

THE CYCLE OF STRUGGLE

A HUMAN SECURITY PERSPECTIVE
ON AFGHANISTAN'S IDP WOMEN



WRITTEN BY BARIN SULTANI HAYMON



WOMEN'S REGIONAL NETWORK
AFGHANISTAN • PAKISTAN • INDIA

DISPLACED WOMEN HAVE A VOICE;

IT IS UP TO THE WORLD TO LISTEN

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—Barin

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ACRONYMS

ACTED	Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development
AREDP	Afghanistan Rural Enterprise Development Program
CC	Community Conversation
DREC	Displacement and Return Executive Committee
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
HLP Rights	Housing, Land and Property Rights
IDMC	Internally Displaced Monitoring Center
IDP	Internal Displaced Person
INGO	International Non-governmental Organization
IPV	Intimate Partner Violence
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoRR	Ministry of Refugees and Repatriations
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
NUG	National Unity Government
SSI	Scale for Suicide Ideation
UNEP	United Nations Environment Program
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VSLA	Village Savings and Loan Association
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WHO	World Health Organization
WHO EMRO	World Health Organisation Eastern Mediterranean Region
WRN	Women's Regional Network

GLOSSARY

Qawm	Rudimentarily defined as a social unit
Tazkera	National ID card
Wali	Governor
Stakeholders	Government officials, NGO's, INGO's and local activists

By mid-2017, the number of IDPs in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India was more than 3 million.



Women displaced in Takhar from Kunduz (Dasht-e Qala Camp)

1. INTRODUCTION

The Women's Regional Network (WRN) was founded during a listening tour in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India in 2010. At this time, it became evident to the group of civil society leaders that there was a need to capture the voices of marginalized women as a direct input into the shaping of political discourse, policy development and program implementation. Today, eight years on, the need for empowering these women and amplifying their voices is greater than ever in an exceptionally conflicted South Asia.

Currently there are at least six ongoing conflicts in the region: in Afghanistan, where war has raged for more than 40 years; in Pakistan, the contention in Balochistan, Kashmir, and the War in the North-West (War in Waziristan); in India, conflicts in Kashmir, the Seven Sister States in the North-East and the Naxalite–Maoist insurgency. Although war is disastrous for all, women and girls suffer disproportionately. The UN Security Council officially drew attention to this danger at the turn of the millennium through the passing of Resolution 1325, which specifically deals with women, peace and security. The Resolution “*calls on all parties to conflict to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse, in situations of armed conflict.*”¹

By the end of 2016, the number of IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons) in the world eclipsed 40.3 million,² a number which has further increased over 2017 and 2018. By mid-2017, the number of IDPs in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India was more than 3 million. This figure excludes displacements due to natural disaster. While much of the world's focus has been fixed on the refugee and migrant crisis, there has been little thought for IDPs, who remain trapped in a cycle of poverty and displacement. IDPs are less visible than refugees in the global context because whereas refugees

cross international borders and are thus an international concern, IDPs are displaced within their home country and are, by contrast, a domestic issue. As a result, IDPs are often overlooked, as they are less distinguishable from the rest of society while states neglect to adopt International Guiding Principles and standards for IDPs. For instance, Pakistan and India do not formally recognise their domestic conflicts and therefore, circumvent their obligations under international humanitarian law to those fleeing conflict.

None of this is to say that refugees or IDPs deserve more or less focus, but both need attention, as they can move between these statuses in a cyclical fashion. It has been said that “yesterday's refugee is today's IDP (refugee returnee); today's IDP is tomorrow's refugee” as people oscillate between porous borders.³

1.1. WRN Afghanistan and Community Conversations

WRN has been active in Afghanistan since its formation, with most of its focus on Kabul, Balkh, Bamyan, Faryab, Herat, Kandahar, Nangarhar and Kunduz.

WRN aims to tackle the interlinked issues of peace and security, justice and governance through a research method called Community Conversations. It is a technique which allows the researcher to have dynamic interaction with local women in an organic way that shifts depending on the specific circumstances of each community. The Community Conversations provide a genuine depiction of the subject matter from an insider's perspective as told in firsthand accounts. This authenticity positions WRN's research as a particularly valuable input into the larger discussion of IDPs, conflict and security, specifically because WRN endeavors to preserve the women's voices through the use of direct, verbatim quotations.

1 UN Security Council, 'Women, Peace and Security (Security Council Resolution 1325)', 31 October 2000.

2 The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), '2017 Global Report on Internal Displacement', May 2017.

3 Rita Manchanda, 'South Asia Tribunal on Women's Human Rights - Militarisation, Conflict and Displacement' (Women's Regional Network, May 2016).

WRN has published two previous reports on women in conflict zones in *Afghanistan: Surviving War and Transition (Perspectives from Afghanistan) 2013–2014* and *Afghanistan's Internally Displaced Women: Complex Realities 2015–2016*. This year's Community Conversation is building on the work of the two previous CCs by expanding to include IDPs in Takhar Province as well as providing a heightened focus on displaced women in conflict settings.

1.2. Objectives of Research

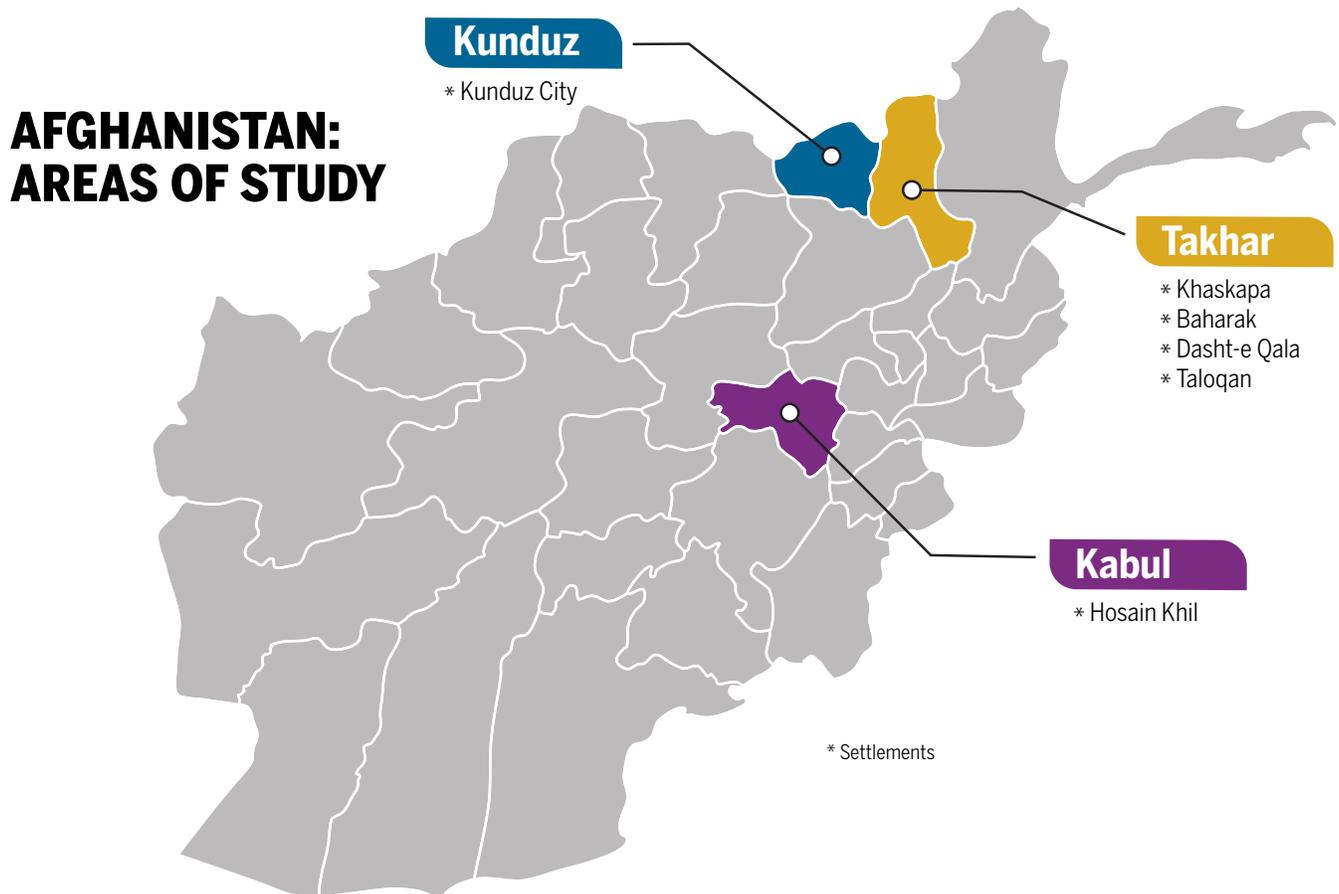
This paper presents and reflects on the perspectives of a cross-section of internally displaced women to promote the inclusion of this group in the ongoing discourse around IDPs. It is an endeavor to provide an avenue for IDP women to influence policies and programming by drawing attention to their needs. The paper will diagnose the challenges IDP women face in an insecure environment and relay their perspectives on security,

corruption, militarization of aid and development. The output of the research and the accompanying recommendations will serve as the rationale and the credibility for the Network to reach key stakeholders to advance policy to improve the lives of IDPs, especially the living conditions of women and their dependent children.

1.3. Scope of Research and Methodology

Primary research was carried out in January 2018 over a two-week period. It included field visits to Kabul, Takhar and Kunduz provinces where five Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were carried out at the following IDP settlements: Hosain Khil, Khaskapa, Baharak, Dasht-e Qala and Taloqan rental apartments. The below map illustrates the field of study.

Approximately 150 women and girls were interviewed, ranging from 16–70 years of age. Most of the participants have not received any formal education and were from an



agrarian background. Almost all of the women aged 18 and older were married or widowed and had a minimum of three children — in most cases more. Very few were employed in any formal capacity prior to displacement, but instead managed their households and/or farms as applicable. A large percentage of the respondents were from the Uzbek ethnic group, but also included were Pashtuns and Tajiks. The constituents of the interview population, particularly in terms of ethnic background, are representative of the demographic makeup of the northern region selected for the field study. The main language used for the interviews was Dari with local variation.

