UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

PROTECTION BRIEF
AFGHANISTAN

AUGUST 2024

Operational Context & Analysis[1]

With the end of major hostilities in Afghanistan and the consolidation of control by de facto authorities (dfa) in August 2021, conflict is no longer the primary driver of displacement. Nonetheless, 3.2 million Afghans remain displaced within the country due to conflict and over 5.82 million are registered refugees or Afghans in refugee-like situations in the region, mostly in the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan. An estimated 34,000 refugees are living in Afghanistan's Khost and Paktika regions. Refugees and asylum-seekers are among the most vulnerable groups in the absence of refugee laws and with limited access to basic rights.

The socio-economic and human rights situation inside Afghanistan has significantly deteriorated since the takeover in August 2021. Afghans are grappling with steep increases in poverty, malnutrition, and a near-collapse of the national public health system. An estimated 23.7 million people require humanitarian assistance in 2024.

The de facto authorities are also systematically dismantling the rights of women and girls. The situation has been exacerbated by decrees limiting the employment of Afghan women by NGOs and UN organisations, restricting access to vulnerable women and girls. Currently, there are no signs that the systematic discrimination against women and girls will cease or that their quality of life will improve. On the contrary, on 21 August 2024, the de facto authorities announced the ratification of a Law on the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, which dramatically restricts the rights of women in the country even further. The document is the first formal declaration of the vice and virtue laws under the dfa's strict interpretation of Sharia law, and – unlike the previous edicts – was published in the Official Gazette. It gives the Ministry of Vice and Virtue a mandate to enforce the law; in other words, a legal basis for infringement of human rights, further restricting women's rights. In addition, the law defines the responsibilities of an inspector responsible for enforcing the prohibitions with discretionary power over arbitrary arrests and detentions.

Afghanistan remains highly susceptible to climate shocks and is among the least prepared, experiencing extreme weather conditions such as earthquakes, droughts and flooding which compound poverty and loss of livelihoods, ultimately creating triggers for further displacement.

The situation has been further complicated by Pakistan's implementation of the 'Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan' which saw hundreds of thousands of Afghans, many of them refugees, return to Afghanistan since late 2023. While the Government of Pakistan has provided a one-year extension for Proof of Registration cardholders, the return of other groups continues. Afghan communities have been welcoming returnees, however return movements are straining the already limited resources.

Key Trends & Figures[2]

5.82M

Registered refugees and Afghans in refugee-like situations from Afghanistan in neighboring countries as of 31 December 2023

3,222,400

Conflict induced IDPs in Afghanistan as of 31 December 2023

1.6M

New Afghan arrivals to neighboring countries since August 2021

899,096

IDPs were displaced in Afghanistan in 2021 & 2022

34,827

Refugees in Afghanistan as of 15 May 2024

[1] *Operational Context and Anlaysis may be reviewed along with UNHCR Protection and Solutions Strategy 2024-2027*
[2] *Source: UNHCR Operational Data Portal*

Protection brief in graphics (2024)

This protection update for Afghanistan provides a comprehensive overview of UNHCR's different protection programs, aiming to prevent, mitigate and respond to protection risks faced by vulnerable populations in the context of the current humanitarian crisis and in the absence of durable solutions. The data and insights presented are derived from an extensive protection analysis, collected through a variety of robust tools and systems. The activities include protection monitoring, household assessments, returns assisted, specialized support for persons with specific needs, community engagement, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), child protection, women protection, and civil documentation. This update aims to highlight key achievements, ongoing challenges, and the critical needs of the affected communities, ensuring a transparent and effective protection response.

Assessments

26,999 rapid household assessments conducted

5,428 household protection monitoring assessment conducted

129,812 number of women and girls reached

Documentation

761 awareness sessions conducted on civil documentation for **14,387** individuals

4,501 received legal assistance/counselling on documentation

7,842 legal identity documents issued

Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS)

