

**IN BRIEF**

## **GENDER ALERT — Impact of telecommunication shutdown on women-led organizations in Afghanistan**

Photo: UN Women/Ali Omid Qasimi Taqdisyan

### **Introduction**

The de facto authorities (DFA) in Afghanistan implemented a nationwide telecommunications shutdown for 48 hours between 29 September and 1 October 2025, following intermittent cuts across several provinces since 16 September 2025.<sup>1</sup> The blackout of internet and phone services deepened fear, isolation and misinformation, as rumors circulated in the absence of verified information. No official explanation has been provided, though earlier restrictions in Balkh province were justified as measures to “prevent immorality.”<sup>2</sup> The risk of further shutdowns without warning remains.

The telecommunication blackout had far-reaching consequences – disrupting banking, remittances, emergency and medical services, airports, access to information, and online classes – severing vital lifelines for women and girls who, already confined to the home, rely on connectivity for education, livelihoods, and protection. This Alert assesses the gendered impact of the blackout through a protection lens, focusing particularly on how it disrupted humanitarian and basic human needs programming. It also sets out recommendations to strengthen preparedness of stakeholders operating in Afghanistan, including humanitarian actors, civil society organizations and international stakeholders, such as the UN.

### **Methodology**

This brief draws on insights from women-led organizations in Afghanistan documented by UN Women shortly after the resumption of telecommunications services in October 2025.<sup>3</sup> **Key findings and recommendations have been developed in coordination with the Gender in Humanitarian Action (GiHA) working group and the Gender-Based Violence (GBV) sub-cluster.**

Their insights are complemented by nationwide data, including the 2024 and 2025 Whole of Afghanistan Assessment, Perceptions Surveys research by Ground Truth Solutions and Salma Consulting for the Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group (GiHA WG), reaching 2,000 Afghans (1,000 women and 1,000 men) across all regions of Afghanistan, except for the South and UN Women’s 2025 Gender Flagship Survey, reaching 2,190 Afghans (1,074 women and 1,116 men) across all regions. Together, these sources provide organizational perspectives and household-level insights into access to communications, operational constraints, protection risks, and coping strategies through a gender lens. This enables analysis of how the telecommunication blackout affected Afghan women, including through disruption of protection services and delivery of other programme activities.

*For a detailed methodology overview, see Annex I.*

1. Between 15-17 September, the DFA shut down the fibre optic networks, for varying durations, in Balkh, Kandahar, Kunduz, Baghlan, Takhar, Herat, Zabul, Nimroz, Helmand, Uruzgan, among other provinces: UNAMA. 2025. [Out of reach: The impact of telecommunications shutdowns on the Afghan people](#); UNAMA, [UNAMA calls on de facto authorities to urgently restore internet, telecommunications access in Afghanistan](#) 30 September 2025.

2. Associated Press, [Taliban leader bans Wi-Fi in an Afghan province to ‘prevent immorality’](#), 16 September 2025.

3. Written inputs on felt impacts and recommendations to the UN and other international stakeholders were gathered from UN Women’s key partners and networks in the first week following resumption of telecommunications services.

## Background

Mobile phone coverage and internet connectivity in Afghanistan have increased significantly in recent years. In 2024, nearly half of all Afghans (45 per cent) had access to mobile phone coverage to use voice, SMS and internet.<sup>4</sup> Yet, access remains deeply gendered. A door-to-door survey with 2,190 Afghans (1,074 women and 1,116 men), conducted by UN Women in March 2025, showed that phone ownership (including both basic and smartphones) is higher among men (93 per cent for both urban and rural) than women (80 per cent urban, 61 per cent rural). Smartphone access is even more skewed between women (50 per cent urban, 28 per cent rural) and men (61 per cent urban, 50 per cent rural).<sup>5</sup>

Poverty, weak infrastructure, and low literacy limit phone and internet access for all Afghans. Yet women face additional barriers – stemming from socio-cultural norms that limit their digital access and reinforce their dependence on others for accessing phone and Internet services. While women who do not personally own a phone may be able to access phone and internet services through family members or neighbours<sup>6</sup>, they must often rely on male family members and obtain their approval, and – as a result of sharing devices with multiple people – often cannot maintain privacy in their communications. This

dependency is further amplified by the restrictive policies imposed by the DFA that curtail women's movement, limit their presence in public spaces which, in turn, limits their access to information.