Additional interviews were conducted with government officials, representatives from international and local NGOs, and local activists in order to capture a holistic picture of IDP life in Afghanistan. The report also drew from secondary resources by reviewing existing literature on IDPs such as policy papers, articles, and reports from government and non-governmental organizations.

The outputs of the Community Conversations shaped the direction of this study. The interview questions were based on WRN's Research Methodology Document which provided ethical guidelines for the researcher as well as a gender flag post questionnaire based on feminist research methodology. Among other topics, respondents were queried on the topics of corruption and the militarization of aid and development, as it was initially thought that these themes might feature prominently in this analysis; ultimately, however, this subject matter did not resonate with the interviewees. For example, regarding the militarization of aid and development, the women's everyday struggle for food and other resources was said to be so intense that they were not particularly concerned about issues related to the sources of aid. Their main area of concern, first and foremost, was survival for their children and themselves, and the procurement of aid and other resources to meet immediate needs.

1.4. Challenges and Limitations

The principal impediment to the research was the physical risk and strain of operating in remote areas of Afghanistan. The challenge of conducting field research in an insecure environment cannot be overstated — particularly when the research is focused on, and carried out by, women. Hostile environments dictate where, when, how and if researchers conduct their field work. In this case, the Kabul Intercontinental Hotel attacked on January 20, 2018 directly

impacted the logistics of the research, delaying access to the defined regions of study. Kam Air, which operates 90 percent of Afghanistan's domestic flights,⁴ suspended its operations due to the number of fatalities sustained among their pilots and flight crew at the hotel. This had a direct impact on the travel schedule and consequently the timetable of the fieldwork.

The security of the team was also a constant challenge because of the remoteness of the locations chosen for the study and the fact that these areas were (and are) not fully under government control. Travel in general is difficult in Afghanistan, and especially so where it involves access to isolated areas. The physical terrain and limited infrastructure present significant problems, and these can be exacerbated by the region's harsh winter weather. A further logistical complication was around time-of-day constraints, as women are only safe to travel during specified daylight hours, and normally should be off the roads by four o'clock in the afternoon.

Perhaps a lesser known facet of Afghanistan's logistical challenges is the interpersonal access that is required in order to navigate the country's close-knit patriarchal society. With weak or absent government structures, familial and other social networks are by far the most effective way of getting things done: this is as it has always been in Afghanistan. In the more remote regions of the country, this dynamic is even more entrenched; therefore, it was only through the effectiveness of the WRN network that the data collection for this project was even possible.

A number of common themes emerged from the interviews; the most prominent among these are presented within this research. It must be noted that this paper is not intended to be an exhaustive summary of every thematic issue that emerged from the data collection, nor is the analysis thereof intended to address all of the commonalities and differences among the interview population. **It is a cross-sectional snapshot of what the situation is, a valuable documentation of women's direct voices and an advocacy tool.** A final caveat is that while every effort has been made to remain authentic to, and directly representative of, the genuine views of the local women, it is important to note that qualitative research may, by its nature, veer towards the subjective. The analysis and conclusions must be assessed with this in mind.

⁴ Mujib Mashal and Fahim Abed, 'Grounded and Gutted, Main Afghan Airline Struggles After Taliban Attack', *The New York Times*, 28 January 2018.

At the end of 2017, over 610,000 Afghans were coerced, forcibly returned or deported from Pakistan and Iran, adding to the 1 million Afghans that returned the previous year.



Widow women who have lost their husbands in the Kunduz conflict and are now displaced in the adjacent province of Takhar

2. DISPLACEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

As of December 2017, the number of displaced persons in Afghanistan reached over 1.2 million. While this is a vast number for a country with a population of just over 34 million, it is perhaps unsurprising considering that Afghanistan has been in a state of perpetual conflict for approximately four decades. Afghanistan experienced its first wave of exodus and internal displacement in the late 1970's, coinciding with the Soviet invasion. The second wave came in 1992 during the Afghan Civil War, with another surge to follow in 1996 with the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan; a further surge occurred in 2001 following the US intervention. Over these forty years, Afghans have borne extreme suffering as the country exhibited all of the telltale symptoms of war-torn regions, including insecurity, political turmoil, limited economic development, and poverty. Throughout this period, these factors have together produced a steady stream of IDPs and refugees. In addition to these manmade challenges, Afghanistan also faces many natural disasters as a result of its mountainous topography, including earthquakes, drought and landslides. These factors also drive further displacement.

2.1. Neighboring Countries

Historically, Pakistan and Iran have been safe harbors for Afghans during times of conflict. In recent years, however, sentiment has shifted, and these are no longer an appealing option. Both countries appear to display host country fatigue, having taken in millions of Afghan refugees over a period of decades. Coupled with the escalating political tension between Pakistan and Afghanistan, the risk profile for Afghan refugees within the region is now significantly higher, such that harassment, exploitation, abuse, and forced repatriation are now commonplace. As migration options dwindle, this has a corresponding upwards impact on the number of IDPs within Afghanistan.

At the end of 2017, over 610,000 Afghans were coerced, forcibly returned or deported from Pakistan and Iran, adding

to the 1 million Afghans that returned the previous year.⁵ These numbers include Afghans that were born in Pakistan or Iran and that do not consider Afghanistan to be their home. Yet they were pushed to return to uncertainty and insecurity, creating new forms of trauma. These returnees are adding pressure to a country that is already struggling to grapple with soaring levels of IDPs. Many of the returnees cannot go back to their place of origin — mostly due to conflict, but also due to lack of infrastructure, basic services and challenges with reintegration — and this has led to returnees falling into an internally displaced status. The current data on IDPs does not include displaced returnees, and this has resulted in many falling into an aid gap as they are unaccounted for within the system.

2.2. Kunduz and Takhar

Northern Afghanistan has become increasingly volatile since the drawdown of foreign troops at the end of 2014. The northern Afghan province of Kunduz has been the site of heavy clashes between the Taliban and Afghan security forces over the past few years. Kunduz, the provincial capital, has twice fallen to the Taliban: once for a brief period in 2015, and again in 2016. More than 350,000 Afghans have been displaced from their former homes in Kunduz since January 2015, with a large portion remaining within the province or migrating to neighboring Takhar.⁶ Of this number, more than 21% are adult women. Kunduz and Takhar are two of the 15 provinces in Afghanistan that are considered to host the highest numbers of IDPs and returnees.⁷

5 IOM and UNHCR, 'Returns To Afghanistan in 2017: Joint IOM-UNHCR Summary Report', 28 February 2018.

6 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

7 IOM, 'Displacement Survey Shows 3.5 Million Internally Displaced, Returnees from Abroad in 15 Afghan Provinces', 8 March 2018.

A lack of a unified approach to policy implementation has created an environment whereby the function of agencies working on IDP issues is driven more by personalities than the policy.



Women who are widows and have lost their husbands in the Kunduz conflict, now displaced in the adjacent province of Takhar

03. AFGHANISTAN'S NATIONAL IDP POLICY

3.1. Implementation of the National IDP Policy

The National IDP Policy was launched by the government of Afghanistan in February 2014. Afghanistan is the only country in WRN that currently has a national IDP policy. The policy is a comprehensive document that outlines the guiding principles for addressing the rights of IDPs with specific language on the needs of women. It even goes one step further to highlight and promote a woman's role in decision making regarding her life. Furthermore, it outlines the roles and responsibilities of various governmental departments, NGOs and other humanitarian agencies. The formulation of this policy was a significant step, and its mere existence has been lauded as a success. However, it has now been more than four years since launch, and the government has yet to take vital and necessary steps to ensure the successful implementation of the policy.

One of the largest obstacles for the implementation of the policy has been the absence of a firm national mandate from the National Unity Government (NUG) to underpin and drive forward the application of the policy. Consequently, this has caused a disconnect in priorities and accountability between the national, provincial and local levels of government. A prime example of this disconnect is the lack of awareness of the policy at the local level. An official from Shelter of Life stated:

"The MoRR office should give every organization and tell them that they should follow the procedure of this policy. They have not done this as of yet. For example, whenever an IDP arrives, we have to come up with a plan and decide where we are going to put them. Every organization does their own assessment and makes their own decision on what to do with the IDPs. Every office has their own procedures and approach to help IDPs."

It is no great insight to point out that, in order for this policy to be a success, it must be communicated effectively across stakeholders at all levels. A failure of this nature is not surprising, however, as it is symptomatic of Afghanistan's relatively weak institutional capacities — the latter being a common feature of a developing country.

This lack of a unified approach to policy implementation has created an environment whereby the function of agencies working on IDP issues is driven more by personalities rather than the policy. In other words, if a particular government official is interested in the IDP policy or perhaps in IDPs more broadly, they will push that agenda within their department. The converse is also true where there is disinterest, and as such the IDP agenda may effectively atrophy at the local level. Alyse Kennedy, Emergency Coordinator of ACTED Afghanistan, an international non-governmental organization (INGO), stated as follows:

"[Much of it is] contingent on personal relationships. The second that gets disrupted, there is an impact. Sometimes it is a positive because we may get a person that is far more motivated in this area, and sometimes there is no motivation. That is a very salient observation and the truth is that it does rely on a lot of personalities — and it shouldn't, because there is strategy in place and a desire from Kabul to have a system in place, but it is contingent on these kind of roadblocks along the way letting people through."

Mher Khuda Sabar, Afghanistan's General Director for IDPs and Emergency of the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation, echoed a similar sentiment.

"Let me give you an example of what the problem is with implementation: Gul Agha Sherzai, the former governor of Nangarhar, was introduced to the policy, but he left soon after. For six months, there was a new governor in

[Shamsulhaq Siraj] and we explained the policy to him, but his role changed and someone else came. We went back and introduced the policy to the new person and again, the person changed and someone else came.”

Continuity is a major obstacle to the successful implementation of the policy. There will always be turnover in personnel — perhaps even more volatility should be expected in Afghanistan, given the instability — but the system of controls needs to be sufficiently robust to cope. This touches on another problem, which is the lack of accountability through the various government bodies involved in the IDP issue. The Displacement and Return Executive Committee (DiREC) was created to manage the implementation of the policy, but tangible results are yet to be seen.