26,763 benefited from MHPSS services

50% of MHPSS beneficiaries are women and girls

40,822 benefited from awareness raising sessions

Child protection

15,214 children and parents participated in awareness raising on CP

1,864 children referred to child protection services

10,198 children received PSS support in schools

Women protection

3,668 dialogues conducted with community leaders

19,185 women reached through awareness raising

140 women referred by UNHCR partners through inter-agency referral pathways

Assisted persons with specific needs

6,433 PSN assessments conducted

2,261 # of PSN cases Identified

1,571 referred by UNHCR partners through inter-agency referral pathways

2,964 PSNs received cash Assistance

Assisted returns

40,822 Number of UNHCR assisted voluntary and other retrun

29% Of assisted returns are female-headed

49% Of assisted returns are women and girls

Protection risks

Protection Risk I

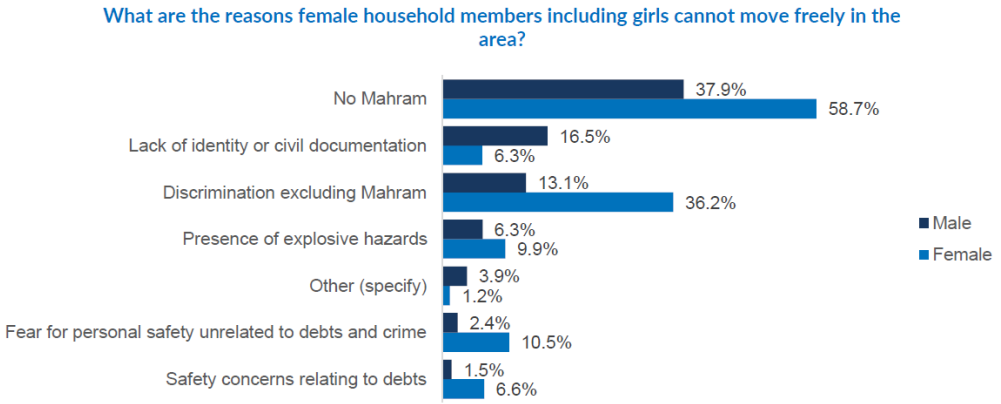
Systematic discrimination of women and girls limiting access to rights and services. Following the 2021 Taliban takeover, the de facto authorities have made significant changes to the legal framework concerning gender equality in Afghanistan. The 2004 Constitution, which provided equal rights and duties before the law for both women and men, was suspended, so was the Law on the Elimination of Violence against Women.

The issuance of over 80 decrees and directives has led to substantial restrictions on women's basic rights and fundamental freedoms. These measures have effectively marginalized women from participating in the shaping of their own futures and that of their country. Restrictions have been placed on education, limiting it to below grade seven and in some cases to madrasas after primary school.

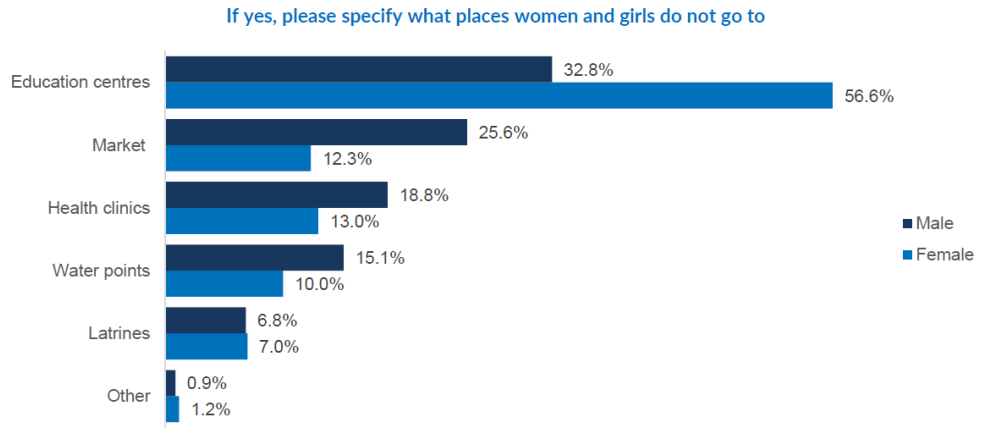
Women's freedom of movement has been curtailed, particularly through the imposition of mahram (male chaperone) requirements, and their freedom of peaceful assembly, opinion, and expression have been constrained. Employment opportunities for women have been limited to specific sectors, and their participation in public and political life severely restricted.

UNHCR's 2023 Community Based Protection Monitoring (CBPM) Report reveals that approximately 40 percent of households report that there are areas in the community where women and girls are not allowed to go.

The main barriers to movement reported for women and girls across all population groups are mahram requirements, followed by discrimination and the lack of civil documentation, the latter underlining how women and girls' limited access to civil documentation disproportionately impacts on their daily lives.