In a context where women and girls are banned from schools, universities, and most jobs, online education and connected livelihoods remain among the few safe and constructive opportunities for women and girls. Connectivity can help sustain learning, income, and psychosocial wellbeing in an environment where women-specific protection services, mental health support and reporting mechanisms are heavily restricted. It can also provide a vital channel for women to access information independent of the knowledge and willingness of – often male – family members to share information with them.<sup>7</sup> Digital access is critical for women to receive alerts, seek support, or report abuse, particularly for those without informal networks or male relatives, for example widows. Recent data from UN Women also show women use the internet to access information on climate disasters (9 per cent), health concerns (9 per cent), and employment (8 per cent).<sup>8</sup> Some women report cutting daily expenses – even food – to afford mobile data.<sup>9</sup> Without internet connectivity women's access to both basic- and life-saving services is constrained, limiting their ability to make informed decisions about their own lives and futures.

---

4. This increases slightly to 48 per cent of Afghans who have at least one household member with voice and SMS services through mobile phone coverage to use for most days: *Whole of Afghanistan Assessment (WOAA)*. 2024.

5. UN Women. 2025. Gender Flagship Study. *Unpublished*.

6. According to the door-to-door survey conducted by UN Women in March 2025, rural women are systematically disadvantaged when it comes to accessing phone and Internet services through family members or neighbours. Among respondents who reported not personally own a phone, rural women were the only category who reported not being able to access phone services through family members or neighbours (24 per cent, compared to close to zero per cent across other categories). UN Women. 2025. Gender Flagship Study. *Unpublished*.

7. UN Women, UNAMA and IOM. 2025. Joint Consultations with Afghan Women - April 2025. *Unpublished*.

8. UN Women. 2025. Gender Flagship Study. *Unpublished*.

9. UN Women, UNAMA and IOM. 2025. Joint Consultations with Afghan Women - April 2025. *Unpublished*.

## Immediate Impact

**“FOR WOMEN, THESE SHUTDOWNS ARE NOT JUST TECHNICAL ISSUES BUT SERIOUS THREATS TO THEIR PERSONAL FREEDOM, MENTAL HEALTH, AND SOCIAL BONDS. COMMUNICATION REPRESENTS AWARENESS, HOPE, AND THE ABILITY TO ENDURE IN TODAY’S DIFFICULT CONDITIONS.”**

– Employee of women-led media organization

### General operational impacts

The impacts of the September 2025 blackout among Afghans, particularly women, were acute. It temporarily halted humanitarian and emergency response,<sup>10</sup> suspended financial, medical and aviation services, interrupted the media and online education, and deepened isolation. NGO partners reported rising stress, anxiety, and heightened protection risks for women as referral pathways broke down.

Specifically, women-led organizations, including humanitarian and civil society actors, reported losing contact with field offices and staff, halting operations, causing high levels of fear and anxiety among staff members. Staff could not withdraw money, make payments, submit necessary documentation (regarding procurement, HR, payroll and financial reporting), or use office equipment that required internet access, effectively bringing operations to a halt. The lack of communication blocked movement coordination with the DFA, stopping field missions, including to emergency response sites such as the earthquake-affected areas in the east and border points across the country where returnees from Iran and Pakistan continue

to arrive. As a result, broader operations were brought to a standstill: coordination, meetings and trainings were temporarily suspended, contact with local DFA and partners was disrupted, and access to financial services was interrupted.

### Impact on quality and delivery of humanitarian and basic human needs response

Across humanitarian clusters, coordination and emergency response were severely affected: distributions were postponed, assessments were delayed and supply chains were disrupted. Critical online systems like registration and biometrics systems were made inaccessible, disrupting the registration of returnees. While a few in-person activities, such as livelihood training, continued, overall operations were sharply reduced. Many NGOs withheld women staff’s movement due to safety concerns arising from the communication blackout. Practically, women could also no longer communicate with their *mahrams* which left them unable to coordinate simple logistics – such as arranging transport – in a context where being in public without a *mahram* has effectively been criminalised.