While the interviews demonstrate that there is a will to see this policy succeed, it is rooted in personalities instead of institutions. As long as this is the case, the best-case scenario is one of mixed results, and as a consequence the status quo will continue to leave a significant number of prolonged IDPs to inevitably slip through the cracks of a fragmented system.

3.2. Emergency Versus Protracted Displacement

The IDP Policy precisely defines IDPs as follows:

“Persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border.”⁸

While this is a functional working definition on paper, real-world implementation is rife with complexity. Particularly problematic is the question of duration, i.e. when an IDP should no longer be considered an IDP. The Afghan National IDP Policy addresses the issue of duration by stating that a person ‘shall be regarded as IDP...irrespective of the cause and duration of their displacement’.⁹

However, because no unified parameters have been set which would determine when an IDP is no longer to be

considered ‘displaced’ for these purposes, stakeholders (government officials, NGOs, INGOs and local activists) have developed their own varying interpretations and timelines. This was indeed the case for many of the organizations interviewed for this study, and the variance across these different actors is obvious. Not only does this make coordination more difficult, it also creates statistical distortions that impact policy formulation and programming (or lack thereof). Most importantly, however, it is having a profound, real-life impact on IDPs, who are seeing aid reduced, or cut off entirely, too early in the process. This is a devastating and self-defeating outcome, as it often prolongs displacement.

3.3. Duration and Stigma

The issue of duration has created a dichotomy between the concept of emergency and prolonged IDPs. As different organizations have their own interpretations of duration, this creates an uncertainty that is damaging to IDPs, who remain in a protracted situation of stasis. Based on the interviews for this study, the stakeholder groups and host communities held contrasting views when considering emergency versus prolonged IDPs. In general, there was a markedly higher level of compassion when discussing newly displaced IDPs. For example, one woman from the host community in Taloqan spoke sympathetically about the newly arrived IDPs after the second fall of Kunduz in 2016:

“Fifty people came to our place and we have a very small place, but my husband kept saying it is ok, keep helping them. Little boys would cry and say, ‘Aunt, please a pot of tea, we are thirsty’ and I would say, ‘it’s ok and come’ and give them tea. I had no clothes left at the end of it because I kept saying its ok, they need it. They needed blankets so we gave it to them. Whatever we had my husband kept saying it’s ok, give it to them...this is the day God has brought on to them so it’s ok, we must help.”

Yet, at a camp (Baharak) only 20 km north from Taloqan, IDPs have been living in desolation for nearly two years, since Kunduz fell to the Taliban for the first time in 2015. The camp is situated in a barren dirt field with a mountain to one side; nothing else could be seen apart from the UNHCR tents housing the IDPs. One woman explained the situation in the camp:

8 The Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, ‘The National Policy on Internally Displaced Persons’ (Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation, 23 November 2013).

9 The Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.



Desolate surroundings of Baharak camp

“There is no water and we don’t have access to any water.”

“We now live in a situation where we have no option but to go begging. We go to the stores and beg for food just so our children don’t die from hunger.”

The situation here was bleak, the most pressing concern being lack of access to food and clean water. In fact, the needs of the people in this camp were quite similar to those in the camp that the woman from the host community described sympathetically above. It therefore begs the question of why attitudes should differ across the two groups. It became evident during the interview process with various stakeholders, which included government officials and residents from the host community, that there is a negative perception of long-term IDPs. What differentiated the Baharak camp from other previous displacement settlements is that the IDPs have been living there in a state of limbo for over two years,

while the bulk of the other informal settlement has since been disbanded, with many of its former inhabitants having returned home.

The perception of the locals and other stakeholders about the Baharak IDPs was that their prolonged status was the result of some combination of laziness and an opportunistic motivation to exploit aid agencies. One respondent from the host community said:

“Those people sitting at the camp all have homes and they call each other to alert each other that someone from an aid organization is coming so they quickly arrive at the camps and pretend they are poor and helpless to get handouts.”

The IDPs are well aware of this negative perception. One woman from the Baharak camp said that people have accused her of *“hav[ing] built a house so [she should] go to it instead of sitting in the tent.”* The IDPs also relayed that they have

been told that they *“need to get up and go back to [their] land.”*

This stigma against protracted displacement is at least partly attributable to the fact that IDPs are perceived as a burden on the host community. In a country where at least 11.1 million¹⁰ citizens are food insecure, foreign aid has severely dwindled, and unemployment is stubbornly mired in a status of perpetual crisis, it is unsurprising that the local population are guarded and skeptical where it concerns resource allocation. Many in the host populations are economically vulnerable themselves, creating a natural tension where IDPs are in receipt of aid.¹¹

The displaced, however, are of course experiencing all of these hardships as well, but at a far more severe level. IDPs are typically captured in a cycle of poverty that can be exacerbated by multiple displacements. In all five of the Community Conversations, almost all of the women had been displaced a minimum of two times, with many reporting three or more incidents. Bibi Gul, aged 47, from the Hosain Khil informal settlement in Kabul explained that she was *“from Logar and had been displaced three times, going back and forth”* between Logar and Kabul.

According to the Multi-Cluster Needs Assessment of Prolonged IDPs — Afghanistan by REACH, families that were displaced multiple times were found to be increasingly food insecure.¹² Alongside this critical issue, multiple displacements have been linked with other problems, including higher eviction rates and lower attendance among school-aged children.¹³ The study also found that female heads of household were among the most vulnerable because their economic situation tends to be worse. Only 13% of households sampled had an acceptable level of food resources.¹⁴

In sum, it is evident that prolonged IDPs are at higher risk, particularly where a woman is the provider and head of household. This group is vulnerable to a perpetual state of multiple crises that is difficult to break out of, especially in Afghanistan, given the additional pressures of the weak economy and labor market. The negative perception of prolonged IDPs and lack of clear, consistent criteria for

determining their eligibility for aid are each further threats, as these factors tend to have the effect of curtailing assistance programs for IDPs during a period in which they remain vulnerable. As a result, prolonged IDPs often find it difficult to re-establish themselves in society and remain stranded in a perpetual displacement cycle for which there is presently no long-term solution.

3.4. Durable Solutions: Protracted Displacement

One of the largest issues uncovered during the course of this research is the lack of durable solutions for prolonged IDPs.¹⁵ There is a general assumption that IDPs that have been displaced for multiple years are better off than the newly displaced because they have access to aid and therefore can quickly rebuild their lives in their new community. In reality, prolonged IDPs are often as food insecure as the newly displaced and have equally inadequate housing. Study after study has shown this to be true.¹⁶

Part of the issue lies in the fact that IDPs in protracted situations are seen as a longer-term development issue by humanitarian agencies, who are instead oriented towards the provision of short-term relief. It is for this reason that the newly displaced, if they are not caught in the data gap, qualify for aid within the first six months of being displaced. IDPs can obtain additional aid from humanitarian agencies, but the qualifying criteria varies across the different organizations dependent upon the specifications of the humanitarian group’s mandate. In practical terms, this results in a situation whereby aid is relatively easy to access early on in displacement, but longer-term solutions are more difficult to find. On some occasions, IDPs may be passed on to a development agency at the end of their initial emergency aid program, but even this is not assured.

This is clearly a policy gap, one which has resulted in many IDPs falling into the destructive cycle of prolonged displacement. Such was the case for many of the women interviewed for this research, who said that they no longer received any assistance from NGOs or the government. As one woman explained:

10 ‘World Food Programme: Afghanistan Country Brief (October 2017),’ accessed 25 April 2018.

11 Anne-Kathrin Glatz, ‘Afghanistan: New and Long-Term IDPs Risk Becoming Neglected as Conflict Intensifies (IDMC),’ 16 July 2015.

12 REACH, ‘Multi-Cluster Needs Assessment of Prolonged IDPs – Afghanistan,’ January 2017.

13 REACH.

14 REACH.

15 OCHA’s new study ‘Breaking the Impasse, Reducing Protracted Internal Displacement as a Collective Outcome’ highlights a new approach to the issue of IDPs in protracted situations.

16 See: WFP and REACH Initiative, ‘Afghanistan: Multi-Cluster Needs Assessment - Food Security in Informal Settlements,’ November 2017.



Girl in the Khaskapa Community Conversations

"The original MoRR (Ministry of Refugees and Repatriations) helped us, but now they are not helping. It's been between 3-6 months that they have not helped. They [the officials] are saying that you are not an IDP, we can't help you. You need to leave because you are not IDPs. No one comes around anymore."

The gap in programming is partly due to the lack of accounting for the variations of experiences within the internally displaced. While all displacement is fraught with difficulty, there nonetheless exists within this a spectrum of varying levels of hardship. Part of this variation is attributable to the IDP's life prior to displacement (including their social network and access to education), which will inevitably impact if, how and what type of access they have to shelter, employment, education and health post-displacement.

Furthermore, gender plays a particularly important role in explaining the variation as women and men experience displacement differently (see further Section 4). The majority of the women in this study, for example, were from low-income families, often times landless and with limited or no education prior to displacement. While a full background survey was not undertaken, it is evident that many women were already facing challenging circumstances prior to becoming IDPs, and that these pre-existing problems were then exacerbated by their displacement.

There is a need for coordination between the humanitarian and developmental agencies to specifically understand and address the needs of prolonged IDPs in a sustainable way. However, stakeholders must take into account the variations within displacement and respond accordingly. There is a need for further research into this particular issue in order to drive development of more effective policy.

In times of conflict, women and girls are subject to increased threats of sexual and gender-based violence, increased maternal mortality rates and a degradation in access to education.



Hosain Khil, an all female informal settlement

4. HUMAN SECURITY: AFGHANISTAN'S IDP WOMEN

It is essential to stress the fact that women experience conflict differently than men. In times of conflict, women and girls are subject to increased threats of sexual and gender-based violence, increased maternal mortality rates and a degradation in access to education. These impediments reinforce the existing barriers of a patriarchal society which is inherently exclusive and unequal in its treatment towards women. In the same manner, subsets of women experience conflict differently based on their age, class, and other socioeconomic factors. All of these factors come into play for women during displacement, and therefore the specific needs of IDPs can vary significantly even within the same camp. Neither conflict nor displacement is gender-neutral, so therefore programming cannot be gender neutral.¹⁷

According to the United Nations, human security is a people-centered and multi-sectoral concept that is an all-encompassing approach to understanding insecurity.¹⁸ A report from the Human Security Unit of the UN defines human security as follows:

“Human security entails a broadened understanding of threats and includes causes of insecurity relating for instance to economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political security.”¹⁹

17 Rita Manchanda, 'South Asia Tribunal on Women's Human Rights - Militarisation, Conflict and Displacement' (Women's Regional Network, May 2016).

