



EVALUATION REPORT

STRATEGIC CLUSTER EVALUATION: UN WOMEN AFGHANISTAN COUNTRY OFFICE



 FOR ALL
WOMEN
AND GIRLS

STRATEGIC CLUSTER EVALUATION: UN WOMEN AFGHANISTAN COUNTRY OFFICE

**UN Women Independent Evaluation,
Audit and Investigation Services**

Independent Evaluation Service

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With UN Women's support, women entrepreneurs are strengthening their livelihoods by growing businesses and creating jobs for other women in their communities.

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CBC	Community-Based Centre
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DFA	De Facto Authorities
EVAW/G	Ending Violence Against Women/and Girls
GiHA	Gender in Humanitarian Action
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team
IES	Independent Evaluation Service
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
MPWC	Multi-Purpose Women's Centre
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
SOGIESC	Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNCT	United Nations Country Team
UNEG	United Nations Evaluation Group
UNSFA	United Nations Strategic Framework for Afghanistan
UN WOMEN	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
WCSO	Women-Led Civil Society Organization
WEE	Women's Economic Empowerment
WFO	Women-Focused (Civil Society) Organization
WPS	Women, Peace and Security

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

STRATEGIC CLUSTER EVALUATION: UN WOMEN AFGHANISTAN COUNTRY OFFICE

Context

Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, Afghan women and girls have faced unprecedented restrictions on their rights to mobility, education and participation in public life. The introduction of the restrictive Law on the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, enacted by the Taliban de facto authorities (DFA), has created a profound human rights crisis. In this environment, nearly 23 million Afghans required humanitarian assistance in 2025, with women and girls bearing the brunt of protection risks, psychosocial distress, exclusion from essential services and participation in decision-making at all levels, and constrained opportunities to enhance their livelihoods.

Photo: UN Women / Ali Omid Taqdisyan

UN Women supports this Multi-Purpose Women's Centre in eastern Afghanistan, providing business development skills, vocational training, and access to psychological counselling and medical services for women in the surrounding communities.

Purpose, scope and methodology

This strategic cluster evaluation, led by UN Women's Independent Evaluation Service (IES), assessed the Afghanistan Country Office's key programmes with time frames from June 2022 to December 2025. The evaluation covered Ending Violence Against Women (EVAW), Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE), Women, Peace and Security (WPS), capacity-building of Women-led Civil Society Organizations (WCSOs), and programmatic and coordination work related to Gender in Humanitarian Action (GiHA). The objectives of the evaluation were to assess the relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency and potential for sustainability of UN Women's interventions; analyse integration of human rights, gender equality and humanitarian principles; and identify lessons and actionable recommendations. The evaluation used a mixed-methods theory-based approach, triangulating qualitative and quantitative data from 1,622 respondents to surveys, interviewees and participants in focus group discussions; three case studies; and over 100 documents, with a strong focus on participatory, ethical and gender-responsive methods.

Key insights and conclusions

UN Women's work in Afghanistan has been a lifeline for women and girls in the world's most severe women's rights crisis. Despite immense challenges, the Country Office has sustained hope, agency and essential services for Afghan women. However, the future of these gains is precarious. A key lesson learned is that robust risk management and a commitment to protecting individuals, especially the most vulnerable, must remain at the heart of all interventions. The evaluation evidence demonstrates that there is a crucial ongoing role for the international community in support of Afghan women, to continue amplifying their voices, sustaining and building women's organizations and ensuring that women's rights and realities remain at the centre of global action.

CRITICAL RELEVANCE AND ADAPTATION:

UN Women's work has been essential in keeping women's rights on the agenda and sustaining WCSOs, Women-Focused (Civil Society) Organizations (WFOs) and gender equality activists under extreme restrictions. The Country Office's approach to engagement with the DFA and adaptive programming has enabled continued support for women and girls, although risks associated with operational and programmatic adjustments remain.

LEADERSHIP AND COORDINATION:

Over the evaluation period, UN Women's coordination role strengthened the UN system and other development partners to keep the rights of women and girls on the agenda. UN Women played a critical role in producing and disseminating gender data and leveraging the evidence for communications and advocacy within coordination spaces, which highlighted the impact of initiatives and provided a model for work in other restrictive and crisis contexts. The Country Office filled critical data gaps to inform programming and strengthen international advocacy, calling for more urgent action to protect women's rights in Afghanistan. While there are positive examples of cross-project collaboration, there are more opportunities to build on synergies across the Country Office's teams and initiatives.

EFFICIENCY AND RISK MANAGEMENT:

Flexible funding enabled greater programmatic and operational manoeuvrability – necessary in a dynamic crisis context. While tailored oversight mechanisms contributed to accountability in a high-risk environment, the evaluation identified opportunities to further develop UN Women's systems and procedures to increase their adaptability to crisis contexts.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO IMPACT AND SUSTAINABILITY:

Interventions were shown to improve women's well-being and empowerment, especially through safe spaces, psychosocial support and economic empowerment. The evidence points to the importance of investing in the organizational resilience and capacity of WCSOs as a critical means of sustaining women's movements and service delivery in Afghanistan. However, overall sustainability is threatened by severe funding cuts, short project durations and systemic barriers, including the fragility of WFOs and limited access for marginalized groups.

INCLUSIVE OUTREACH:

Efforts to reach marginalized groups were meaningful but require more systematic strategies and tools. The absence of a clear strategy for engaging family and community members emerged as a gap.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1

Continue to **LEVERAGE UN WOMEN'S TRIPLE MANDATE** to champion Afghan women's rights through sustained advocacy, flexible support and context-driven programming.

2

Strengthen **STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS, COORDINATION AND INTERNAL INTEGRATION** to maximize collective impact.

3

Continue to deliver **HIGH-IMPACT, INCLUSIVE SERVICES** and **SCALE PROVEN APPROACHES** for women's empowerment.

4

Optimize **OPERATIONAL SYSTEMS, RISK MANAGEMENT AND RESOURCE ALLOCATION** for agile, accountable delivery appropriate for crisis contexts.

5

Continue strengthening and prioritizing the approach to building **INSTITUTIONAL RESILIENCE FOR WOMEN-LED ORGANIZATIONS**, supporting them to secure long-term, adaptable funding and share good practices.

6

Continue to **ADVANCE PRINCIPLED ENGAGEMENT, PROTECTION AND INCLUSIVE PARTICIPATION** for all women and girls.



Photo: UN Women/Sayed Habib Bidell

UN Women has been on the ground at border crossings with Iran and Pakistan, and in the communities where returnees are rebuilding their lives, working to make sure that women and girl returnees feel safe, heard and can access the information and services they need. UN Women supports women humanitarian workers who are on the frontline, playing a crucial role in reaching these women and girls.

1

BACKGROUND

1.1 PURPOSE, OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE

Purpose

UN Women's Independent Evaluation Service (IES) led this strategic cluster evaluation of the UN Women Afghanistan Country Office's key programme areas related to Ending Violence Against Women (EVAW), Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE), Women, Peace and Security (WPS); efforts related to capacity-building of Women-led Civil Society Organizations (WCOSOs); and the coordination work related primarily to coordination of Gender in Humanitarian Action (GiHA) and UN Women's role within the UN system.