The blackout had a disproportionate impact on protection services as well as quality of the humanitarian and basic human needs (BHN) response. Women and girls faced increased isolation without hotlines, online counselling, or contact with support networks.<sup>11</sup> The shutdown disrupted referral pathways for survivors of trauma, preventing access to comprehensive care, prolonging response times, and risking re-traumatization. With DFA restrictions already limiting protection services, further outages would curtail “under the radar” support and reduce the likelihood of survivors seeking help. Even for those survivors able to seek help in person, referrals to other services would have proved challenging. Broader livelihood stress linked to supply chain disruption heightened household tensions, fuelling women’s protection concerns, while communication cuts fostered impunity for perpetrators by making reporting more difficult.

10. Telecommunications are critical for early warning and disaster response, underscored by the recent 6.0 magnitude earthquake in eastern Afghanistan on 31 August 2025 killing more than 2,000 people and injuring 3,600, and damaging 8,500 homes: UN News, [‘Taliban internet blackout leaves Afghans in limbo while needs surge’](#), 30 September 2025.

11. A 2024 UNFPA assessment found over 26 per cent of Afghan women report high stress levels, 30 per cent have sought or are receiving support, and 5 per cent rely on online counselling – options eliminated during outages: Salma Consulting. [Mental Health Assessment: Improve UNFPA’s Psychosocial Response and Increase Access to Services in Afghanistan](#). Kabul: UNFPA.

During the blackout, the Awaaz hotline<sup>12</sup> was non-functional, cutting off communities' ability to lodge complaints relating to humanitarian and basic human needs programming or report Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA) – a serious concern given that in 2024, 37 per cent of Afghans identified it as their preferred channel to voice concerns about humanitarian assistance.<sup>13</sup> Women, particularly in rural areas, already prefer in-person mechanisms due to cultural norms and limited digital access, underscoring the need to strengthen face-to-face feedback and complaints systems that remain functional during outages.

Moreover, the blackout placed even greater strain on already restricted livelihoods. Women-led businesses lost access to phones and internet for marketing, transactions and customer contact. Many female employees working from home were cut off from employers, while many family members grew more concerned about women working outside of the home.<sup>14</sup> These compounding pressures further limited women's economic participation and mobility.

Beyond immediate risks, blackouts also risk eroding long-term protection. Organizations queried by UN Women expressed concerns that, should such shutdowns recur, or if sustained restrictions on internet access persist, additional restrictions on services such as online learning could deepen girls' exclusion from education. This would have negative trickle-down effects on the lives of women and girls', with outcomes such as increased risks of child marriage, which are closely interlinked with restrictions on education.<sup>15</sup>

### **Civic space and normative work**

In addition to impinging on fundamental human rights and freedoms, the blackout undermined programming that supports women's voice, agency, and participation. By cutting women human rights defenders (WHRDs) and civic actors off from international networks, advocacy platforms, and reporting channels, blackouts heightened exposure to reprisals and limited access to information – an important safeguard for preventing, mitigating and

documenting human rights violations. Taken together, this impeded civic engagement and human rights work.

Media, including women-led outlets, were particularly affected. Live broadcasts, interviews, and coordination with sources were suspended, and online content creation and social media stopped. Some media outlets with satellite broadcasting could continue unaffected, while those broadcasting through the internet went entirely off air. Those with online educational components were unable to run programmes or communicate with students, effectively bringing educational activities to a halt. Only limited frequency modulation (FM) broadcasts and pre-recorded programming could continue, underscoring the urgent need for contingency measures.

## **Preparedness Ahead of Future Telecommunications Disruptions**

**There are realistic concerns of recurring internet and telecommunications shutdowns, yet most local NGOs lack affordable alternatives to maintain operations. Costly digital contingency measures require donor support, while preparedness should prioritize multiple complementary channels – digital and physical – to build robustness. This is especially critical for women and women-led organizations, who face heightened barriers to information and protection services.**

The following preparedness options, some already piloted during the blackout, can help build robustness for future disruptions:

### **1. Developing offline adaptations**

- **Pre-positioning materials** by printing and storing key documents and templates. For protection actors, this includes developing offline referral systems (with mitigation measures shared ahead with partners to ensure protection of survivors, including confidentiality and security of information). For media outlets, this includes pre-recording radio programmes so content can continue without internet.