18 Human Security Unit, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, United Nations, 'Human Security in Theory and Practice: Application of the Human Security Concept and the United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security', 10 September 2009.

19 Human Security Unit, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and United Nations.

Two of the main components of human security include freedom of fear and freedom of want. IDP women, in particular, are especially vulnerable on both of these fronts.

4.1. Personal Security

During the Community Conversations, the women were asked a series of questions regarding their perception of security, e.g. 'how do you define security?', 'how safe do you feel?' and 'do you feel secure in your place of residence?' A significant majority of the women indicated that they did not feel secure in their current environment. Nazifa, who lived in a rental property in an area called Khaskapa, in Taloqan city of Takhar, explained:

“Things are better here compared to our own watan (homeland). In terms of fighting, things are safer, but not in regards to thievery. There is a lot of stealing going on and we worry about that. At night, it becomes a problem, especially for women. If it is during the night, they will come and steal whatever we have.”

Another female respondent from the Hosain Khil settlement in Kabul shared a similar concern:

“We don't have security; we are scared at night time that a thief might break in. There are perverted men walking around, stealing and attack the homes. At night, if you call the security people to help you, they would not come because they are scared for themselves.”

Both of these examples show that even where there is no imminent physical threat, they nonetheless experience personal insecurity in other forms.

4.1.1. Gender-Based Violence: Shame and the Impact of Cultural Impunity

According to the UN, “violence against women and girls is one of the most widespread, persistent and devastating human rights violations in our world today.”²⁰

IDP women, especially female heads of household, face an increased risk of gender-based violence because they are removed from the protection of male protectors within their social network once displaced. However, intimate partner violence (IPV), a form of GBV (Gender-Based Violence), can also arise or worsen during displacement. While domestic violence is a taboo subject in Afghanistan — despite evidence that it is a relatively commonplace occurrence²¹ — one woman in the camps shared how the stress of displacement has impacted her home life in this area:

“They [men] are stressed and upset. If there isn’t anything in the house and if we ask for things that we need in the house, they do hit us. They say where do you want me to get it from? Do you want me to steal it for you?”

Due to the cultural taboos, GBV is rarely reported. Partial explanation for this are the customary practices that are pervasive in Afghanistan, in particular surrounding the issue of honor and shame. Women are often pressured or feel the pressure due to cultural norms, to not expose the perpetrator as it will dishonor the woman’s family. Other times, women do not come forward because they are often times not believed which is one of the reasons why the harmful practice of virginity testing still exists which only reinforces and perpetuates the culture of shame or worse, honor killings.

Another reason why GBV is not reported is because of the lack of confidence in the justice system which was the common sentiment among the interviewees. For example, one woman from the Hosain Khil settlement recounted her experience finding her missing son, which was unsuccessful.

“I told the government that my son is missing and they didn’t do one thing to help me. I have no faith in the justice system.”

²⁰ United Nations, ‘International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, 25 November’.

²¹ Human Rights Watch, ‘Afghanistan: Child Marriage, Domestic Violence Harm Progress’, 4 September 2013.

There were many similar examples. Another woman said:

“No, we never complained or told anyone. Even if we complained, what can they do? They will say, ‘look at us, we don’t even have power, how can we help you?’”

None of this is surprising considering the culture of impunity and corruption that exists within Afghanistan, up to and including the highest levels of power within government and more broadly throughout the country at large. The impact of this culture erodes any confidence in the rule of law and further perpetuates the behavior within the community, while simultaneously stoking further cynicism amongst the Afghan public. For example, if a known warlord is publicly indemnified for past crimes without any recompense or penalty, what hope do IDP women have of obtaining justice against such strongmen?

One woman discussed the death of her husband, who was killed in action while a member of the Afghan armed forces, and the subsequent lack of care by government officials in the aftermath.

“My husband was a soldier and he was killed in his post by the Taliban. To this day, I haven’t seen his body. When we asked, they said that the Taliban attacked his post at night and he got injured and died of his injury. It’s been about five years.”

When asked if she had been able to lodge a complaint, she said:

“when I told the government officials, they said ‘go away! Where is the government?’”

One simple way in addressing the issue of justice would be to support programs that will increase the number of women in the legal profession. This is an important first step towards promoting equal access to justice for all women, and would be especially helpful for women affected by sensitive issues such as GBV and sexual violence. Furthermore, female representation within the legal system would help ensure that the issues which are important and relevant to women are given appropriate attention.

Another possible solution would be for stakeholders to partner with local organisations such as the Afghanistan Capacity Development & Educational Organisation (ACDEO). The ACDEO already provides a family support



Baharak Community Conversations

hotline which offers free counseling, legal advice and referrals to local social services; a similar offering tailored for displaced women could make a significant positive impact. Moreover, during the course of this research, an ACDEO representative indicated an interest in developing programming for the displaced, so this could be a viable option if the right connections are made.

4.1.2. Women, Peace and Security

The IDP women were surveyed on the role of women in peacebuilding. The vast majority, including a consensus of four out of five FGDs, believed that women should and do participate in the peace process. The women shared how they ensure peace within their own spaces. One woman from the Baharak camp explained as follows:

We would advise and talk to them to tell them not to fight and that fighting is bad. We say, we are one brother and one sister.

Another female respondent from the Hosain Khil settlement spoke about the impact of mothers on their children's lives:

"If two people were fighting, their women must stand up and teach them not the fight. We should sit our children down and educate them to not to fight. I would advise my children not to fight."

If women are present, they can bring peace in a good way because of the sensitivity that mothers have and they can encourage their sons.

These statements show how the women can leverage their standing in the social unit, along with their mediation skills, to influence a positive outcome in a conflict setting.

Another woman from the Baharak camp highlighted the balanced perspective that women can bring to the table.

If there is a woman, then the man is good because the woman helps him be good, but if there is no woman, and there are only men, then the other men corrupt them, take them off the path. Look for example at the Taliban.

Her statement captures precisely how women can be positive agents of influence. Her awareness of the participatory role women can play in the peace process again challenges the notion of displaced women as ‘victims’. Rather, these women are aware of their agency and actively use it to promote peace.

All of these quotes signal the important role women play in ensuring peace within their own families and in their local settings. Equally important is that it shows how powerful and effective women can be in peacebuilding. Research has shown that when women have played a formal role in the peace process, the resulting agreement is 35% more likely to last at least 15 years.²² This is why it is vital that women play a meaningful part in the Afghan peace process. Women are eager to take an active role in shaping the discourse, and must be well-represented throughout the process if their rights are to be secured.

Lastly, while indeed women can play a role in countering violent extremism, the issue of women’s rights cannot only be pursued in the context of security, because it simply utilizes women’s rights as a CVE instrument when it must be a standalone priority.²³

4.1.3. Geographic Vulnerability

A key element of human security is that it is context-specific; this is particularly important to understand the personal security of the IDP women. The geography of the settlements played a role in the women’s perception of their own security. Factors to consider here include the intensity and frequency of armed conflicts in the region, proximity to urban/city centers, and/or proximity to security checkpoints. The more isolated camps, such as the one in Baharak, were perceived to be a greater security risk. The camp is fairly isolated and positioned closer to areas under Taliban control.

“We are constantly worried about Taliban coming from the side of the mountain. At night, we cannot sleep because

22 Council on Foreign Relations, ‘Women’s Participation in Peace Processes’, 5 January 2018

23 Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS), ‘Prioritise Peace: Challenging Approaches to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism from a Women, Peace and Security Perspective’, April 2018.

we are worried that the Taliban is coming. We hear their gunshots and rockets. We can even see the flag of the Taliban from here.”

The perception of foreign and national forces in Afghanistan was also linked to the respondents’ sense of security. The women of the more isolated (and therefore more vulnerable) camps generally held a more positive opinion of the security forces, and of foreign soldiers in particular. One woman from the Baharak camp said:

“No, we didn’t see international forces, but if the foreign troops came we would be very happy to see them even if we don’t speak their language. I would be so happy if they came because we are so uncomfortable and insecure. The Taliban bother all of us. We feel that they help bring security.”

She went on to express positive feelings for the Afghan armed forces.

“What can I say, they are trying to help us and bring security. They are giving up their lives to help us. It is better if the security forces are there.”

Another woman from the Hosain Khil informal settlement stated,

“if there was a security post or something here, then I would have more security.”

The women’s positive perception of the national armed forces aligns to the findings of the Asia Foundation’s 2017 Survey of the Afghan People, 24 which noted an uptick in confidence in the Afghan forces.

4.2 Food Security

Food security is achieved when an individual has continuous, regular access to food that is nutritious and sufficient at all times to meet the dietary needs of sustaining a healthy life.²⁵ Two fundamental elements of food security are access and availability. Across all of the women interviewed, access to food was one of their top three major concerns (although

24 The Asia Foundation, ‘2017 Survey of the Afghan People’, 2017.

25 The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), ‘Rome Declaration on World Food Security. World Food Summit, 13-17 November 1996’, n.d.



Dasht-e Qala Camp near the Tajikistan Border

availability was also an issue and is discussed further below under Climate Change), with employment and housing the other primary worries.

During the course of the research it was also observed that more isolated settlements featuring makeshift homes such as humanitarian aid tents or abandoned buildings tended to have higher levels of food insecurity. The women in Baharak camp described their situation as follows:

"We can't find oil, so we cry. We can't find flour, so we cry. We can't find rice, so we cry. We can't find wood to burn to keep warm, so we cry."

"My sister, even more important than the education is food, because once security returns to our land, we will go back [to school]. Right now, our problem is that we don't even have access to food — we are hungry."

Access to clean water is a headline component of food security, and this also emerged as a key concern during the Community Conversations. Again, the situation was more urgent at the camps located in isolated areas:

"Access to water is a large problem, access to food such as flour and oil are an issue; everything is difficult."

