and men, with the latter ranking shuras and jirgas as their second preferred dispute resolution mechanism (65 per cent) while only 34 per cent of women interviewed rely on these communal structures to address their issues. Furthermore, returnee women heads of households show significantly less trust in courts of law and the police to address their issues. Only a small number of returnee women indicated that they would go to courts of law (8 per cent), or that they would seek support from the police (9 per cent) as compared to a third or fifth of male respondents respectively. The lack of female representation and trust in formal and informal dispute resolution mechanisms alongside cultural barriers and religious representation, as well as discrimination and dissatisfaction with the remedies proposed were cited among the key concerns of returnee women, highlighting the significant barriers women face in exercising their rights. As these mechanisms are not perceived to yield favourable and just outcomes, many women hesitate to report protection cases due to fear of retaliation. A case study participant in Kabul spoke of the dishonour associated with formally reporting protection cases, and the social pressure to rely on shura mechanisms. Key informants in Kabul including NGOs working in the sector confirmed communities' preference to avoid court resolutions, with women reporting their fear about rumours or about a possible detention of their husbands or male relatives.

Women want to find a way to voice their problems, and for community leaders to act on them, while being protected from the stigma associated with reporting, notably when it comes to certain more sensitive protection risks such as violence against women and girls.[31] However, a gap remains in terms of referrals and resources. Local NGOs and community shuras, who can more easily reach women, face critical shortages in capacity, knowledge and resources.

Formal justice mechanisms also face severe gaps, with very few referrals. UNAMA research found that the legal framework for addressing violence against women and girls is unclear, with uncertainty about which de facto justice actors are responsible at different stages. Many survivors turn to informal dispute resolution mechanisms due to fear of the de facto authorities.[32] In addition to elders and family, nearly half of returnee women rely on shuras or mullahs to resolve community issues (46 and 42 per cent, respectively)[33], such as matters related to divorce, inheritance, domestic violence or other abuse.

30 UNHCR CBPM data, 2024.
31 UN Women (2024), Gender Country Profile: Afghanistan.
32 UN Women (2024), Gender Country Profile: Afghanistan.
33 UNHCR CBPM data, 2024.

3. Conclusions and Operational and Policy Recommendations

Returnee women and girls in Afghanistan are particularly at risk given the compounding effects of their gender and the experience of multiple displacement (from flight to return), which lead to restrictions on the exercise of their rights, social isolation, loss of networks, obstacles in accessing services, limitation on opportunities and make them more vulnerable to mental health challenges, poverty, abuse, exploitation and violence.

While the funding situation in Afghanistan faces unprecedented challenges and is likely to continue experiencing a decline given the reduction in global foreign assistance, it is crucial to direct resources to the areas of greater need but also greater potential impact. UNHCR will continue to maintain a robust focus on the most vulnerable, especially women and girl returnees.

Going forward, this research points to key steps that can be taken to attempt to address the issues faced by returnee women and girls.

Leveraging local community structures and mechanisms

Female respondents spoke of the need to advise and inform men on issues faced by women, and of the challenges that they face in getting support from leaders in their communities. Women asked that men in their communities be trained and guided on how they can support women. Providing awareness-raising, civic education and training as part of other interventions targeting men, elders and community leaders is essential in this context. UNHCR's community engagement and social cohesion interventions, alongside women's protection programs, incorporate core engagement with local community leaders and elders as entry points and key channels to pass on messages.

The role of these figures, including of religious leaders, could be explored further. UNHCR has used hadiths for teaching and awareness raising as part of community dialogues under UNHCR's women protection interventions in Kunduz for example. This programme gathered influential representatives from communities, districts and villages to discuss a joint commitment to support women and women's rights locally. These dialogues can help mitigate women's social isolation and meaningfully contribute to female returnees' reintegration. Further exploring how to leverage local influential figures and existing social and community formal and informal structures could help further advance women's rights in areas such as land tenure, property and business ownership, and thus support socioeconomic inclusion, as well as more broadly build better understanding within communities to support social cohesion.

This brief highlights gaps in referral systems and in returnees' awareness about existing services, and women mentioned their limited access to formal and informal justice mechanisms, with cases of abuse and violence against women and of child marriage and child labour often going unreported or unaddressed. There is a discrepancy in perspectives between male and female returnees in terms of what qualifies as an effective dispute resolution mechanism, with women relying far less on formal actors (such as the police or judges) than men. Women are more likely to rely on community elders and relatives, an insight which may

provide an entry point for further engagement. The role of local community and shura leaders in protecting women and girls can be reinforced if they can be sensitised on the needs of returnees, including sub-groups (by age, gender and specific vulnerabilities such as disability or belonging to a minority).