A cluster evaluation can be defined as "An envelope of evaluations of projects combined into a single evaluation based on results or strategic, thematic or geographical area or scope."¹ Four projects, implemented between June 2022 and June 2025, were included as part of the cluster evaluation: the *Rebuilding the Women's Movement in Afghanistan* programme (August 2022–31 December 2025);² *Enabling Essential Services for Afghan Women and Girls* (July 2022–March 2025);³ USAID-funded project; *Delivering Family Support Services in Afghanistan* (June 2022–April 2025), US Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs funded project;⁴ and *Protection of Women's Rights and Delivery of Essential Services to*

Address Gender-Based Violence in Afghanistan (March 2023–August 2025), European Union (EU) funded project.

The key purpose of this cluster evaluation was to support decision-making regarding the ongoing implementation of key programmatic areas and to provide insights for continuing the work through the extended UN Women Strategic Note in Afghanistan (extended from 2025 to 2027). The evaluation also serves accountability purposes for development effectiveness to the donors that provided funds, and to the participants and partners who were intended to benefit from UN Women's efforts. The evaluation sought to facilitate learning on effective, promising and innovative strategies and practices. All evaluations at UN Women aim to develop capacity and mobilize stakeholders to advance gender equality and women's empowerment.

The primary intended users of the evaluation are the Afghanistan Country Office and its key stakeholders, including civil society organizations (CSOs), development partners, the UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, and relevant headquarters units. Secondary users included UN Women's partners and relevant organizations in Afghanistan who may wish to learn from this cluster evaluation.

FOUR PROJECTS INCLUDED AS PART OF THE CLUSTER EVALUATION

AUGUST 2022–31 DECEMBER 2025	JULY 2022–MARCH 2025	JUNE 2022–APRIL 2025	MARCH 2023–AUGUST 2025
<i>Rebuilding the Women's Movement in Afghanistan</i> programme	<i>Enabling Essential Services for Afghan Women and Girls</i>	<i>Delivering Family Support Services in Afghanistan</i>	<i>Protection of Women's Rights and Delivery of Essential Services to Address GBV</i>
			

¹ International Labour Organization, Guidance Note 3.3 Strategic Cluster Evaluations, <https://www.ilo.org/media/397761/download>

² The *Rebuilding the Women's Movement in Afghanistan* programme is funded by the governments of Switzerland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Canada, Spain, Belgium and Austria.

³ Start and end dates noted as per the UN Women internal Donor Agreement Management System (DAMS).

⁴ *Ibid.*

Evaluation scope

The evaluation focused on the current extended Strategic Note cycle (2023–2027), which was extended in line with the broader UN Strategic Framework for Afghanistan (UNSAFA) 2023–2027. The cluster evaluation covers projects implemented between June 2022 and December 2025. With the understanding that the current Strategic Note cycle is not complete, the evaluation analysed work completed primarily through May 2025 and aimed to feed into design of the next Strategic Note, due to commence in 2028.

This strategic cluster evaluation assessed contributions across UN Women’s triple mandate: normative, coordination and operational. With respect to coordination efforts, the data centred on GiHA Working

Group and the Gender Theme Group (GTG) efforts. The evaluation aimed to assess attainment of results and provide insights into the respective thematic areas and their interlinkages.

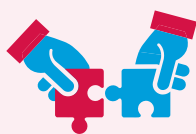
The key questions the evaluation aimed to answer were updated during the inception phase after consultation with the Evaluation Management and Reference Groups to ensure they reflected the priorities of key stakeholders. The evaluation questions and detailed evaluation matrix can be found in Annex 4.

The geographic scope included all areas in Afghanistan where UN Women is operating, including the office in Kabul and the five sub-offices in Balkh, Bamyan, Herat, Kandahar and Nangarhar.

THE STRATEGIC CLUSTER EVALUATION HAD THE FOLLOWING OBJECTIVES:

1

Assess the relevance and coherence of UN Women’s programmes, vis-à-vis the UN system, and the added value of UN Women in Afghanistan from the perspective of rights holders and partners.



2

Assess effectiveness and organizational efficiency in progressing towards the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of women results and any potential unintended consequences.



3

Analyse the potential for sustainability, and how a human rights approach, gender equality principles and humanitarian principles, including neutrality, impartiality, independence and humanity, are integrated in the design and implementation of UN Women’s work.



4

Produce lessons learned, including innovative approaches to programming in a complex and hostile environment for women, and issue actionable recommendations for further iterations of projects or similar programming within the context of the broader programme of work in Afghanistan.



1.2 EVALUATION APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

Methodology

The evaluation employed a non-experimental, mixed-method, theory-based approach, using triangulation to validate findings across multiple data sources. The evaluation was carried out in accordance with internal and external guidelines,⁵ and explicit emphasis was placed on integrating gender equality and human rights principles into the evaluation process. This included disaggregating data by sex and applying feminist analytical frameworks that supported an intersectional analysis. To the extent possible in the Afghanistan context, the evaluation design ensured participatory and inclusive processes which were culturally appropriate; accounted for the complexity of gender transformative programming; and ensured the meaningful consultation of marginalized women, prioritizing their safety and the “do no harm” approach. The evaluation adopted a systemic perspective, recognizing that UN Women’s contributions towards gender equality and women’s empowerment outcomes, as well as the Entity’s ability to implement its programme of work, were influenced by several key contextual factors, such as socio-cultural norms, harmful practices, the international donor and financing environment, political dynamics, environmental risks, humanitarian crises, security concerns, and the capacity and commitment of local partners.

In consultation with the Country Office, a reconstructed theory of change was developed (see Figure 2) and used as the basis for contribution analysis. Evaluation questions were developed using the theory of change and assessed against the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s Development Assistance Committee evaluation criteria (relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency

and sustainability), a human rights and gender equality criterion and assessment against humanitarian principles, including neutrality, impartiality, independence and humanity. All evaluation products were subject to quality review by IES management, a peer reviewer and the Evaluation Reference and Management Groups.

Data collection

The evaluation employed qualitative and quantitative data collection from multiple data sources (see Figure 1), reaching 1,622 respondents across all key stakeholder groups, with the majority comprising the women rights holders participating in UN Women-funded activities. Three case studies provided insight into the extent of support provided to Afghan women-led civil society; Country Office adaptation in response to the changing context; contributions towards the impact of Country Office programming on the well-being of women and girls; and more than 100 documents were reviewed including Project Documents (ProDocs), annual reports, donor reports, publications, training modules, reviews and audits. Several targeted analyses of secondary data were undertaken, including analysis of partner agreements, publications and social media web analytics.

Overall analysis

Multiple lines of evidence fed into the contribution analysis.⁶ A contribution analysis evidence map was developed to map information obtained from different sources on the same results area, including UN Women reports and information collected through interviews, surveys and case studies. NVIVO software was used for qualitative data analysis. Triangulation of sources and methods of information was conducted to ensure robust findings that can be used with confidence.