"We now live in a situation where we have no option but to go begging. We go to the stores and beg for food just so our children don't die from hunger."

"It's been two years since we have had meat. We are hungry, we have stomach problems and I have blood coming out of my mouth."

Food security was a major concern raised by the women during the CC. Absent land ownership or other access to agriculture, food security becomes intrinsically linked with access to other resources, be they financial or other assets, that may be traded for food. The poor and destitute, however, cannot access food via any of these routes. It follows that food security is contingent upon financial security, which is in kind linked to the deficit in personal security inherent to conflict zones. These issues are all inextricably linked, and policy development needs to simultaneously account for all of these factors in a holistic manner.

One final element that needs to be explored further is how familial roles, and particularly the role of the male as the provider, impacts food security. In Afghanistan, familial roles tend towards the traditional, but can be varied depending on education and socio-economic factors. In rural settings, and where education has been limited, women tend to assume a more traditional role focused on child-rearing and domestic duties. Men, on the other hand, tend to be perceived as breadwinners. This traditional gender-based construct may act as an obstacle to women in terms of food security, particularly during times of displacement. However, it can also increase mobility for women who are compelled to take on non-traditional roles such as becoming the breadwinner in the family which was the case for many of the female-headed households in this study.

4.2.1. Climate Change

The other element of food security is availability, which has direct links to climate change. Climate analysts have already warned of the alarming trend in Afghanistan where it relates to rising temperatures.²⁶ There is currently a drought gripping the country, as precipitation levels have been in decline since autumn 2017, which includes an unusually dry snow season. This puts downward pressure on water supply, both in terms of fresh drinking water and for the irrigation of crops, with the attendant cascade effect on agricultural output and food production.²⁷ This will inevitably hit those who are most vulnerable the hardest, and especially the IDPs, who are already food insecure.

Around 61% of Afghans rely on agriculture as a source of income²⁸ — a number which, as it happens, includes some of the participants of this research. The women in the Khaskapa settlement explained that their community leader brought them pistachios to peel and smash, an opportunity only available to them during autumn harvest.

"We are happy to do whatever work that they have. We take one rock hit another rock just so that we can cover the cost of our oil and food."

Agriculture is the bedrock of Afghanistan's economy; it

is by far the country's most important industry and the one on which it is most dependent. There is little doubt that any significant adverse effects from climate change could potentially decimate what remains of legitimate economic opportunity in the country.

4.3. Health Security

Health is an essential part of human security which entails the "state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."²⁹ Respondents were asked about health services to gain a better understanding of the challenges IDP women face. During the Community Conversations in the Baharak and Dasht-e Qala settlements, when the questions regarding healthcare were raised, many of the women began shouting out their ailments, suggesting that this was a particularly sensitive and prevalent issue for them. One woman from Baharak stated:

"Where is the hospital for us to go? Even if we go, they won't check us out or offer us any medication. My throat hurts, I have high blood pressure and there is no medication. We don't have money so we can't go. We don't have access to a hospital."

More than 9 million Afghans have inadequate or no access to essential health services, either due to insufficient coverage by the public health sector or due to conflict.³⁰ Financial means are only one aspect of the problem; another important one is the geographical spread of care facilities, which are few and far between. This creates obvious challenges in a conflict zone, as even those who can afford the journey financially and are of sufficiently good health to undertake it often face a dangerous trek through insecure areas.

4.3.1. Obstetric Care and Neo-Natal Care

One of the other concerns identified during the Community Conversations was lack of access to obstetric care. Every camp had at least one pregnant woman — more, in some cases — and in each instance they all shared frustrations with the lack of accessibility to any form obstetric care. One woman from

26 Central Statistics Organization, 'The Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey 2013-2014'.

27 USAID, 'Food Assistance Fact Sheet: Afghanistan', 3 April 2018.

28 WFP and UNEP, 'Climate Change in Afghanistan: What Does It Mean for Rural Livelihoods and Food Security?', November 2016.

29 'WHO | Constitution of WHO: Principles', WHO, accessed 16 May 2018.

30 OCHA, '2017 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Afghanistan', November 2016. Ariel Higgins-Steele et al, 'Humanitarian and Primary Health Care Needs of Refugee Women and Children in Afghanistan', 11 December 2017.

the Baharak settlement described the collective anxiety on behalf of the pregnant women:

“She (pointing to another woman) couldn’t find any food to eat and couldn’t go to the doctor, her baby died. It’s been two months since the baby died and her belly swelled up. She didn’t have any oil or meat to eat so that she can regain her strength. She has no firewood just to burn so that she could warm up her feet. We currently have two women that are pregnant in the camp and we all wondering how we are going to take care of them and make sure they are alright.”

One woman in the Dasht-e Qala settlement recounted how she had sold her hand sewn crafts to raise the necessary funds for a clinic visit during her first pregnancy, but has been unable to return during her second.

“A few times, I took a machine and tried to sew some things to sell. I sold them and took the money and used it at the clinic twice. I haven’t been able to do it with this pregnancy and I’m 6 months pregnant.”

Another woman explained:

“We want to give birth in the clinic, but we can’t. If you have the money to give birth, they will even send a car to pick up the pregnant woman, but if you have no money it’s a different story. We end up taking loans to give to the clinic so that they can help us.”

All of these quotes highlight the difficulties that IDP women have in accessing obstetric care in Afghanistan. According to WHO, infant and maternal mortality rates are the highest in the region, with hemorrhaging being the leading cause of death.³¹ A particularly grim statistic is found in the 2017 Afghanistan Demographic and Health Survey — the first of its kind — which reported that “1 in 14 women in Afghanistan will die from either pregnancy or childbearing.”³² Many of these deaths are entirely preventable with proper care, but lack of access is a pervasive issue for all Afghans, and especially for the displaced.

31 WHO EMRO | Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health | Programmes | Afghanistan.

32 Central Statistics Organization and Ministry of Public Health, ‘Afghanistan Demographic and Health Survey 2015’, January 2017.

These quotes also drive home the clear linkage between health care and financial security. Low or no financial resource acts as a prerequisite to accessible health care, and for most IDP women, this is an impossible barrier to overcome. Where difficult decisions must be made in terms of resource allocation, food and water will be prioritized over health care. Few IDPs can manage both. For the women in more isolated areas, the additional logistical issues with travel put healthcare even further out of reach.

As a woman from the Dasht-e Qala camp stated:

“Everyone is sick and we don’t have medicine. There is a clinic in Dasht-e Qala area, but it is very far.”

4.3.2. Menstrual Health

Although menstruation is a fact of life for women, it is not a topic that is easily broached in many cultures, and Afghans are no exception. Surprisingly, a woman bravely raised the lack of access to sanitary products during her menstrual cycle. She stated:

“One of the biggest problems that we have is that we don’t have pads for our monthly cycle.”

Even as she spoke, her mother-in-law brought a swift reprimand, explaining that the woman had psychological problems owing to the recent loss of a child. This incident demonstrates not only the sensitivity, shame and embarrassment associated with the issue, but is also indicative of a real problem. This is an unmet need that is difficult for women to draw attention to.

It goes without saying that access to sanitary products is an essential component of good gynecological health — but the problems around menstruation do not end there. One of the major obstacles that IDP face is locating spaces where they are able to privately and safely manage their periods, and the lack of access to sufficient clean running water again surfaces here. It is often the case that no running water is available, let alone washrooms. This was the case in the Baharak settlement where, as previously noted, the terrain was dry and flat, with no immediate access to clean water. Given the scarcity of drinking water, the use of available stores on matters of personal hygiene is a luxury that is seldom afforded.

Because of the social stigma and the lack of adequate solutions and facilities, women are forced to seek out

remote spaces in order to find privacy, exposing them to the possibility of attacks. This example again highlights the interconnectedness of these issues and how they interlink and converge to create a difficult and sometimes dangerous environment for women IDPs. These factors together increase the risk of gender-based and sexual violence, indicating the gravity of the problem.³³

One of the more encouraging recent initiatives is Afghanistan's WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) Cluster Strategy and Operation Plan for 2018-2019, which includes provisions that will help address these needs.³⁴ Given the scope and breadth of the problem, however, more initiatives of this nature are required.

4.3.3. Mental Health

One of the final areas of health security that arose during our community conversations was the issue of mental health. As is common across the world, mental health issues carry a stigma in Afghanistan — this is particularly damaging for a country reeling from four decades of war and insecurity. Official statistics are not collected, but WHO estimates that more than a million Afghans suffer from depression, with over 1.2 million suffering from anxiety disorders. WHO considers these to be conservative estimates, and projects that actual figures are likely much higher.³⁵ Given the hardships facing IDPs, this is an issue one might expect to encounter in the camps. Many of the women spoke about their sadness and an overall feeling of hopelessness:

"We are very sad that we had to leave our home. It has affected me so much that I can't even concentrate on my prayer and I have forsaken everything, including myself."

"We don't have a good life, we don't have a good home, we don't have a good day."

"I've seen so much, I have psychological problems. I've seen so much blood."

This attests to the many traumas women experience when displaced due to conflict, such as the survival of life-threatening situations, sexual violence or witnessing the death of a loved one. As a result, many women suffer Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), but it is seldom diagnosed because it mirrors symptoms for depression and anxiety which often co-occurs with PTSD.

One of the symptoms for PTSD and depression is hopelessness and this is something that many IDPs contend with on a day-to-day basis. The stress of a protracted unsettled situation, especially where children are involved, can have a detrimental effect on one's health, both physically and psychologically. When left untreated, the feeling of hopelessness can become so intense such that it leads to chronic depression and, from there, potentially suicide. Aaron T. Beck, the renowned psychiatrist and developer of the Scale for Suicide Ideation (SSI), linked hopelessness to suicidal ideation. He states that "when depressed patients believe there is no solution to serious life problems, they view suicide as a way out of an intolerable situation." According to Beck, "hopelessness is a core characteristic of depression and serves as the link between depression and suicide."³⁶

This indeed was the case for one of the displaced women of Taloqan. She was 30 years old, living in a one room rental with her mother, her five children, a female cousin, and a further woman related by marriage. She related that the responsibility for the survival of her family fell squarely on her shoulders, and that pressure and ultimately hopelessness led her to self-harm. She courageously shared her story:

"There is a lot of pressure on me and there is nothing that I can do even for myself. One night, I fainted two or three times and they kept taking me to the hospital. How many times can my children take me to the hospital? Three or four times? Sometimes I even hit myself — I have a wound here [in abdomen]. I broke some glass into pieces and hit myself with it. My throat closes up and I go to my kids and they are all crying, but my tongue is tied up and I can't speak. What can I say? This is the sadness of my life."