Recognising that feedback may vary by location, there are opportunities to expand information sharing and enhance women's by working with men as allies. While this approach has already been applied across different forms of protection and community engagement programming, the data highlights the importance of targeted programs putting more emphasis on men and boys, enabling them to identify their role in preventing violence against women and girls and supporting their protection and inclusion.

Peer-to-peer support for social cohesion and integration

The experiences and reintegration challenges demonstrate that more could be done to create platforms and opportunities for returnees to support one another. Returnees have shared that they would like to have other returnees deliver trainings and share skills learnt while abroad. Female returnees, especially those returning from Iran, voiced their willingness to share their knowledge and skills with girls and women in their area. They requested support in accessing facilities and safe spaces for learning and exchange. Religious leaders interviewed have also emphasized that more peer-to-peer support opportunities would be beneficial, especially leveraging that female returnees bring new skills which can boost many sectors. External actors can play a key role in facilitating these exchanges which not only enable skills transfer and thus improve business opportunities but also support female returnees' reintegration and build greater understanding between returnee and host communities, by showcasing how returnees, particularly returnee women, can contribute to their communities and be positive agents of change.

It is key to take on a gender-responsive approach in programme design and delivery, through facilitating the creation of safe spaces, promoting localised mechanisms and enabling support to come from within the communities themselves, targeting faith-based and community-based organisations, including those led by women and other vulnerable persons such as persons with disabilities.

Integrated protection interventions

Due to a lack of awareness and the imposition of mahram requirements and other restrictions, coupled with the overall challenges of return, women returnees face obstacles in obtaining or renewing civil documentation. Interventions aimed at addressing those barriers will have significant impact in access to services and reintegration. Specific mechanisms can include expanding the recruitment of women legal experts for dedicated women-to-women counselling, promoting the use of legal women community outreach volunteers to facilitate legal outreach to women, tailored legal aid and cash assistance to cover mahram costs to reach the right facilities. UNHCR and other actors are expanding legal assistance programmes including the provision of cash assistance, but continued efforts will be required to scale up such interventions in a context of growing returns.

Cash assistance plays a key role in supporting the reintegration process, and is the main modality used by UNHCR as a delivery modality preferred by communities. Cash assistance can provide much-needed relief for returnee women and girls, particularly

for female heads of households who face additional difficulties in securing an income. UNHCR embeds protection considerations and interventions into cash-assistance programs targeting women, disabled persons and other vulnerable populations, as poverty often leads to reliance on harmful practices, increasing their protection risks. In the context of returns, this integrated approach can enhance physical and psychosocial safety and improve access to rights and services for female returnees. Linking these interventions with community-based case management can also be effective given women's preference for community systems. Further research would be needed on the impact of different cross-sectoral interventions on both reintegration processes and on women and girls' protection.

Thousands of Afghans cross back into their homeland through the Islam Qala border in Herat province, following a sharp rise in mass returns from Iran. © UNHCR/Oxygen Empire Media Production

Strengthening coordination and cross-sectoral responses

Sustainable reintegration and protection of displaced and returnee women requires coordinated sectoral and cross-sectoral responses with a focus on:

- **Legal assistance and documentation,** ensuring non-discriminatory, coordinated legal services across partners, and cash assistance to help lift barriers to access to legal aid and civil documentation process.

- **Mental health and psychosocial support,** as part of a broader package of services for female returnees, addressing the specific challenges expressed by women and girls, and training community volunteers to enhance local support systems at the border and in return areas.

- **Inclusive community engagement and mobilization for women and child protection,** to raise awareness about how to identify and respond to the needs of women and girls. This should include specifically engaging men and boys in preventing violence against women, with a focus on male community leaders and dispute resolution mechanisms.

- **Skilling and livelihoods** to continue and upscale initiatives which support skills-building, economic self-reliance and empowerment of women returnees, engaging the private sector where possible, and promoting approaches which boost economic growth for the community as a whole to avoid social tensions and contribute to reintegration.

Coordination is also needed in advocacy vis-à-vis the DfA for the removal of restrictions on women and girls and for adapting policies and programmes to the needs of female returnees. Working in inter-agency constellations and through a joined-up approach remains a priority for humanitarian and solutions mechanisms.

A regional lens for protection and durable solutions

At a regional level, a tailored approach with neighbouring countries, as part of tripartite agreements and consultations are vital, to ensure orderly, safe and voluntary return to Afghanistan and mitigate protection risks faced by female returnees. Cross-border initiatives can be improved, notably to understand the skills of Afghan women returning to Afghanistan and to connect them with livelihood opportunities upon return. Beyond socio-economic interventions, in the medium to long-term, political and financial initiatives in support for returnee women and girls in Afghanistan must be sustained, at the Solutions Support for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) Local Core Group, the Afghanistan Coordination Group, the EU Senior Officials' Meeting and the Doha process.