⁵ UN Women, *UN Women Country Portfolio Evaluations: Revised Guidelines* (2022). Available at [UN Women country portfolio evaluations: Revised guidelines | Publications | UN Women – Headquarters](https://www.unwomen.org/en/publications/2022/07/un-women-country-portfolio-evaluations-revised-guidelines);

UN Women, *Guidance on Integrating Disability Inclusion in Evaluations and Reporting on the UNDIS Entity Accountability Framework Evaluation Indicator* (March 2022). Available at <https://www.unevaluation.org/unevaluation/publications/guidance-integrating-disability-inclusion-evaluations-and-reporting-undis-entity>;

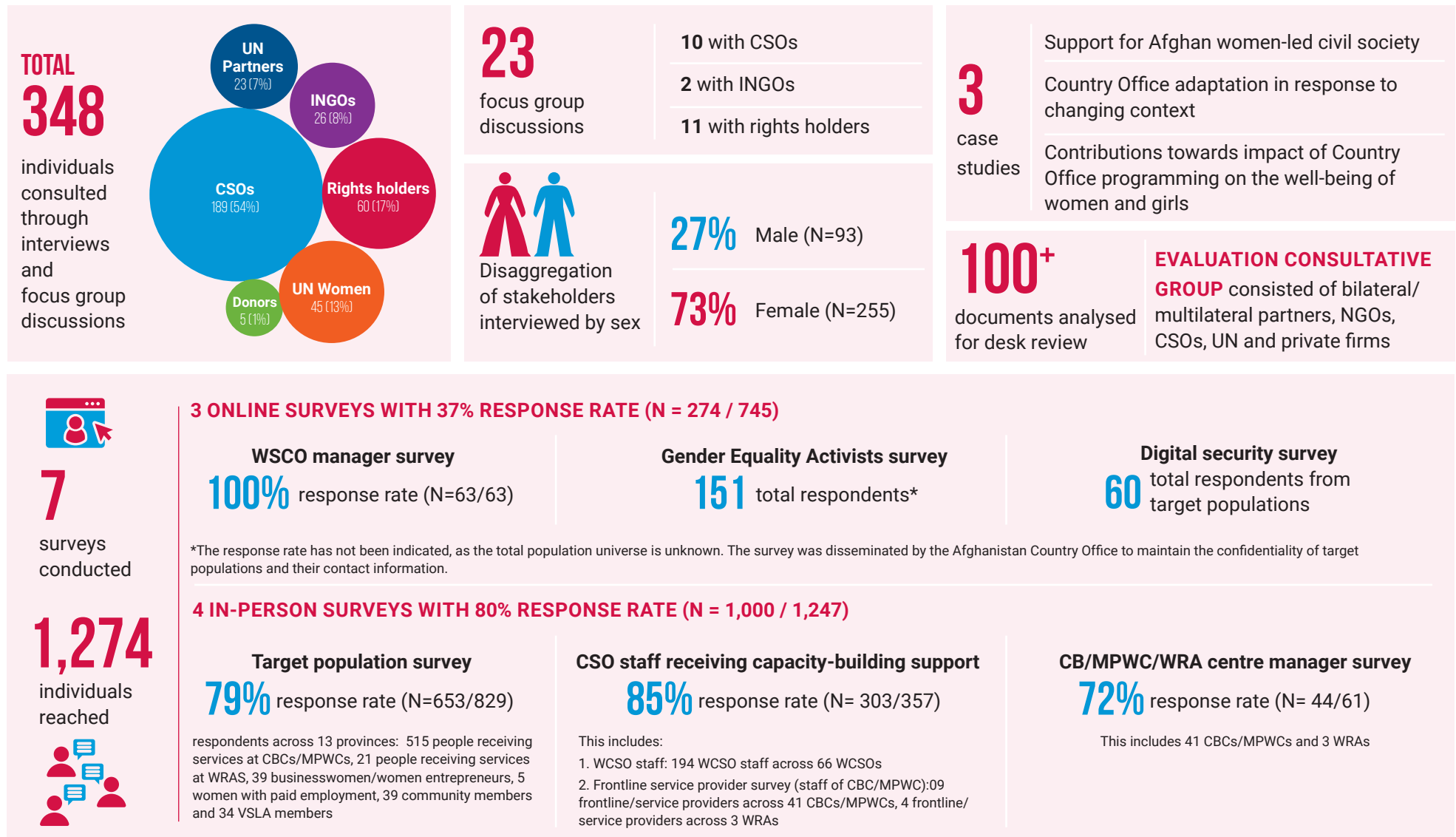
United Nations Evaluation Group, *Integrating Human Rights and Gender Equality in Evaluations* (August 2014). Available at <https://www.unevaluation.org/unevaluation/publications/integrating-human-rights-and-gender-equality-evaluations>

⁶ Better Evaluation, “Contribution Analysis” (2024). Available from <https://www.betterevaluation.org/methods-approaches/approaches/contribution-analysis>

FIGURE 1

UN Women Afghanistan Country Office Strategic Cluster Evaluation: Overview of qualitative and quantitative data collected

MIXED-METHODS APPROACH: NON-EXPERIMENTAL, THEORY-BASED, GENDER RESPONSIVE, UTILIZATION FOCUSED



Source: developed by the evaluation team

1.3 ETHICS, GENDER EQUALITY AND NO ONE LEFT BEHIND

The cluster evaluation was guided by the [UNEG Norms and Standards \(2016\)](#) and [UNEG Ethical Guidelines \(2020\)](#), upholding the principles of integrity, accountability, respect and beneficence throughout all stages of the evaluation. The evaluation team and contracted firm jointly ensured that ethical standards were rigorously applied during the design, implementation and data collection stages.

Informed consent and participant rights

Before any data collection exercise, enumerators explained the evaluation's purpose, the nature of the data being collected and how it would be used. Participants were informed of their right to decline or withdraw at any time without consequence. Consent was obtained verbally. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured for all participants, while focus group participants were informed that confidentiality could not be guaranteed given the group dynamics; however, their names would not be utilized in any records of the meeting. Special measures were taken to ensure confidentiality when engaging with at-risk gender equality activists to assure their safety.

Do no harm and risk mitigation

All evaluation activities were guided by the "do no harm" principle. Teams assessed how engagement might pose risks to community members and implemented mitigation strategies. They followed travel advisories, provided information on available support services and revised approaches for engaging individuals due to emerging issues. Enumerators were trained to identify and respond to potential harm, including stopping interviews and offering reassurance when needed. Additional measures, such as adapted communication methods, were used for vulnerable groups including individuals with disabilities.

Gender responsiveness and cultural sensitivity

To ensure comfort and cultural appropriateness, female enumerators engaged with female participants, often accompanied by a mahram. Access was secured through prior consultation and approval.

Enumerators received gender-sensitivity training and were equipped to handle sensitive disclosures responsibly, refraining from probing and instead providing relevant service information. Referral pathways were tailored to the Afghan context to ensure accessibility and effectiveness.

Safeguarding participants affected by violence

For participants affected by violence, especially women and women with disabilities, data collection followed the [WHO Ethical and Safety Recommendations for research on violence against women](#) and [UN Women's Safe Consultations with Survivors of Violence Against Women and Girls \(2022\)](#). While direct questions about violence were avoided, evaluators were prepared to respond appropriately if the topic emerged, including providing updated referral information for psychosocial support services (see Annex 10 for more details).

Contextual awareness

The evaluation team considered the emotional and social dynamics of conducting research in crisis settings, where normal routines were disrupted and uncertainty prevailed. Special attention was given to how the current context affected marginalized and disadvantaged groups, ensuring this was addressed in both evaluation design and implementation. Decisions to engage these groups were weighed carefully against potential risks, with alternative data collection methods considered when necessary.

1.4 EVALUATION CONSTRAINTS AND LIMITATIONS

Data collection posed significant challenges in Afghanistan. Some data were gathered directly by the IES team (through both online and in-person methods) while other data were collected by a data collection firm contracted by the evaluation team.