12. The Awaaz hotline is a country-wide joint inter-agency initiative established for Afghans to voice their concerns, access information and provide feedback on assistance programmes.

13. This consists of some 31 percent of Afghans in rural areas and 53 percent in urban areas: *Whole of Afghanistan Assessment (WOAA)*. 2024..

14. See also UNAMA. 2025. Out of reach: The impact of telecommunications shutdowns on the Afghan people.

15. Linear regression analysis at the country-level shows how the risk of worsening sexual and reproductive health indicators correlates to educational attainment. UN Women. 2024. [Gender Country Profile: Afghanistan](#).

- **Offline digital tools** provide options to continue working and saving information without internet access, such as hybrid (online-offline) data collection tools and alternative offline biometric data and registration systems, which can be adequately equipped with data protection measures.
- **Offline document storage and transfer** would allow for collaborative processes, such as simple local platforms for file transfer, small digital libraries, and sharing content via Bluetooth/USB.
- **Radio messaging and paper-based communication** may be useful, but security risks – such as undue access and data leaks – must be carefully considered.
- **Business Continuity Planning (BCP)** is underway among NGOs and international stakeholders to allow for structured contingency measures.
- **Standard operating procedures (SOP)** should establish agreed meeting times and fallback protocols in case communications are down. This may include standing meeting slots, use of physical noticeboards in central offices, or rotation-based check-ins.
- **Adaptive coordination mechanisms** could guarantee women's participation in coordination and service delivery by relocating meetings to accessible and central sites, and where this is not possible, sharing information with women staff bilaterally, or providing printed updates.
- **Collective movement protocols** can mitigate risks to women staff in the field. For emergency response, this includes NGOs organizing for women staff to travel together to emergency sites (such as earthquake response areas) at agreed times to increase security, and support.

## 2. Support digital contingency measures

- **Very-small-aperture-terminals (VSAT)** proved effective during the last shutdown but their high cost, and the risk of DFA reprisals for installing independent internet systems make them difficult to scale without coordination.
- **Satellite broadcasting** allows for TV and radio stations to continue reaching audiences.
- **Offline messaging apps** like *Briar* and *Bridgefy* can operate without the Internet, using offline Wi-Fi and Bluetooth networks to bridge communications.
- **Exploring cross-border solutions** for organizations with a presence near Afghanistan's international borders, such as e-SIMs that connect to neighbouring countries' telecommunications networks.

## 3. Strengthening in-person communication with women

- **Ensure in-person systems** for direct contact with beneficiaries, building on existing community structures including women leaders, women's groups, and women-led organizations with strong community links. This could include establishing local focal points, setting up small district hubs, or deploying mobile teams to ensure continuity during outages, and to gather feedback on humanitarian aid, both routinely and during internet shutdowns.
- **Women's groups** are the preferred communication platform of one-third of women,<sup>16</sup> highlighting their critical role in preparedness and the need to strengthen their capacity for information sharing during crises.
- **Trusted local messengers**, including women leaders and women's networks, can safely and reliably relay information.

16. Ground Truth Solutions & Salma Consulting. 2025. [Supporting women through the impacts of natural hazards in Afghanistan](#), p.17.

## Recommendations

### Recommendations for international stakeholders

- **Advocate through all available channels** to prevent further restrictions on digital and telecommunications access, including by highlighting the disproportionate impacts of shutdowns on women and their wellbeing.
- **Support contingency planning** by requiring partners to develop outage preparedness plans, including offline workflows, pre-positioned resources, and local focal points.
- **Provide flexible funding** to cover mobile teams, pre-positioned materials, and protective systems for women-led organizations, who are already among the most resource scarce.
- **Facilitate connectivity** by coordinating with international organizations already using independent internet systems to mitigate risks of reprisals, and, in some instances, supplying satellite-based internet (e.g. VSAT) with secure logins for partners.
- **Build capacity** through training on crisis management, offline reporting, and safe adaptation strategies for fieldwork during outages. Tailored trainings for women engaged in sensitive areas of work, such as human rights and journalism, should be developed and offered.
- **Strengthen women's groups** by investing in their communication and information-sharing capacities, recognising their role as trusted preparedness and response channels.
- **Ensure flexibility for local partners** for all programming activities including implementation and reporting requirements during internet blackouts.
- **Invest in in-person psychosocial support services for women**, as prolonged loss of connectivity further fuels isolation and vulnerability.