Last but not least, the UNHCR non-return advisory and guidance note on the International Protection of People Fleeing Afghanistan, as well as the Court of Justice of the European Union's ruling highlighting that the systematic discrimination faced by Afghan women under the Taliban's rule amount to persecution under EU asylum law, should be taken seriously by every single government, not only in the region. This is of particular importance in the context of the current return movements, and the support required to specific protection profiles in need of durable solutions.

Annex 1: Methodology

This protection brief primarily draws on publicly available UNHCR data sources, including:

- 2024 UNHCR Community Based Protection Monitoring (CBPM)
- 2024 UNHCR Returnee Monitoring
- 2024 Socio-Economic Vulnerability Assessment (SEVA) focusing on 27 Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration (PARR) and targeting over 10,000 households.

Additionally, data has been extracted from a UN Women data collection exercise conducted in August 2024 (round 1) and December 2024 (round 2), and from the IOM Flow Monitoring Survey (FMS) dataset, which contains data collected from January to December 2024 in 7 provinces in Afghanistan (Balkh, Faryab, Herat, Kabul, Kandahar, Kunduz and Nimroz).

A thorough review of secondary data – including SEVA and CBPM datasets, UNHCR Post-Return Monitoring Reports, UN Women Afghanistan Gender Updates and Rapid Gender Analyses, IOM Flow Monitoring Survey (FMS) data, as well as past academic and research reports. These were supplemented by past work done by Samuel Hall, a local research organisation dedicated to migration and displacement research, alongside primary data collection. This included (1) key informant interviews (KIIs) conducted with UNHCR staff, international and local non-governmental organisations (I/NGOs), civil society organisations (CSOs), and community leaders, alongside (2) semi-structured interviews (SSIs) comprising case studies with male and female returnees in four provinces - namely Kabul, Herat, Nangarhar and Kunduz.

For both the KIIs and SSIs, tailored data collection tools were developed by the research team. Questionnaires included a mix of targeted and open-ended questions, allowing space for participants to freely express their views, share their lived experiences, and communicate their concerns. For case studies, questions were designed to map different protection risks, support mechanisms or service gaps experienced by returnees. More to the point, these interviews aimed to shed light on key risks and reintegration dynamics following return, analysing these through a protection lens reflecting the experiences of returnee women and girls. In total, 20 KIIs were conducted, alongside 12 returnee case studies across locations (see Annex 1 for a detailed breakdown).

Some limitations in the data used should be noted:

- Variation in methodologies: secondary data sources vary in terms of collection methods, geographic focus, target groups, and timeframes. While findings are triangulated across different data sources and most data was collected in 2024, variations in sampling and methodology limits comparability across datasets.

- Sampling considerations: The selection of areas for the 2024 CBPM as well as the SEVA data collection was based on the high density of displaced populations and returnees, including priority areas of return and reintegration. As a result, the data reflects specific operational and protection contexts rather than a random or nationally representative sample. Findings should be considered indicative of conditions in high-priority areas, not generalisable to all returnee populations in Afghanistan.

- Restricted geographic coverage in qualitative data: Primary data collection through interviews was limited to four provinces (Kabul, Herat, Nangarhar and Kunduz), which may not capture the full spectrum of protection concerns faced by returnees nationwide. However, secondary sources were used to fill these gaps.

Annex 2

The breakdown of samples for both KIIs and case studies carried out as part of data collection for this knowledge brief appears in the following table:

Tool / Participant Category	Locations	Sample	Sample by gender
KII - High level	N/A	4	3F / 1M
KII - UN / INGO	Kabul	1	1M
	Kunduz	1	1F
	Herat	1	1M
	Nangarhar	1	1F
KII - NGO / service providers	Kabul	1	1F
	Kunduz	1	1M
	Herat	1	1M
	Nangarhar	1	1M
KII - Civil society / community leaders / Faith actors	Kabul	3	2F / 1M
	Kunduz	2	1F / 1M
	Herat	2	1F / 1M
	Nangarhar	2	1F / 1M
Case studies	Kabul	3	3F
	Kunduz	3	2F / 1M
	Herat	3	3F
	Nangarhar	3	3F
Totals		**33**	**22F / 11M**

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Supported by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency

This report is published by UNHCR, in collaboration with the SSAR Support Platform under the Chairmanship of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.