The following key limitations relate specifically to data gathered by the IES team:

- **Restricted access to sensitive areas:** Due to security and political constraints, the IES team was unable to conduct in-person data collection in certain high-risk or sensitive areas. *To address this, online interviews were conducted with stakeholders from these locations, and data collection was undertaken by the contracted evaluation firm through locally based individuals familiar with the context.*
- **Constraints on hiring female interpreters and translators for IES in-person data collection:** Owing to restrictions on women's employment in the country, the IES team was unable to recruit independent female interpreters and translators for in-person data collection. *Therefore, two Country Office female personnel were engaged to support translation and interpretation. These individuals were not directly involved in programme implementation to avoid any potential bias and were required to sign confidentiality agreements to ensure the integrity and impartiality of the evaluation process.*

The following key limitations relate to data gathered by the data collection firm:

- **Delays and changes in the approval process for data collection activities:** Delays in acquiring approval from relevant de facto ministries and changes made in the approval process to conduct data-collection activities resulted in significant delays to the start of field activities and coordination difficulties, with permission granted for some provinces but not others. *As a mitigation measure, some surveys were conducted via phone surveys rather than in-person surveys for provinces still awaiting approval to ensure that data collection could continue.*

- **Closure of centres selected for data collection activities:** Over the course of the data collection phase, 12 service centres initially selected for data-collection activities were found to no longer be operational; one having closed with some partner agreements concluding as data collection activities were ongoing, resulting in delays in field activities and a reduced sample size. *As a mitigation measure, partners were contacted for confirmation on currently existing and operational service centres with sample sizes adjusted.*
- **Implementing partners not physically present in target provinces where projects were implemented:** Some implementing partners selected for data-collection activities while implementing projects in the target province did not have a physical presence in the province resulting in difficulties coordinating data-collection activities. *As a mitigation measure, respondents were scheduled to be surveyed either remotely or in-person at centres belonging to other partners or another safe and secure location depending on their specific circumstances.*
- **Requests for transportation costs for prospective respondents:** Some prospective respondents for data collection made requests for transportation costs to participate in in-person interviews due to difficulties in travelling to field locations. *As a mitigation measure, prospective respondents requesting transportation costs were either surveyed remotely or provided with transportation costs on a case-by-case basis. The Country Office also coordinated with partners to support their safe engagement.*
- **Responder bias:** To maximize safety and security, partners were requested to identify the survey respondents; therefore, the respondents may have been more familiar with the work or less impartial. *This was mitigated by ensuring respondents were made aware that their responses were confidential and anonymous. Information was also triangulated with other sources, including key informant interviews, focus group discussions and desk review.*



Photo: UN Women

UN Women travelled to local communities to assess the damage caused by the earthquake on 31 August 2025, in eastern Afghanistan. UN Women also supported Afghan women humanitarians who met with affected women and girls to identify their most urgent needs.

2

EVALUATION CONTEXT

2.1. AFGHANISTAN CONTEXT

The Taliban (also known as the *de facto authorities* – DFA) takeover of Afghanistan in Kabul on 15 August 2021 has had a seismic impact on the lives of women and girls. A series of bans and restrictions implemented by the DFA have contributed to a rapid reversal of the rights of women and girls through restrictions on women’s employment, and women and girls’ education and freedom of movement, including the requirement for a mahram (male family member) to accompany women and girls in public.^{7,8} Since September 2021, girls have been prohibited from attending secondary school and, by 2022, women were excluded from universities. Afghanistan remains the only country in the world enforcing such bans. The Ministry for Women’s Affairs, which was designed to ensure the protection and promotion of women’s rights, was disbanded in September 2021. On 24 December 2022, Afghan women were banned from working in NGOs and INGOs. This was extended to UN agencies in April 2023, severely impacting humanitarian operations.⁹ The ban on women attending medical institutes came into effect in December 2024, and the draconian Law on the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice of August 2024 will continue to undermine the status of women and gender equality more broadly in the country. The latter includes a morality law which institutionalizes strict control over women’s lives and has prompted further advocacy.¹⁰ The DFA has restricted access for women to humanitarian assistance, justice and health services.¹¹ These restrictions unfold against the backdrop of a significant returnee influx from Iran and Pakistan beginning in late 2023,

which has disproportionately affected women and girls by heightening protection risks, limiting access to essential services and stretching humanitarian response capacities.¹²

The short and long-term costs of these drastic reversals on women’s rights are immense. According to the UN Women Afghanistan 2024 Gender Index, the rate of women currently not in education, employment or training is almost four times higher than the rate for men (78 per cent compared to 20 per cent, respectively).¹³ The Gender Index found that women’s participation in the labour force is also markedly lower than men’s, with estimates of 24 per cent compared to 89 per cent, respectively. Women who do work typically occupy lower-paid, less secure positions, often in informal sectors. The DFA has erased women’s political representation and participation at all formal levels of governance, indicative in the score of zero on two indicators measured in the Gender Index, i.e. the proportion of seats held by women in local government and the national parliament. Amid such deprivation of women’s rights, violence against women and girls has increased. According to a recent survey conducted by the World Health Organization, Afghan women face physical and sexual violence from intimate partners nearly three times higher than the global average.¹⁴ Where services for survivors of violence against women and girls are available, including mental health services, many women face barriers accessing the services due to the social stigma associated with violence and mental health and the significant restrictions placed on women’s freedom.¹⁵ Suicide rates among women have reportedly increased and mortality rates, including maternal mortality are expected to rise.¹⁶

⁷ UN Women. (2021). [Gender Alert No 1: Women’s Rights in Afghanistan: Where are we now?](#) UN Women, New York.

⁸ UN Women, IOM, UNAMA. 2024. [Summary Report of Quarterly Consultations with Afghan Women](#): February 2024.

⁹ UN Women. (2024). Afghanistan Gender Country Profile. [Gender-country-profile-Afghanistan-en.pdf](#)

¹⁰ Safi, M., and Khan, A. (2024). New morality law in Afghanistan is not just silencing women’s voices: it’s gender apartheid. ODI Global. <https://odi.org/en/insights/new-morality-law-in-afghanistan-is-not-just-silencing-womens-voices-its-gender-apartheid/>

¹¹ UN Women. (2024). Gender Country Profile: Afghanistan. Kabul, UN women Afghanistan. <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/Gender-country-profile-Afghanistan-en.pdf>

¹² UN Women. (2025). Gender Alert: Gendered needs and challenges of Afghans returning from Pakistan and Iran.

¹³ UN Women (2025). Afghanistan 2024 Gender Index.

¹⁴ UN Women (2025). Afghanistan 2024 Gender Index.

¹⁵ Kaul, A., Saboor, L., Ahmad, A., Mannell, J., Paphitis, S., and Devakumar, D. (2024). What are the experiences and psychosocial needs of female survivors of domestic violence in Afghanistan? A qualitative interview study in three Afghan provinces.

¹⁶ UN Women. (2022). Women’s Rights in Afghanistan one year after the Taliban take-over Gender Alert No. 2. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/08/gender-alert-no-2-women’s-rights-in-afghanistan-one-year-after-the-taliban-take-over>

Recent cuts to USAID funding, which accounted for approximately 45.6 per cent of total contributions to the Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan in 2024, have had devastating impacts on food assistance efforts, among other sectors, disproportionately affecting women and girls.¹⁷ Reductions in United States support have also constrained access to health services, protection services, logistics and online education programmes for women and girls, further deepening existing vulnerabilities.