Education centres are most prominently among the places not fully accessible for women and girls followed by markets, health clinics and waterpoints. The significant number of women and girls that may not be able to access lifesaving health services at clinics within their community is of particular concern.



Female heads of households focused more on access to education whereas male heads of households considered access to markets, clinics, and water points more challenging than female respondents. This indicates that male and female headed households place different weight on access to education for women and girls.

UNHCR's protection monitoring furthermore highlights the severe access restrictions faced by women in accessing law enforcement and justice mechanisms, leaving them with informal dispute resolution mechanisms as the sole avenue to address grievances and legal complaints. The lack of female representation in informal dispute resolution mechanisms has been identified as the key shortcoming of the system. The limited access to justice further heightens women and girls' vulnerability to gender-based violence, both in the public and private sphere.

These surveys reveal some of the impacts of the systemic denial of women's rights, dignity, well-being, and personhood, which contravenes Afghanistan's obligations under international treaties, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

In light of these developments, it is imperative for the international community to continue monitoring the situation and advocating for the rights of Afghan women and girls. The commitment to gender equality and the protection of women's rights remains a cornerstone of a just and equitable society.

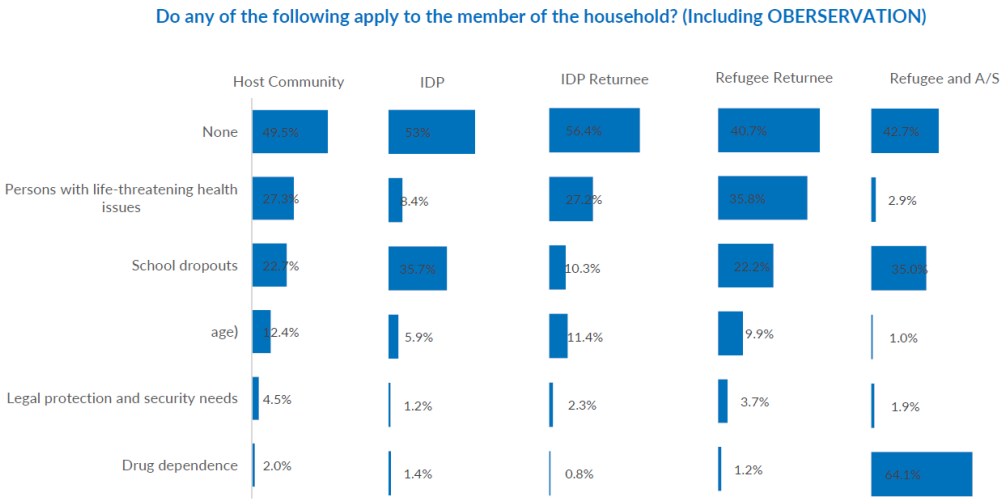
UNHCR is using the information gathered through its protection monitoring tools to inform these advocacy efforts as well as to adapt its programmatic and strategic decision making to ensure effective women-to-women service delivery. This includes increased focus women's access to civil documentation and legal services as well as MHPSS support. UNHCR has also made conscious efforts to include mahram costs for female UNHCR and partner staff in its project budgets, aiming to create an enabling environment for women's participation and to counter the increased marginalization of women in the workplace. UNHCR has adopted a variety of different approaches to support its service delivery and outreach work to women and girls, including the hiring of married couples as community outreach volunteers.

Protection Risk II

Belonging to a specific population group as a key protection risk. UNHCR's Community Based Protection Monitoring (CBPM), including household-level assessments, key informant interviews and focus group discussions, as well as Rapid Multi-Sectoral Household Assessments (RHAF), have identified stark contrasts in vulnerabilities across various population groups, namely IDP and refugee returnee, host communities, refugees and asylum-seekers.

Asylum-seekers and refugees have reported significantly higher movement restrictions than other population groups the main reasons being the lack of documentation, safety concerns as well as mahram requirements for women. Refugee returnees more often identified fears for their personal safety and security among the key reasons restricting the movement of men, women, boys and girls.