When prompted on whether she had sought medical or psychiatric assistance, she explained that while she has sought medical help, it was the affordability of medication

33 Marni Sommer and Margaret Schmitt, 'What Is the Scope for Addressing Menstrual Hygiene Management in Complex Humanitarian Emergencies? A Global Review', July 2016.

34 United Nations Children's Fund, 'Afghanistan WASH Strategy and Operation Plan - HRP 2018-19', 19 April 2018.

35 World Health Organization (WHO), 'Depression a Leading Cause of Ill Health and Disability among Afghans - Fighting Stigma Is a Key to Recovery', 9 April 2017.

36 Aaron Beck, Robert Steer, and Maria Kovacs, 'Hopelessness and Eventual Suicide: A 10-Year Prospective Study of Patients Hospitalized with Suicidal Ideation', May 1985.

that was the problem, given her financial limitations. While this again highlights the link between mental health and financial insecurity, it also speaks to the inadequate mental health services available for Afghans in general, and more specifically for IDPs. The government recently announced that 700 professional psychological counsellors and 101 specialized mental health doctors have been trained to help address the mental health crisis in Afghanistan.³⁷ However, severe gaps exist in extending this service to IDPs, who are underserved in this area as the humanitarian response tends to focus on basic necessities such as food, water and shelter. The mental health of IDPs must become a public health priority for the Afghan government and a focus of the donor community because of the severe damage such issues can cause. Unsurprisingly, mental health suffers are more vulnerable to substance abuse, violence, poor physical health and have lower social functioning — all which add to the litany of problems created by displacement, making it that much more difficult to break out of the cycle.³⁸

These are just some of the health issues that encountered during the course of our study. However, it warrants mention that there are other issues that can affect the health security of IDP women such as sexual violence, family planning, disease and aged-based issues.

4.4. Environment Security

Housing was one of the top three concerns of almost all the women in the Community Conversations; this comes as no great shock for a population entirely without a long-term home. Many of the women felt their sense of security was tied directly to the lack of proper housing and land.

“If we had land, then we would buy our own place and finally have security.”

“It would be great if the govt could help us with land so we could live peaceful and we could build a home for ourselves.”

Most of the women in the focus groups had been living

37 World Health Organization (WHO), ‘Depression a Leading Cause of Ill Health and Disability among Afghans - Fighting Stigma Is a Key to Recovery’.

38 Barbara Lopes Cardozo et al., ‘Mental Health, Social Function, and Disability in Postwar Afghanistan’, 4 August 2004. Also, see: Bayard Roberts et al., ‘Post-Conflict Mental Health Needs: A Cross-Sectional Survey of Trauma, Depression and Associated Factors in Juba, Southern Sudan’, 4 March 2009.

as IDPs for years, displaced on a minimum of two occasions, and some many times over. The frequency of these multiple displacement cases is indicative of the recurrent cycle of IDPs, who often fall into a status of protracted displacement. There are number of reasons for this; in the interviews, common themes sprang up around land disputes and, in some cases, the destruction of property. A woman aged 50 in the Khosain Hill camp explains:

“If peace arrives in Logar, what is the point of me returning? I don’t have land...The house and land has been destroyed. There is no home for us to return to. The home we had was bombarded and the Taliban/Daesh are in our area.”

Two women in Dasht-e Qala settlement were returnees from Pakistan who, as is the fate of many such returnees, ultimately became IDPs. Similar to the previous respondent, these women could not return to their place of origin because someone else had taken their land.

“Some Uzbeks took over our land. Yes, we went a few times to the government to ask for help, but no one helped us.”

This example highlights yet another challenge that IDPs face: land usurpation (also referred to as land grabbing). After years of absence — decades, in some cases — many IDPs return to find that their land and property has been overtaken. A lack of formal documentation of property ownership and weak state mechanisms make it difficult for IDPs to reclaim their land, prolonging displacement and hindering successful reintegration.³⁹

Another dilemma that IDPs frequently face is eviction, or the threat thereof. The women from Hosain Khil settlement in Kabul described their predicament:

“No, I don’t feel secure at all. The other day they told us that they are going to send us away, all the way to Jalalabad. This clay house that I live in now, without a proper roof over our head, I would be happy to live here but they will not let us live here.”

“The property owners that have built around this camp want to knock this place down and kick us out of this area.”

39 For example, see: UNHCR, ‘Land Issues within the Repatriation Process of Afghan Refugees’, 1 September 2003. Also, see: Erica Gaston and Lillian Dang, ‘Addressing Land Conflict in Afghanistan’, June 2015.



Community Conversations discussion about access to the Tazkera card

The women in the Baharak camp also faced similar problems. As one woman described:

“The Wali (Governor) of Takhar told us that one of the commanders told him that we must leave this place because the land has already been divided up... The boss of the MoRR also told us that we can live in the tents, but we cannot build homes on them as it is the land of other people. They will not let us build anything and we do not have money to rent so we have no choice but to sit at this camp.”

While the impact of eviction is obvious in its severity, one aspect that is perhaps underrepresented is the mental health cost of living under these uncertain conditions. The threat of eviction places the IDPs in a perpetual state of fear, anxiousness and helplessness. The links between eviction and elevated levels of anxiety and depression are well documented, with such symptoms more pronounced for women.⁴⁰ These

40 For example, see: Amy McCaig, ‘Eviction Can Result in Depression, Poorer Health and Higher Stress, According to New Rice and Harvard Study’, 5 May 2015. Also, see: Barbara Lopes Cardozo et al., ‘Mental Health, Social Function, and Disability in Postwar Afghanistan’, 4 August 2004.

traumas perpetuate the mental health crisis that IDPs are facing which as noted previously, only extends displacement.

4.4.1. Land Security and Tazkera⁴¹

As is evident from the above statements from the interviewees, access to land is a major challenge which acts as a barrier to durable long-term solutions. The issue of land is another complex and multifaceted one, and one that has long been a source of tension and conflict in Afghanistan. A number of factors have created a property boom in recent years, among them a shortage of cultivable land, a steadily rising population, and increasing urbanization. Given the country’s reliance on agriculture (both in terms of legitimate and, in some cases, illicit crops) and widespread poverty, fertile land is a competitive resource in high demand.

Land ownership is directly linked to improved housing and food security. If the plot is of a sufficient size, a livelihood can be generated through farming, and this can provide local economic benefits through the creation of related jobs.

For women, the benefits of land ownership are vast, and

41 Tazkera is a national identification card used to show identity, residency and citizenship.

include improved health and increased access to education; it has even been suggested that women who are landowners are eight times less likely to experience domestic abuse.⁴² It is therefore of critical importance that women who are rightfully entitled to land be supported in retaining it. In Afghanistan, however, a significant obstacle is the lack of formal documentation, and this is an issue that inordinately affects IDP women.

Housing, land and property rights ('HLP rights') are contingent upon the possession of sufficient personal (birth certificates, marriage certificates, tazkeras and others) and land-related documentation (customary deeds, official titles, and so forth).⁴³ The absence of such documentation is likely to frustrate the requisition of HLP rights, regardless of the legitimacy of the claim. This is a particularly troublesome issue for returnees or IDPs who often find themselves in a dispute situation upon discovering their property to be occupied.

Access to property title deeds to prove ownership requires a tazkera. In the event of loss of property title deeds, an individual can obtain an attested copy of the title only after proving identity and presenting a tazkera.⁴⁴ It follows, then, that the exercise of HLP rights is conditional upon possession of a tazkera — without this critical piece of documentation, it is virtually impossible to reclaim stolen land.

In the IDP camps, there was a mixed response to the question of tazkeras — some women had them, while others did not. One woman pointed out that, at the time of her displacement, the tazkera did not even register in her thought process, due to more pressing concerns:

"We had so many problems with the Taliban back home, that it wasn't something we thought about."

Again, it is not unusual for IDPs to face life-and-death decisions in connection with their displacement; in these cases, the retrieval of proper documentation is not a high-level priority. One woman also highlighted a gender-based behavioral difference where it comes to the safekeeping of documentation:

"Our men have their tazkeras because men carry their tazkeras in their front pockets so they always have it on them. We usually leave ours at home."

42 'Women's Land Rights', Landesa (blog), accessed 28 May 2018.

43 NRC, 'A Guide to Property Law in Afghanistan', 15 September 2011.

44 Ibid. NRC.

There was mixed understanding among the women regarding who could obtain a tazkera, and from where. Some of the women were unsure if their children born in a camp would be able to get a tazkera and many were uncertain whether this was available to both boys and girls. The below conversation among these women reveals the level of confusion:

"If they are born in the camp, boy or girl, they won't have tazkera."

"No, we can't get them a tazkera."

"Where do we go and get it?"

The lack of clarity and consensus here is a concern, and suggests that a public awareness campaign is needed to stress the importance of proper civil documentation. Besides the issue of HLP, persons who lack a national ID will experience difficulty in obtaining legal and medical services, children's education and many forms of aid. A tazkera can dramatically impact a woman's life, offering the possibility of land ownership and other benefits and support services which are vital to escaping the cycle of long-term displacement.

Raising awareness around the importance of identity documentation, and facilitating the acquisition of same, should be an area of priority focus of the Afghan government, especially where it concerns IDPs. This is crucial to breaking the cycle of displacement and consequent poverty endemic to IDP status. It also bears mentioning that many IDPs face the same logistical and financial limitations noted elsewhere in this paper (e.g. costs and risks associated with travel), as well as other challenges such as inconsistent government policies and corruption, which further inhibit their ability to obtain civil documentation.⁴⁵

4.5. Economic security

The IDPs indicated unemployment as one of the core challenges they experience, and this applies regardless of the duration of displacement.