2.2. UN WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN

Aligned with the UN Strategic Framework for Afghanistan (UNSFA) 2023–2025 (extended to 2027), the UN Women Afghanistan Country Office developed the Strategic Note 2023–2025 (also extended to 2027 in line with the UNSFA) which aims to preserve a place in Afghan society for women and girls despite their systemic exclusion from almost all aspects of public life. The Strategic Note is also closely aligned with the UN Women Humanitarian Strategy (2022–2025),¹⁸ which emphasizes gender-responsive coordination, protection and livelihoods support in crisis contexts, including through GiHA leadership, nexus programming and strengthened engagement with women’s organizations.

UN Women’s work is focused on responding to its triple mandate:

- 1. Normative work:** *influence over policies, global standards and norms through evidence-based advocacy.*
- 2. Operational work:** *supporting Member States to implement international standards and to forge effective partnerships with civil society.*
- 3. Coordination work:** *working to promote United Nations system accountability on gender equality and the empowerment of women, including regular monitoring of system-wide progress; and, more broadly, strengthening gender-responsive coordination across the wider humanitarian architecture in Afghanistan.*¹⁹

The Afghanistan Strategic Note has one impact area: Afghan women and girls have their human rights protected and promoted through access to essential services, humanitarian assistance, livelihood and income opportunities, improved voice and agency, and support from a resilient Afghan women’s movement.

The Country Office’s programme areas are closely aligned with the three outcomes of the UNSFA 2023–2027: Outcome 1. Sustained Essential Services; Outcome 2. Economic Opportunities & Resilient Livelihoods; and Outcome 3. Social Cohesion, Inclusion, Gender Equality, Human Rights and the Rule of Law.

¹⁷ Financial Tracking Service (FTS). (2024). Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2024 – Funding Overview. UN OCHA Financial Tracking Service. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/08/un-women-humanitarian-strategy-2022-2025-in-brief>

¹⁸ UN Women. (2022). UN Women Humanitarian Strategy 2022–2025.

¹⁹ This includes engagement with Humanitarian Country Team structures, cluster and sector coordination mechanisms, international and national NGOs, and local women-led and women’s rights organizations to ensure greater coherence, accountability and gender mainstreaming across actors involved in the crisis response.

2.3 CLUSTER THEORY OF CHANGE

The theory of change outlines the underlying theoretical framework for guiding and assessing the Country Office's rights-based and empowerment approach to creating change. UN Women's vision of change in Afghanistan is set out in a results chain of outcomes, outputs and related activities that align to the global theory of change underpinning the UN Women Strategic Plan 2023–2025. The evaluation team reconstructed the theory of change that underpins the Country Office's work in each of the following key thematic areas: Women, Peace and Security; Ending Violence Against Women; Women's Economic Empowerment; sustaining women's civil society; and GiHA programmatic and coordination work. A cluster theory of change that consolidates these thematic areas was then subsequently developed and is the primary means for assessing the Country Office's contribution to outcome-level change. It formed the basis of a common framework to (a) analyse and assess the contributions towards impact within the programme areas included in the strategic cluster evaluation; and (b) identify learning and guidance for gender equality and women's empowerment programming in Afghanistan. These theories of change were based on a close review of the logic chain, results framework, key strategies and primary stakeholders mapped out across the four projects; desk review of programme documents (Project Documents, donor/progress reports); and inception phase interviews conducted with UN Women personnel from the Country Office, headquarters and the Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific.

The reconstructed cluster theory of change focused on empowering women and girls and advocating for gender equality in Afghanistan (see Figure 2). It builds on UN Women's value add in terms of the Entity's mandate and coordinating role to ensure Afghan women's rights and priorities remain on the international agenda; its strong partnerships with key international decision-makers, Afghan WFOs

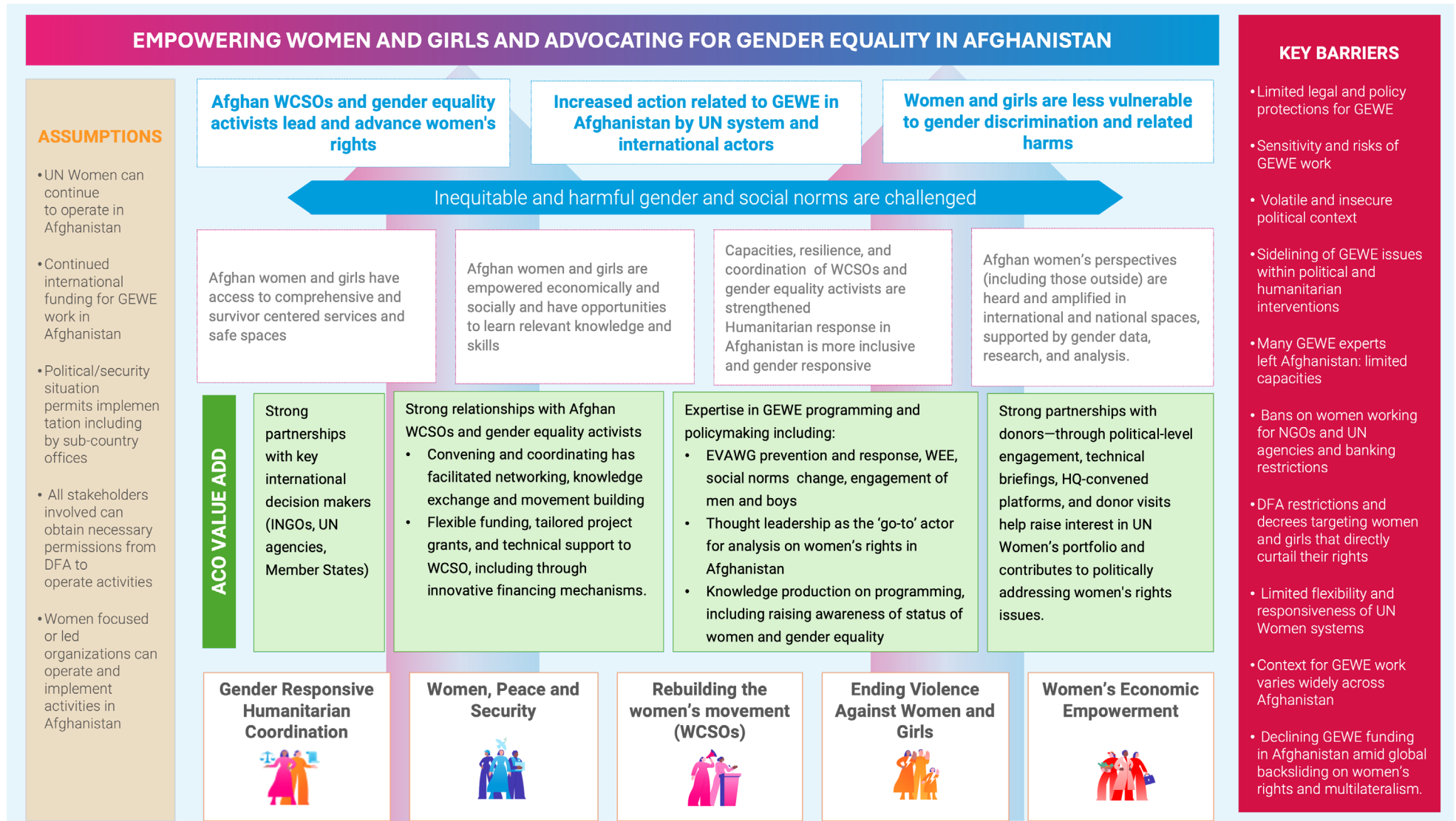
and gender equality activists; its expertise in gender equality and women's empowerment programming and thought leadership for analysis on women's rights in Afghanistan; and its diversified donor portfolio.