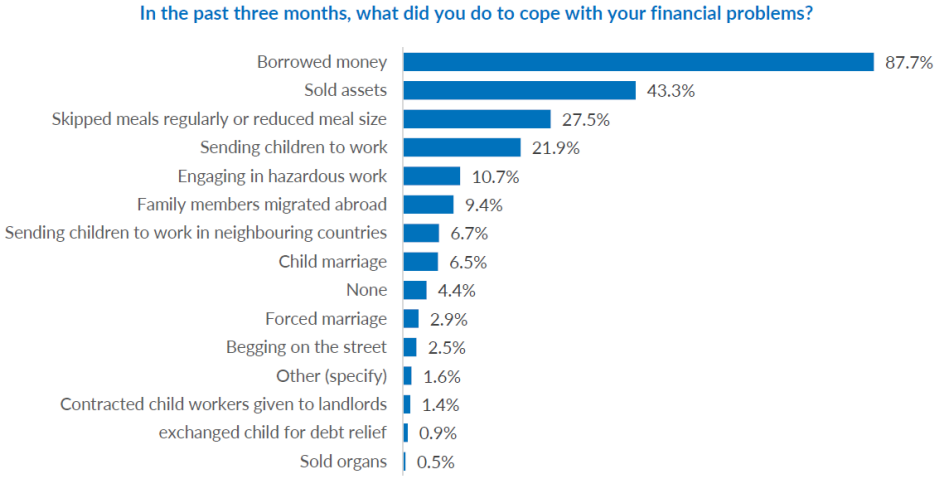
Life-threatening health issues are a major concern, particularly for refugee returnees. School dropouts are notably high among IDPs and refugee and asylum-seekers. However, drug dependence is alarmingly high among refugee and asylum-seekers, suggesting a critical area for intervention for these groups.



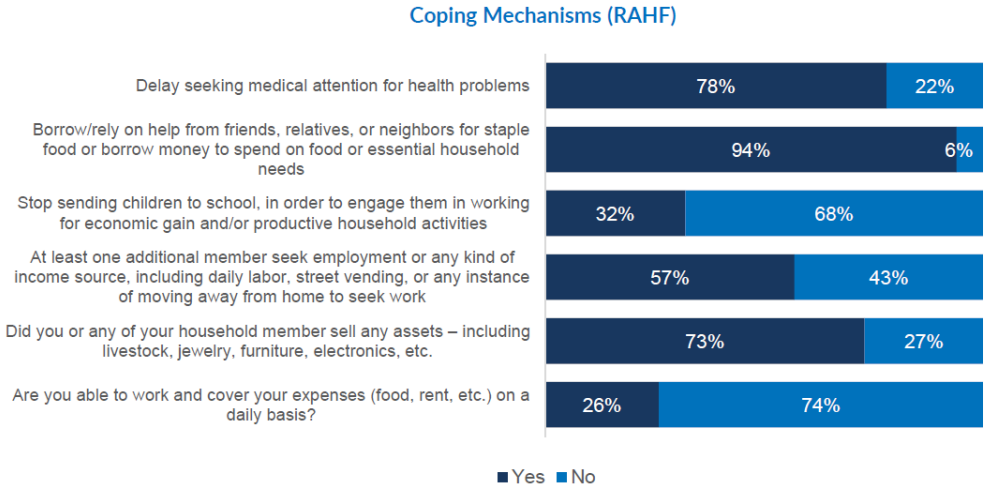
The gender-disaggregated data reveals differences in the vulnerability profiles of male and female-headed households. While 36.5 per cent of male respondents report having vulnerabilities, this figure is substantially higher for female respondents - 74.4 per cent of whom indicate that they have one or more vulnerability. These vulnerabilities include being a female head of household, women-at-risk, or having a disability. Overall, male heads of households report higher percentages of having disabilities (11.3 per cent, compared to 6.6 per cent female-headed) as well as life-threatening health conditions or being an older person-at-risk.

A significant number of households reported to have adopted harmful coping mechanisms to mitigate the impacts of these vulnerabilities, implying serious child protection risks, such as sending children to work, including to neighboring countries, engaging them in begging or hazardous work, and child or forced marriage. Women and girls are disproportionately affected. Additionally, a small number of respondents resorted to extremely detrimental measures such as selling children for debt relief, and subjecting children to indentured labor for landlords.

Movements to other countries, particularly to Iran and Pakistan – including of women, children – has been reported by a significant number of households. This is despite the increased challenges that Afghans face when seeking work or education opportunities as well as life-saving medical care abroad, and illustrates the serious impact of the security, human rights and humanitarian crises on communities. The percentage of community members feeling compelled to seek opportunities abroad is higher when only looking at specific population groups, as nearly a quarter of refugee returnees reported on having adopted this coping mechanism.