"Our men are always out looking for work, bless them. Sometimes there is work for them, sometimes there is no work."

45 See: Samuel Hall and NRC, 'Access to Tazkera and Other Civil Documentation in Afghanistan', 8 November 2016 and Amnesty International, 'Fleeing War, Finding Misery: The Plight of the Internally Displaced in Afghanistan', 2012.

"I tell him to try to find whatever job he can get. He comes back and cries to me saying oh woman there is no job for me, no choice for me. There is a problem — I cannot go that way because the Taliban is there, I cannot go this way because there is no job."

These quotes reflect the broader sentiment of Afghans at large, who collectively have cited joblessness as the second most prevalent concern (security being first) in the most recent opinion poll by the Asia Foundation.⁴⁶ This is borne out in the statistics, the most recent available figures showing an estimated unemployment rate of 23.9%, with the youth unemployment rate hovering at 30.7%.⁴⁷ More telling is the proportion of the population living below the poverty line, which is a staggering 54.5%.⁴⁸

In the case of the internally displaced women of this study, the impact of joblessness is far more extreme. A job for the displaced equates to having access to food or not. It is the difference between living in an aid tent or a run-down rental housing. It is having to choose between having sustenance and/or accessing medical care for a life-threatening problem. Unemployment is simply devastating in this context and there is no safety net for these women. The statements below capture what is at stake:

"We don't have jobs, which means we don't have money to pay rent"

"We don't have money to buy meat to buy one kilo to cook food. We are hungry"

"There are many days that we go hungry, my stomach is hungry and I can't feed my children."

"We don't have jobs, don't have dignity."

The IDP women want to work. Employment is a matter of life and death, in terms of food and housing security. These women are seeking opportunities for self-sufficiency and autonomy. Their position strongly rebuts the stereotype of the 'lazy IDP' waiting for a handout.

46 The Asia Foundation, '2017 Survey of the Afghan People.'

47 Central Statistics Organization, 'The Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey 2016-2017', 2018.

48 Ibid. Central Statistics Organization.

"If there was an opportunity for women to work, then there wouldn't be so much hardship for the men...Some work — sewing, for example — so we can help our men get out poverty."

One cannot improve the livelihood opportunities for displaced women without first appreciating the hurdles they face. Education, for example, plays a large role in the type of work displaced women can attain (if any). As expanded on further below in 4.5.1, access to education is extremely limited for children, and particularly so for girls, in displacement situations. If a woman has been in displacement for years — or, potentially decades, as was the case for a few women covered by this study — their level of education will often be almost negligible. In these circumstances, low-paid manual labor, if it can be found, is the only viable option.

Another challenge that women face is the impact of security on their access to employment. Many women, as noted under 4.1, felt too insecure to travel due to fear of attacks or rape. This is yet another example of how war and conflict work to limit the options available to women. Programming must look beyond the symptoms of poverty and rather focus on the causes; personal security is a vital factor.

One final aspect that must be taken into consideration in programming is how displacement disrupts the family and social unit. For example, in displacement, relying on the social unit for assistance with childcare is not an option, where it might otherwise be. This in turn creates a hinderance, especially to a female head of a household, in finding work.

Despite these constraints, the women of the IDP camps often find a way to make things work. One anecdote in particular stands out as an example of their resourcefulness and motivation. The women of the Khaskapa settlement explained how widows and other single women formed a sewing network, pooling the resulting revenue across the group to cover their basic necessities:

"If the women don't have husbands, they sew and try to raise money from themselves...They raise maybe AFN 300-400 and then they put it together to make ends meet."

The IDP women are far from powerless; rather, they are adaptable and enterprising, showing remarkable resilience and determination to carry on. An anecdote stands out as a demonstration of the resourcefulness and motivation of the IDPs. Another example of these traits in action is the success

of a program whereby the women of the Dasht-e Qala settlement were donated 20 live chickens. This has worked well as a sustainable food resource and a source of income for the community. A similar pilot has been set up in Balkh by the Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA), which is supported by the Afghanistan Rural Enterprise Development Program (AREDP).⁴⁹

It is opportunities of this kind that will empower these women to take control of their circumstances and break the cycle of displacement. These women have attained transferable skills that would serve them well if and when they are able to return to life outside the camps.

4.5.1. Education

The Afghan National IDP policy tasks the Ministry of Education (MoE) with ensuring free, compulsory primary and secondary education for all displaced children. The policy also states that displaced children cannot be denied education because of a lack of documentation (i.e. tazkera) of financial means (e.g. funds for the purchase of textbooks). Regrettably, the current reality on the ground is far removed from these principles.

In general, the children of the women in the Community Conversations are not receiving a formal education. Few other children are enrolled, mostly due to financial duress.

"We don't have money for school and books. Yes, there is a school nearby, but many times the children need money for books. My kids come home crying saying that the teacher hits me for not having books, pens, and papers."

This particular respondent was a resident of the Khaskapa settlement; this is worrying because it is located in Taloqan — the capital city of Takhar — yet she nonetheless had difficulties accessing education. One would certainly hope for and perhaps expect better given her proximity to a city center. This example draws attention to the barriers to education faced by displaced children which may not be readily apparent, as it would appear that the children of the Khaskapa camp would be enrolled in this nearby school. In addition, this account also brings to light the systemic failures at present, as these children have been rejected and treated as outcasts, notwithstanding that the IDP expressly stipulates that a child

cannot be denied education due to a lack of school supplies.

Another woman explained why her children do not attend school:

"There is no studying and school for the children...A few times our children were meant to go to the local school, but they [the school] won't take them. I don't know why they aren't accepted. I took a document, but the school rejected it. A few days ago, the local children of Baharak gathered together and really badly beat up my son."

This example again brings to light the many hidden obstacles that IDPs face in accessing education, and also highlights the abhorrent social stigma placed on IDP children. Displaced children are poorer and often cannot afford school supplies and newer clothes, and this makes them more vulnerable to bullying and other similar forms of abuse.

The issue of gender discrimination in terms of the availability of education was not identified as a problem area in the CCs. This is because the IDP children had a uniformly difficult time accessing education, regardless of gender. However, it is clear that displaced girls are facing significant barriers to education. Like their mothers, sisters, cousins, aunts and grandmothers, the mobility of displaced girls is severely curtailed because of violence and insecurity. For example, one woman from the Baharak camp explained:

"Many of the girls are scared because they think the Taliban might attack them for going to school. We are also afraid of going because we know there is fighting and we can hear the fighting so we are too scared to go outside."

Furthermore, negative coping mechanisms such as child marriage and child labor also play a role in explaining why displaced girls are not attending school. A lack of female role models in education, such as the low number of female teachers, also acts as a barrier to education for girls. The discussion around access to education must extend beyond the mere construction of schools, as there are many obstacles beyond physical access which prevent girls from attending. The importance of education cannot be overstated; however, a holistic approach is needed to address the educational needs of IDPs and, more importantly, to ensure that displaced girls are able to attend school.

⁴⁹ See: World Bank, 'Afghanistan: Entrepreneurial Women Bring Economic Vibrancy in Rural Communities', 28 August 2017

Displaced women can and do form strong alliances in order to fortify their own security and survive, despite seemingly every external factor working against them in a dangerous and volatile situation.



Pregnant woman discussing the lack of obstetric care

5. COPING STRATEGIES

One of the most damaging and unfair perceptions of IDP women is that they are helpless. Displacement is extraordinarily difficult for anyone, and particularly so in this part of the world due to all of factors working against these women. The mental and physical strength of these women is unparalleled. They continue to persevere through unimaginable circumstances and find a way to provide for their families. They have created strategies (positive or negative) that help them cope and survive in the harshest of environments.

5.1. Security

One such strategy used prolifically across each camp is that the women tend to travel in pairs, especially at nighttime.

This defense tactic, while familiar to women from all walks of life around the world, is particularly useful for IDP female heads of household, who do not have access to a male protector. Kabul's Hosain Khail camp was set up specifically by women in this position. One occupant described a comprehensive policy of traveling in tandem among the women of the camp:

"At nighttime, we don't go very far. Even if we go nearby, we go two at a time. We don't travel alone. During the day it is better because people are around so we can go shopping or to the doctors, but even then we travel with one or two people."

The other notable element was that many of the women in the camps have remained together with their qawms⁵⁰, through displacement. This creates a greater sense of security, as one woman explained:

"It is better to be with your own qawm. It is better to have security."

⁵⁰ Rudimentarily defined as a social unit based that can be based on kinship, experience and/or other various elements of identity.

This is hardly groundbreaking, as it is widely understood that there is a greater sense of security to be found within in one's own social network. What is interesting here, however, is that new social networks are being formed within the camps. In such a tightly knit, closed society, where familial and tribal connections are paramount, this is a significant.

As an example of this in practice, there were two camps housing women predominantly of the same ethnic group, but also women of other differing backgrounds. It would be expected that the latter group would be treated as outsiders, but in fact a new, cohesive social unit has emerged consisting of all of the women of the camp. These women specifically stated that they all feel part of a collective within the settlement, going so far as to say they now consider all of their fellow displaced women at the camp as part of their qawm. One woman from the Hosain Khil settlement said:

"Well, I feel like these people have become my qawm and blood. They have now become that close to me. They say more than a 100 mothers and fathers, it is better to have one good neighbor. If a neighbor is good, then they are better to have closer than a mother or father."

The importance of this is twofold. Firstly, it challenges the notion of the supposedly entrenched ethnic division that is frequently said to be fuelling the conflict in Afghanistan, because it proves that the concept of a qawm extends well beyond kinship or ethnic ties. A qawm can form around other criteria — such as shared experiences, for example — as demonstrated above. While systematic ethnic discrimination is prevalent, and is indeed heightened in the current political climate, the ongoing conflict cannot be wholly explained by the rather reductive generalization of tribal warfare.

The second element to highlight here is the resourcefulness of the IDP women in adapting to their environs. Displaced women can and do form strong alliances in order to fortify their own security and survive, despite seemingly every external factor working against them in a dangerous and

volatile situation. These behaviors refute the narrative of the helpless IDP.