As can be seen in Figure 2, the cluster theory of change involves four broad pathways of change: Afghan women and girls are empowered economically and socially and have opportunities to learn relevant knowledge and skills; Afghan women's perspectives (including the diaspora) are heard and amplified in international and national spaces; capacities, resilience and coordination of WFOs and Afghan women leaders are strengthened; and Afghan women and girls have access to comprehensive and survivor-centred services and safe spaces. A cross-cutting key pathway of change is that inequitable and harmful gender norms are challenged. These lower level-outcomes contribute to three higher-level outcomes that Afghan WFOs and Afghan women leaders advance women's rights; women and girls are less vulnerable to gender discrimination and related harms; and increased action is taken by the UN system and international actors on gender equality and women's empowerment in Afghanistan.

The theory of change identifies several barriers to the Country Office's ability to contribute to results, which are primarily related to the restrictive environment, sensitivities and potential risks of this work in Afghanistan; the limited operational and technical capacities of national partners and women-led or women-focused organizations operating under severe restrictions; limited and shrinking funding to address gender equality and women's empowerment in Afghanistan; and the ability of UN Women's internal systems to support programming in this complex environment.

FIGURE 2:

Re-constructed theory of change



Source: developed by the evaluation team



Photo: UN Women/Sayed Habib Bidell

Students learning Braille at a UN Women-supported centre for women and girls with visual or hearing disabilities, in central Afghanistan. The centre teaches students financial literacy and small business skills, tailoring and handicrafts.

3

PORTFOLIO ANALYSIS

3.1 FINANCIAL AND HR ANALYSIS

Figure 3 provides an overview of the Afghanistan Country Office's financial and operational profile for 2023–2025. Both the overall budget and delivery increased substantially in 2024 (US\$ 55.5 million and US\$ 49.3 million, respectively) after an initial rise in 2023 (US\$ 34.7 million and US\$ 22.2 million) followed by a projected decline in 2025. Non-core funding accounted for 95 per cent of resources, with only a small share coming from core, extrabudgetary and Institutional Budget funds. While target resource mobilization steadily increased, actual mobilization remained slightly below targets in most years. Most spending is concentrated in Peace, Security and Humanitarian Action (SP4) and Ending Violence Against Women (SP3), with smaller allocations to Women's Economic Empowerment, Political Participation and Global Norms work. The workforce is primarily composed of staff (48 per cent), followed by service contractors and consultants, highlighting a mixed employment structure. Between 2022 and 2025, UN Women received funding from 25 donors.²⁰ The projects forming part of the cluster evaluation were supported by the European Union, USAID, the US Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, and the Governments of Switzerland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Canada, Spain, Belgium and Austria.²¹

3.2 KEY PARTNERS

The portfolio review included a human rights-based approach to the analysis of stakeholders from across programme interventions and activities to identify key duty bearers²² and rights holders. Analysis of approximately 181 stakeholder groups reflects that the majority align to one or both of the Country Office's dominant thematic areas (Ending Violence Against Women and Girls and WEE), with a range of groups represented across sectors. Of these, 18 stakeholder groups were identified as having been directly involved in decision-making and implementation of the Strategic Note.

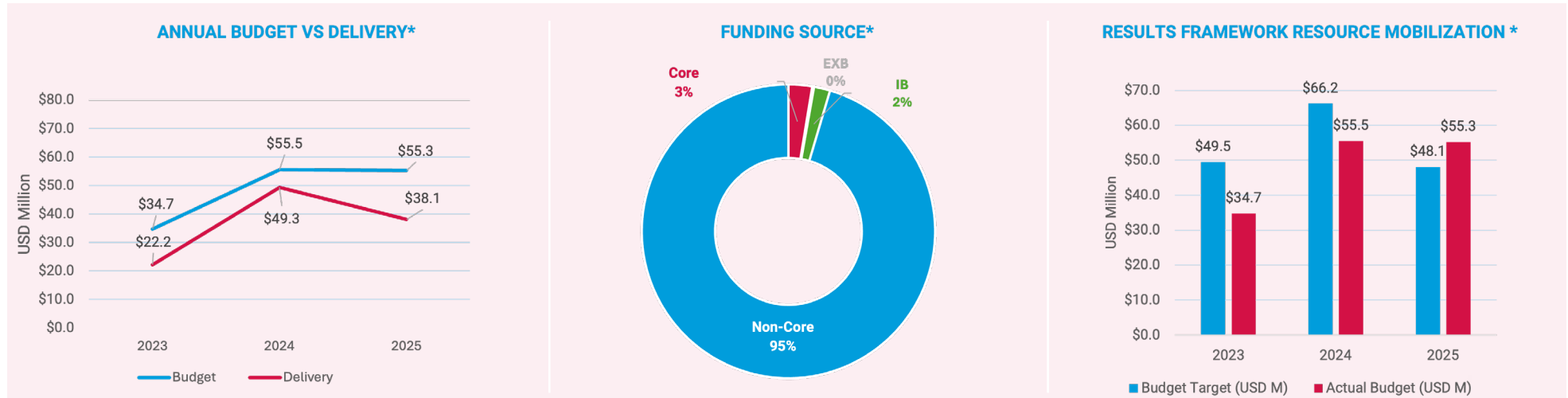
²⁰ Donors providing funding between 2022 and 2025: Government of Norway; Government of Austria; Swiss Development Cooperation; Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO); Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund (AHF) – OCHA; European Union; Government of Slovenia; Austrian Development Cooperation; Government of Iceland; Central Emergency Relief Fund (CERF) – OCHA; UNOPS; Government of Japan; Government of Latvia; Women, Peace & Humanitarian Fund; Government of New Zealand; Government of Denmark; Government of Canada; Government of Sweden; Government of Finland; Government of Spain; Government of France; Government of Belgium; Government of the Republic of Korea; USAID; U.S. Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs.

²¹ The information presented is based on data from UN Women internal systems (Project delivery report).