Rapid Multi-Sectoral Household Assessments (RHAF) data confirms an inability to cover the costs of their most basic needs without resorting to harmful coping mechanisms, with 92 per cent of respondents indicating that they accrued debt.



Additionally, 58 per cent of households report at least one member without legal documentation, hampering access to rights and essential services such as education and healthcare, and restricting their freedom of movement and access to employment. This marks a notable rise from the 37 per cent recorded in 2022, which can be mainly attributed to systemic challenges in acquiring legal documentation following the Taliban takeover in 2021 and the subsequent deterioration of the economic situation in Afghanistan.

The gap is most pronounced among women and girls, who continue to face considerable obstacles in obtaining essential documents. A study by the Alliance for Financial Inclusion revealed that while around 90 per cent of Afghan men, whether displaced or not, were reported to have an Afghan national identity card, the tazkira (or e-tazkira) in 2019, only 38 per cent of all Afghan women and 21 per cent of forcibly displaced women had an ID. Reasons include the cost of administrative fees, the absence of mahrams to accompany women, the need to travel long distances to reach civil registration centers and cultural norms that discourage women from seeking legal documentation.

Furthermore, around 30 per cent of all CBPM respondents face housing, land and property (HLP) issues, the most prevalent concerns identified being rental disputes, threats of eviction, inheritance issues, and ownership or boundary disputes. IDPs experience significantly greater problems related to

their rental accommodation, facing threats of eviction, pointing to the precarious living situation and heightened vulnerability of IDPs.

In summary, the data demonstrates a critical need for provision of targeted assistance and services to women and girls and persons with heightened vulnerabilities, including persons with disabilities and legal protection needs, such as persons without legal documentation or persons at risk due to their specific profile. The data suggests the need to place increased focus on those newly returned from Pakistan.

UNHCR and partners work hard to strengthen protection mainstreaming across all sectors, with a particular focus on prioritizing safety and dignity, securing meaningful access as well as ensuring participation and empowerment of the community and accountability. This is key to address access barriers that have been identified across all areas of programming.

UNHCR launched a legal assistance project in 2023, seeking to empower individuals, particularly those affected by conflict and displacement, by helping them navigate intricate legal systems and ensuring the protection of their rights. It also aims to foster community empowerment through support to legal clinics, grassroots campaigns, and community-led initiatives. This is achieved through a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach encompassing a range of legal services and initiatives.

Protection Risk III

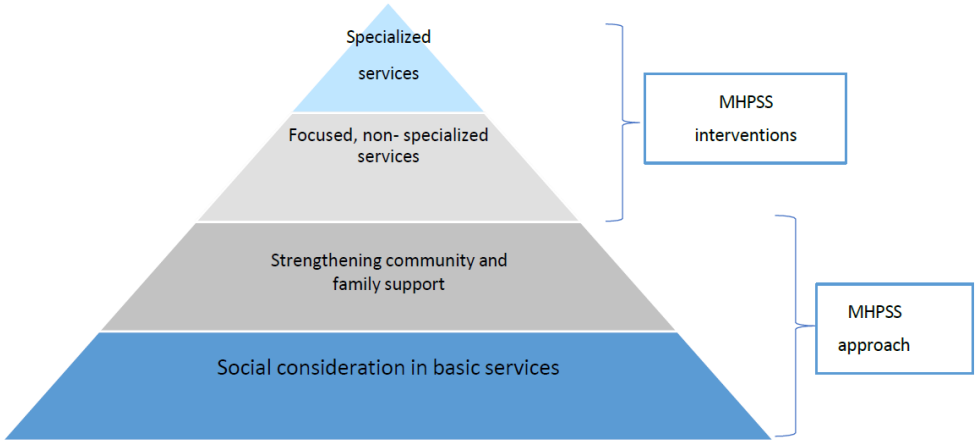
Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) problems are increasing. The humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan has led to widespread mental health and psychosocial problems. The ongoing emergencies like displacement, natural disasters, returns added more to the experience of Afghan communities emphasizing the urgent need for improved mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services.

The 2024 Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs Response Plan quotes “over half of Afghans are distressed, and one in five individuals is suffering from severe forms of mental health problems.” Data collected from Community-Based Protection Monitoring (CBPM) reveals that 27 per cent of respondents have noticed negative changes in their family members' behaviors. Additionally, 45 per cent of respondents note experiencing stress, affecting their sleep and daily activities. In addition, over 50 per cent of refugee returnees have increased MHPSS needs, with noticeable changes in behavior such as stress, mood, and appetite changes, leading to aggression or self-harm. Death by suicide is reported across various provinces, reflecting the profound mental health challenges faced by individuals. While specific data on suicide rates is not available, anecdotal evidence suggests higher rates in some regions. Potential risk factors for this disparity include cultural practices like child marriage, family violence, and socioeconomic hardships.