### Recommendations for NGOs and service providers

- **Develop contingency plans** with a mix of paper-based measures, mobile teams, and offline channels to sustain coordination and accountability during blackouts. Run drills on communication protocols and safety during shutdowns to ensure all staff know what to do when telecommunications are disrupted.
- **Prepare encrypted offline versions of critical documents**, maps, datasets, contact lists, communication templates, forms, etc. Ensure that any documents including sensitive information or personal identifiable information (e.g. names, addresses, contact details) are encrypted (if stored on a USB or external hard drive) and potentially masked and/or anonymised.
- **Prioritise in-person feedback mechanisms**, particularly women-to-women communication, as the most trusted and accessible channel. This also involves ensuring women staff have field access and lead in establishing these channels.
- **Equip partners with VSATs** and other backup connectivity tools, in consultation with them and following do-no-harm principles.
- **Strengthen digital security practices** within organizations and among all staff, including on offline messaging apps and other alternate communications channels.

Additionally, humanitarian and BHN actors may also consider:

- **Update information-sharing protocols** to ensure safe sharing of data during blackouts including expanding the current Inter-Cluster Coordination Team (ICCT) Information-Sharing Protocol (ISP) to also cover basic human needs sector and actors.
- **Clusters should establish backup systems, following the above recommendations, and use offline or paper-based when necessary**, to manage disclosures of women's protection concerns. This is central in ensuring that safe referrals remain possible even when digital communication is down.
- **Invest in paper-based referral systems** for protection and Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA), including pre-printed templates, colour coding or other means of safeguarding personal data, and clear guidance for partners.

## ANNEX I – Methodology

This Gender Alert was compiled using written inputs from UN Women’s key partners and networks following the resumption of telecommunications services in September 2025. Their contributions have been complemented with secondary data to further contextualise the findings. Below is a snapshot of different methodological approaches for the complimentary data.

### Whole of Afghanistan Assessment

The Whole of Afghanistan Assessment (WoAA) 2024 is a multi-sectoral needs assessment conducted through in-person, household-level interviews across all provinces of Afghanistan. This dataset analyzes households’ sectoral and intersectoral needs across various sectors, including health, education, nutrition, WASH, food security, and protection, among others. The results are representative of rural and urban populations, female- and male-headed households, as well as displaced population groups. In 2025 the assessment is based on 48,711 interviews which were collected across all 401 districts in all 34 provinces, from 13 July to 24 August 2025. Results are representative of each group at the national level with a 95% Confidence Level and a 5% margin of error.

In 2024, 20,601 interviews were collected in all provinces from the 17th of July till the 14th of August 2024. Results are representative of each group at the national level with a 90%/95% confidence level and <5% margin of error.

### Ground Truth Solutions - Perceptions Surveys on Strengthening Accountability to Women and Girls in the Afghanistan Humanitarian Response

Ground Truth Solutions and Salma Consulting – supported by UN Women and the Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group – spoke to over 1,000 women and 1,000 men across Afghanistan about their humanitarian needs and protection concerns in 2024 and early 2025. The research explored perceptions of safety, access to assistance, and barriers to reporting protection incidents as well as gender aspects of natural disasters. The perceptions surveys contain quantitative and qualitative aspects. For the quantitative part, the sampling targeted the general population of Afghanistan using a stratified, two-stage sampling approach. The qualitative study consisted of 8 focus group discussions and 12 in-depth interviews conducted across four purposefully selected provinces: Herat, Kabul, Nangarhar, and Khost.

### Gender Flagship Survey 2025

Between February and March 2025, a nationwide primary data collection through individual interviews using Kobo. A total of 2,190 respondents (1,116 men and 1,074 women) participated across all regions of Afghanistan. Regional representation included Central (14%), East (12%), North-East (13%), North-West (13%), South-East (12%), South-West (19%), and West (18%). A total of 80.5 per cent of survey participants were from rural localities and 19.5 from urban localities, which is proportionate to the urban/rural divide in the country. The methodology ensured balanced gender and geographic coverage to support inclusive analysis and programming. Further details on the methodology are available upon request.



**GENDER**  
IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION  
Afghanistan



GBV Area of Responsibility  
Afghanistan