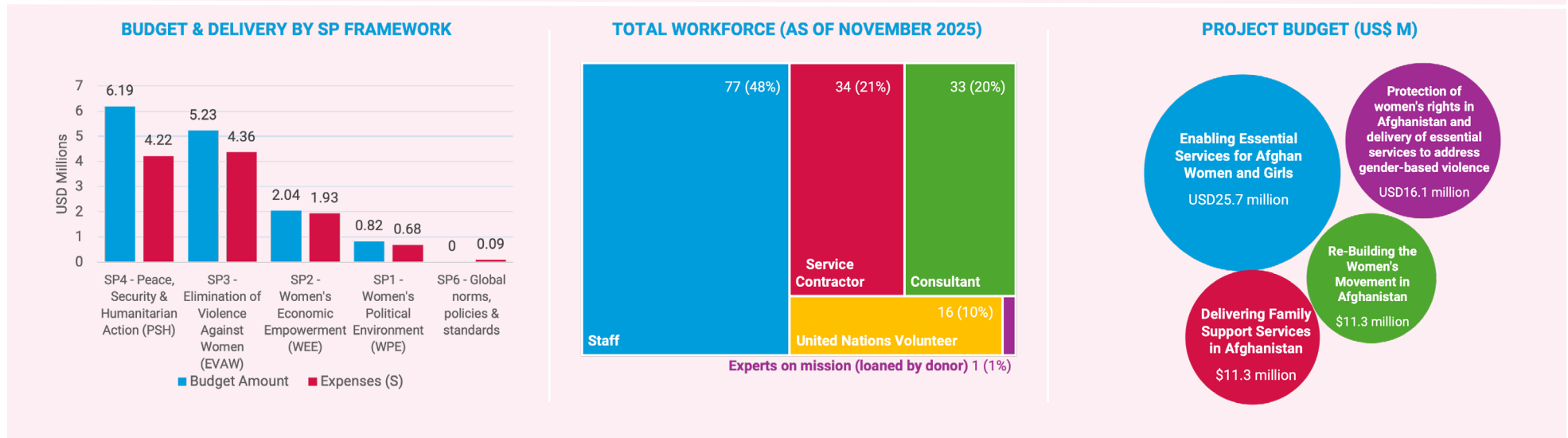
²² In accordance with UNEG Guidance on Integrating Human Rights and Gender Equality in Evaluation, the evaluation recognizes "duty bearers" as both state and non-state actors with either duties or responsibilities for a development intervention.

FIGURE 3:

Afghanistan Country Office portfolio analysis



*Data is for 2023-2025. 2022 is excluded as the delivery report used for annual budget calculations was not available prior to 2023. Funding source and Results framework resource mobilization are also noted for 2023-2025 to ensure consistency of data sources.



Source: developed by the evaluation team based on data extracted from the Project Delivery report November 2025



Photo: UN Women/Ali Omid Taqdisyan

Women business owners gather at a UN Women-supported Multi-Purpose Women's Centre, to share experiences and support each other.

4

FINDINGS

4. 1 STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT AND RELEVANCE

To what extent were the Country Office's interventions aligned with the priorities and needs of women and girls in Afghanistan and the UN Strategic Framework for Afghanistan (UNSFA) 2023–2027, especially in a uniquely challenging and restricted environment? How has the Country Office responded to emerging contextual issues, including the introduction of decrees that have significantly rolled back the rights of women and girls, and developments identified by stakeholders, including women's rights organizations?

FINDING 1

The Country Office's interventions to address critical service gaps; amplify the needs and voices of women; and invest in local women's organizations were highly relevant to the needs²³ and priorities of women and girls in Afghanistan, a crisis context and were aligned with the UNSFA (2023–2027).

Across multiple provinces, women reached through the evaluation reported fear, isolation, shrinking mobility and a desire to stay engaged in their communities, prioritizing access to safety, basic services, psychosocial care, income and education. These priorities, especially psychosocial care, income, safe spaces and organizational support were consistently reflected in projects, with safe spaces most valued for enabling women to connect and support each other in otherwise isolating, restrictive conditions.

The interventions evaluated responded directly to women's priorities of safety, psychosocial well-being, access to basic services and economic participation. These priorities were consistent across provinces and reflected the realities of women's lives in an increasingly restrictive environment, which has emerged following the policies imposed by the DFA since 2021, severely limiting women and girls' mobility, access to services and participation in public life. The focus of different initiatives corresponded closely with UNSFA 2023–2027 priorities on sustained essential services, economic opportunities and resilient livelihoods,

social cohesion and human rights. These initiatives were widely recognized by stakeholders as filling critical gaps left by the collapse or withdrawal of other national service providers. However, it should be noted that UN Women's efforts make a small contribution towards addressing needs and must be seen within the overall humanitarian response and context for basic human needs in Afghanistan.²⁴

The Country Office supported women's centres (e.g. Multi-Purpose Women's Centres [MPWCs], Women's Rest Areas [WRAs] and Community-Based Centres [CBCs]), which served as safe, accessible hubs offering services including health services, literacy and educational services and computer access, vocational training and economic empowerment initiatives, literature studies and protection support services (including psychosocial support, case management and referrals). The Country Office supported partners in ensuring the safety and protection of both service users and those delivering services as core to its strategies.

²³ The Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan for 2025 identified that, in 2025, almost half of the population – some 22.9 million people – will require humanitarian assistance to survive (25 per cent of whom are women). The Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan identifies that women and girls face severe protection risks due to DFA policies. Psychosocial distress is widespread, with 57 per cent of households reporting mental health issues, which disproportionately affects women and girls. Health and nutrition, economic and social exclusion, education, and humanitarian access and participation are all highlighted as major needs of women and girls.

²⁴ Although evaluating a different period, the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Response to the Crisis in Afghanistan identified, "the 'acute' response was generally effective and essential to the short-term well-being of millions of Afghans... there was no sustained and coordinated support scheme for basic services beyond essential ad hoc interventions to prevent system collapse... The humanitarian response was crucial in preventing the collapse of basic services, but it could only help maintain (or substitute for) systems that are crumbling and in desperate need of investment...." The evaluation notes that the operating space for humanitarian work has become even more restrictive and that the humanitarian system could not be expected to fill the gaps left by the withdrawal of development assistance.

Aligned with the findings of the 2024 Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation for Afghanistan, CBCs reflected a relevant shift from system strengthening to direct service provision and case management given the humanitarian context and destruction of services.²⁵ Women surveyed for this evaluation also emphasized the importance of these spaces for gathering safely, building peer support and accessing otherwise unavailable services. They noted that counselling and psychosocial support services helped them cope with stress, trauma and anxiety in a hostile environment, although they also identified gaps in access to broader health services and longer-term mental health care.

Economic empowerment activities, a prominent component of the initiatives, received mixed feedback. In some cases, programme participants and partners raised concerns that livelihood training was not well suited to the context or population, was too short and was based on unrealistic assumptions about what women would be able to do with the training. In other cases, stakeholders assessed economic empowerment activities as highly relevant, especially where they provided income, but importantly also facilitated women's participation in the community.

To enhance the enabling environment for effective and coordinated service delivery, the Country Office has strengthened capacity and networks among service providers. Its support to the Essential Services Network fostered relationship-building, lesson-sharing and a unified approach to protection-related service delivery. By integrating project partners into the network, the Country Office enabled them to learn from each other's experiences, such as navigating restrictive contexts, and improved referral pathways through coordinated efforts. The Country Office also convened regular partner meetings to address emerging issues, operational challenges, collaboration opportunities and lessons learned. The Country Office organized online capacity-building, including a coaching programme for psychosocial support counsellors from 17 organizations to reinforce survivor-centred care.

UN Women's research and consultation²⁶ activities were found to be highly relevant in a context where women's voices and needs risk becoming invisible. Stakeholders noted that the participatory approaches to collecting and analysing data on women's lived experiences, and disseminating this evidence, served both to amplify women's voices and to inform programme design in real time. In several provinces, sub-offices worked with research providers to identify specific local information gaps, which were then incorporated into data collection tools. The evaluation found that protection services were well suited to the different sub-national contexts in which they were being implemented. For example, in the south and south-east regions where stigma deterred women from seeking psychosocial support, awareness-raising on the importance of protection and mental health services was prioritized. UN Women also leveraged prior learning from the Spotlight Initiative to adapt global models to the Afghanistan context, further strengthening their local relevance.