5.2. Emergency Debt

As noted previously, there are provisions within the Afghan National IDP Policy which allow for assistance to be disbursed to long-term IDPs, but these are currently not being implemented. While there are coordinated efforts in place to assist with emergency needs, there is no corresponding relief program for IDPs in protracted situations. Consequently, once the initial aid period runs its course, longer-term IDPs fall into a cycle of poverty, with many taking on debt in order to procure basic essentials.

Many respondents reported such borrowings which were used to cover immediate needs, such as food for their families or to fund a hospital visit. One woman pointed out that the men of the camp are trapped in the same cycle, saying:

“They go to the market to buy some greens and even for that they end up going into debt. How is that life any better?”

Another woman said:

“Do your husbands have jobs? No, there are no jobs — ever since we arrived, we are in debt... Being in debt is a terrible thing and it has given me stress and depression.”

However, the situation is far worse for women heads of household, who often lack the personal network from which to draw small loans and face increased scrutiny from potential creditors. There is also an element of gender discrimination at work when it comes to accessing capital, as this is traditionally seen to fall within the remit of the man’s role.

“Where am I supposed to get money? I am forced to get a loan and even that is an issue because who is going to give me a loan? What do I have to give them for assurance? The other day I borrowed 6000 Afghani to pay for the operation for my daughter’s throat. I tried getting an additional 3000 for her hands, but I promise you, no one would give it to me.”

5.3. Child Marriage

Child marriage is immeasurably damaging to women. Issues arising from this practice include, but are not limited to: life-

threatening complications from early pregnancy; increased risk of domestic violence; limited or no access to education; and elevated poverty levels, both in terms of duration and severity. The effects of the psychological trauma can last a lifetime.

This subject was raised during the course of one Focus Group Discussion (FGD) in the Dasht-e Qala settlement, where two women framed child marriage as a coping strategy for dealing with their financial woes, while simultaneously ensuring provision for their daughters.

“I told my child the other day (points at a little girl, age 7) that I will have to marry you off soon because I can’t take care of you. She went and hid under the covers because she is scared that I am going to do this.”

“Our life is so bad and miserable that I would sell my daughter off for a little bit of food.”

The woman who made the second statement was a returnee from Pakistan who was desperately struggling with food security and pushed to the brink of her physical and psychological limits. Although the idea of marrying off a seven-year-old is objectively appalling, there is a more sympathetic element to her thinking. In addition to the benefit of securing of food and shelter, sometimes child marriage is thought of as a way to shield girls from harassment and sexual violence at the hands of strangers. These represent the very difficult choices of women and the destructive coping mechanisms that are often used in an attempt to ensure the child survives.

Child marriage is not a phenomenon unique to crisis situations, but is a harmful practice that is occurring across the globe. This is true even of more developed economies and western countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom.

Studies have shown that addressing these societal and cultural factors through local education can play an important role as part of an effective mitigation strategy.⁵¹ However, as previously noted, displaced girls have very limited access to education, making this option less viable, at least in a classroom setting. This again highlights the interconnectedness between education, poverty and child marriage, and how difficult it is to tackle one of these issues in isolation without effective solutions in place to deal with the other problem areas in tandem.

⁵¹ Girls Not Brides, ‘Addressing Child Marriage through Education: What the Evidence Shows’, 2018.



Children at the Baharak Camp with no access to education

5.4. Regional Migration

As noted earlier, economic instability and the broader issue of insecurity are inextricably linked in Afghanistan.⁵² Naturally, IDPs are using regional migration as a coping strategy. In almost all of the settlements, the women spoke of how a family member had traveled to Iran to find work.

“My son travels around to look for jobs and comes back. He traveled to Iran to make money and then comes back.”

“Whatever job they can find, they then will send money back home, from AFN 3,000 to AFN 5,000 to cover the expenses of the family for the house and food. They go for years, and we are alone during this time.”

One woman in the Khaskapa settlement was nine months pregnant and unsure of where to turn to in terms of prenatal care. Her husband had left her six months prior for work in

Iran, but had not been able to find a job and thus had not sent any money home.

It has been argued whether these cases should be classified as economic migrants, but it is somewhat far-fetched to consider that these families are voluntarily splitting up for months and years on end in search of economic progression. In reality, these people are trying to survive. Furthermore, the women were well aware of the problems (i.e. discrimination and prejudice) that Afghans face in neighboring countries.

“If we had security, our own country is better and we would not leave our country. However, since we have no security, and if we can find money, then we will go to Iran. But even in Iran, there are miseries.”

This quote in particular highlights the complexity of the situation and the difficult decisions faced not only by IDPs, but also by many other Afghans more broadly. The issues of personal security and economic necessity together place pressure on Afghans such that they feel forced to migrate.

⁵² Hameed Hakimi and Barin Sultani Haymon, ‘The Voice behind the Refugee Outflow from Afghanistan’, June 2016.

Displaced women
have a voice; it is up
to the world to listen.



6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

“We have no oil and no food, we just eat hard and dry bread — all we do is sit here in the dirt. Trust me, if we didn’t have a choice, we would not be sitting here; we would go directly back to our land. We have to sit here because we have nothing left.”

The Afghan government is facing significant challenges on many fronts, the greatest of these being the country’s continued and escalating insecurity problem. Because of this, the tendency is to relegate the IDP issue to a lower level priority, but this would be an error. The persistent instability of Afghanistan is precisely the reason that the correct implementation of the National IDP Policy should be made an urgent objective, as this situation can be expected to produce increasing levels of displacement.

The findings of this research clearly highlight the need for durable solutions for the IDPs. These must come from the Afghan government and, to a lesser extent, humanitarian and development agencies. The scale and scope of the issues are of such complexity that it will require targeted and coordinated efforts across multiple stakeholder groups to address the needs of IDPs in protracted displacement situations.

Finally, there is an imperative for more studies such as this in order to highlight and address the needs, and to ensure the most effective allocation of available resources. The strength, passion and spirit of these women were apparent over the course of the Community Conversations. Displaced women have a voice; it is up to the world to listen.

6.1. Policy Recommendations

Policy recommendations for all stakeholders (government officials, NGOs, INGOs and local activists) to coordinate and tackle simultaneously as many of the gaps and issues are inter-connected.

- The National Unity Government must address the implementation of the National IDP Policy as a matter of urgent and immediate national priority. The escalation of violence in Afghanistan can be expected to result in ever-rising levels of displacement. Politically, this is an easy win for the NUG, and would help alleviate the suffering of at least 1.2 million Afghans.
- The Displacement and Return Executive Committee (DiREC) must make policy training workshops a priority, beginning with local stakeholders that work directly with IDPs. This will mitigate the effect of personality-driven policy implementation.
- The DiREC must put in place measures to hold the various ministries, departments, taskforces and other relevant actors to account in order to drive the implementation of the National IDP policy forward.
- Stakeholders must prioritize access to education as a headline priority, in addition to other aid requirements. A special focus should be given to displaced girls and must take into account their specific barriers to education. This is the first step towards breaking the cycle of displacement and poverty among this vulnerable and marginalized group.

- There is a need for coordination between the humanitarian and developmental agencies to specifically understand and address the needs of protracted IDPs in a sustainable manner. One specific gap in policy is the lack of account for variations within the IDP population, which greatly affects the durability of the current programming. There is a need for further research into this particular issue in order to drive development of more effective policy.
- Stakeholders must set criteria to measure and track the progression of women through the displacement cycle. This is a preventive measure to ensure that IDPs in protracted situations do not fall into the assistance gap, which prolongs displacement.
- Stakeholders must urgently prioritize employing women at all levels, especially where it concerns IDP issues, with particular attention given to IDP women at the local level. The current scarcity of women representatives has created a situation whereby the needs of IDP women are unheard, and consequently unmet. The current structure requires women to go through a male facilitator (often a family member) to make representations on their behalf, an inefficient and opaque process which is unlikely to result in positive outcomes. IDP women would be better served by directly liaising with other women at local level, with whom they would be more likely to raise sensitive issues that they could not otherwise share with a male due to cultural taboos. In addition, gender sensitivity training should also be incorporated into the training regimen for all employees/volunteers working with IDPs.
- Stakeholders should develop policies that identify and train displaced women to ensure that their specific needs are addressed. A displaced woman is best placed to identify and address the struggles of displaced women.
- The humanitarian response must include sanitary products as part of the emergency relief aid to displaced women and girls. This is a simple yet effective way to help increase the personal security of displaced women and girls.
- Develop clearer procedures to foster the meaningful participation of women in peace negotiations.
- Stakeholders must help support displaced women in identifying their individual needs around civil documentation and support them in procuring such documentation as appropriate. A specific focus should be placed on the procurement of tazkeras, given their importance.
- Stakeholders must develop and implement livelihood programs that incorporate direct input from local displaced women. This will ensure that any existing skills already held by the women can be immediately utilized, thus expediting their access to employment and income. A triage process should be established to identify the most vulnerable women with the fewest post-displacement opportunities — i.e. employment and/or education — in order to effectively prioritize the allocation of available aid.
- Stakeholders should create policies that address the mental health needs of the internally displaced women; this important area of human wellness is often neglected among the displaced, but is particularly important for women, given that they often experience disproportionately high levels of trauma when displaced due to conflict.
- Stakeholders should support programs that will increase the number of women in the legal profession. This is an important first step towards promoting the equal access to justice for all women and would be especially helpful for women affected by sensitive issues such as GBV and sexual violence. Female representation within the legal system would help ensure that the issues which are important and relevant to women are given appropriate attention.
- Stakeholders should develop partnerships with existing local organizations such as the Afghanistan Capacity Development & Educational Organization (ACDEO) to accelerate the delivery of aid. The ACDEO, for example, is already providing free counseling, legal advice, and other forms of assistance to local families. This service could be particularly impactful if extended to IDPs.
- Support local women in media, as this offers a valuable and effective platform for promoting awareness around women's issues, including the circumstances of IDP women. For example, Malalay Yousofi, who heads Cheragh Radio, is one of the few remaining women working in media in Kunduz Province.
- Stakeholders — and especially the governments of Afghanistan, Pakistan and India — must coordinate and develop regional guidelines based on international law to protect the rights of IDPs, with a special focus on IDP women and children. This must be a high priority from a regional perspective due to the population movement across porous borders.

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