This is contrasted by the stark reality of 55 per cent of children and 45 per cent of adults lacking access to MHPSS services.

In response, UNHCR in Afghanistan has developed a Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Strategic Plan (2024-2027) to address the urgent need for improved mental health services due to the widespread psychological distress. It outlines strategies to enhance access to MHPSS services, integrate critical services into existing UNHCR protection programs, build community resilience, and improve the quality and effectiveness of interventions, through promotion and protection psychosocial well-being and treating mental health problems.

MHPSS is often conceptualized as a multi-layered pyramid of interventions, ranging from clinical services (usually in the health sector) to focused psychosocial support and to community-based supports (often through community-based protection partners).



IASC pyramid of MHPSS interventions

UNHCR and its local and international partners integrate social considerations into basic services, ensuring accessibility, inclusivity, and cultural appropriateness. MHPSS is integrated into women's protection and child protection activities. MHPSS teams provide service orientation and awareness sessions on MHPSS, starting with community leaders when they arrive in a new location, to address mental health stigma. Additionally, UNHCR provides individual one-on-one counseling services in Afghanistan through partners.

Capacity exchange activities are among the main objectives of UNHCR's multi-year strategy for MHPSS in Afghanistan, aiming to develop the capacity of local staff so they can support their communities more independently in the future.

Challenges & Opportunities

Analyzing UNHCR's protection monitoring activities reveals the interconnectedness and circular nature of belonging to a specific population group, gender, protection risks, mental health, coping mechanisms, and assistance needs. These elements are deeply intertwined and for example gender-specific vulnerabilities often dictate the nature and severity of protection risks faced by individuals. Women and girls may face heightened risks of gender-based violence, which in turn may require tailored assistance interventions. Age, gender and diversity sensitive protection monitoring helps identify these specific risks and the corresponding needs, allowing for more targeted and effective responses. By understanding the cyclical relationship between gender or status and protection needs, UNHCR and partners can develop more comprehensive strategies that address the root causes of these risks while also providing immediate support to those affected.

To effectively address these interconnected issues, there is a critical need for protection mainstreaming, nexus work, and advocacy for women's rights. Protection mainstreaming ensures that all humanitarian activities consider and integrate protection principles, making programs more inclusive for vulnerable populations. Nexus work, which connects humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts, allows for a more holistic approach to addressing the underlying causes of protection risks and fostering long-term resilience.

Implementation of the United Nations Strategic Framework for Afghanistan, which builds on the United Nations Transitional Engagement Framework (TEF) for Afghanistan, has led to a strengthened Nexus between humanitarian and basic human needs actor, which in turn creates opportunities to ensure protection mainstreaming across all sectors.

Key Advocacy Messages and Asks for All Stakeholders

- **Advocate for Women's and Girls' Rights:** Actively advocate for the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan and invest in programming addressing their basic needs, education and access to lifesaving GBV and child protection services – this is paramount for the future of girls and women and the country itself.
- **Engagement with De facto Authorities:** Support principled and human rights-based engagement with the de facto authorities in Afghanistan in line with Security Council Resolutions 2615 (2021) and 2664 (2022).
- **Support UNHCR Programmes:** Provide support for UNHCR's programmes, in particular UNHCR's **Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Strategic Plan 2024–2027** and the **legal assistance project**.
- **Partnerships with NGOs and Civil Society:** Directly support NGOs and civil society in Afghanistan through partnerships, including women-led organizations.
- **Protection Mainstreaming:** Support and advocate for protection mainstreaming across all activities of the international community in Afghanistan, prioritizing dignity, community participation, empowerment, and accountability.
- **Area-Based Approach:** Continue to support an area-based approach, building on existing programs in Afghanistan. This is crucial in the context of large-scale returns from Pakistan, helping to maintain and increase the capacity of local communities to receive returnees.
- **Multi-Year Funding:** Provide multi-year funding for UNHCR's protection operations in Afghanistan to ensure sufficient staffing and sustainability of programmes for medium to longer term interventions.

PROTECTION BRIEF AFGHANISTAN

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