Institutional support offered to WCSOs was relevant in addressing acute operational capacity needs at a time when many such organizations faced closure. Under the Re-building the Women's Movement in Afghanistan project, core grants (US\$ 15,000) enabled organizations to maintain operations by covering expenses such as office rent, staff salaries, taxes, registration fees and essential equipment.²⁷ In many cases, grantees reported that without this funding, they would have had to cease operations entirely. Project grants consisted of a selected cohort of WCSOs receiving funding (US\$ 45,000) to implement small-scale projects in support of women and girls' needs within their community. While the WCSOs designed and led their own activities, they received tailored, hands-on support from the WCSO programme team to conceptualize and implement the projects.²⁸ To ensure the relevance of project design, WCSOs reported that they received support and guidance to conduct surveys, situational analyses, field observations and host dialogues with a diversity of women.

²⁵ Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation Steering Group, 2024. Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Response to the Crisis in Afghanistan

²⁶ Primarily funded through the European Union project.





²⁷ The evaluation survey of WCSO respondents found that 65 per cent (N=41/63) rated the core grants as "very effective" and 24 per cent (N=15/63) rated them as "effective".

²⁸ 60 per cent (N=37/63) of WCSO respondents rated the Phase Two grants as very effective, and 24 per cent (N=15/63) as effective.

BOX 1:

Evidence from evaluation surveys – alignment of activities with the needs of women and girls

As per the evaluation survey results, certain Country Office-supported activities were found to be highly aligned to the most pressing needs of women and girls:

SURVEY OF INDIVIDUALS RECEIVING SERVICES THROUGH WOMEN'S SUPPORT CENTRES	SURVEY OF INDIVIDUALS RECEIVING MICROCREDIT/ BUSINESS/PAID EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT	SURVEY OF VILLAGE SAVINGS AND LOAN ASSOCIATION MEMBERS	SURVEY OF WCSO MANAGERS
<p>Total number of respondents: 536</p>	<p>Total number of respondents: 44</p>	<p>Total number of respondents: 34</p>	<p>Total number of respondents: 63</p>
<p>Counselling and psychosocial support emerged as the most accessed service and the most pressing need for people receiving services.</p> <p>53%</p> <p>(N=284/536) of survey respondents reported counselling and psychosocial support as their most accessed services, while 50 per cent (N=270/536) identified them as their most needed service.</p> 	<p>Micro-credit support emerged as the most accessed service and the most pressing need for businesswomen/ women with paid employment:</p> <p>55%</p> <p>(N=24/44) of businesswomen/ women with paid employment reported accessing such services, while 84 per cent (N=37/44) identified it as their most needed service.</p> 	<p>Of the types of support received by members, access to loans, business development and management, and training on savings skills emerged as the most accessed forms of support, all reported by</p> <p>76%</p> <p>(N=26/34) of respondents. In terms of types of support needed, Access to loans emerged as the most pressing need, identified by 91 per cent (N=31/34) of respondents, followed by Business development and management at 82 per cent (N=28/34)</p> 	<p>With respect to relevance and responsiveness of support to actual needs,</p> <p>43%</p> <p>(N=27/63) of WCSO managers reported this as "excellent", 43 per cent (n=27/63) as "good".</p> 

FINDING 2

The Country Office applied humanitarian principles in Afghanistan and adapted effectively to deliver results in the country's highly restrictive environment. However, the approach to engage with the DFA created operational and programmatic adjustments that, at times, placed additional burdens on partners and potentially constrained opportunities for the Country Office to strengthen its influence on operating conditions.

The Country Office and its partners adapted programming in response to the severe bans and restrictions on women and girls' rights introduced by the DFA between 2021 and 2023.²⁹ Stakeholders highlighted UN Women's openness and flexibility in redesigning activities to account for evolving restrictions, while maintaining relevance to women's needs, in a context where the space for engagement with de facto authorities varies significantly by province. For example, the inception period of the EU project³⁰ (March–July 2023) was used to assess the operational implications of the ban on Afghan women working for the UN and to revise delivery plans. Structured context analyses were undertaken following each new restriction; outputs and indicators were modified for feasibility; and UN Women's Fast Track Procedure for partner selection was applied. In the absence of a designated counterpart ministry within the DFA, the Country Office has pursued engagement through different de facto line ministries with the primary focus being to secure operational access and address related operational issues. Sub-offices have played an instrumental role in enabling localized engagement and adaptability. Their local presence and relationships facilitated real-time adjustments, identification of entry points and negotiation of permissions at provincial level. For instance, in one location, collaboration between a partner and the sub-office secured approval to construct a women's training centre despite restrictive conditions. Adaptations included navigating mahram requirements, shifting activities to closed-door settings, and engaging religious leaders for cultural

relevance, with more discreet engagement used where visibility increased risks for partners, including WCSOs. Partnerships were also forged in response to emerging priorities, such as with another UN agency to establish women's rest areas for returning migrants, offering safe spaces and multisectoral support. In a context where women are banned from working in a CSO or NGO, many CSOs are "men-led". To account for these local dynamics, the Country Office supported the GiHA Working Group to revisit the IASC definition of "women-led organizations"^{31,32} to adapt it to the Afghan context.³³ This expanded definition, also applied within the WCSO programme and more widely by the Humanitarian Country Team following advocacy by the GiHA Working Group and an engagement plan for WLOs in the humanitarian response, enabled continued funding for women's programming while applying safeguards to monitor women's engagement and ensure female staff salaries.

UN Women's approach to applying humanitarian principles in Afghanistan; staying in the country after the DFA takeover; and consistently applying human rights, humanitarian and feminist principles, was widely recognized by stakeholders. This stance strengthened UN Women's reputation within the UN Country Team (UNCT) and HCT. Country Office efforts were grounded in neutrality, inclusion, community-based delivery, safeguards and complementarity, as illustrated in Table 1, which documents UN Women's broad strategy to align with humanitarian and human rights principles.

²⁹ Among these were the law passed in December 2022 that prohibited women from working for CSOs, with some exceptions; the law passed in April 2023 which extended this ban to women working for INGOs and international agencies, including UN Women; and the extension in December 2022 of the ban on the education of girls past the sixth grade (originally initiated by the DFA in September 2021) to include female university students.

³⁰ *Protection of Women's Rights and Delivery of Essential Services to Address Gender-Based Violence in Afghanistan*

³¹ IASC guidance note defines women-led organizations: 1) *governed or directed by women; or 2) whose leadership is principally made up of women, demonstrated by 50 per cent or more occupying senior leadership positions.*

³² UN Women uses WCSOs to describe both women-led and women-focused organizations. This evaluation may also refer to them interchangeably.

³³ *An organization with a humanitarian mandate and/or mission: 1. whose leadership is principally made up of women, demonstrated by at least 25 per cent or more occupying senior leadership positions; 2. at least 30 per cent of women and girl staff/volunteers in the organization; 3. With operational capacity to respond to humanitarian needs in Afghanistan; and 4. With services focusing on women's needs.*

TABLE 1:**UN Women’s approach to applying humanitarian principles in Afghanistan: Alignment with humanitarian and human rights principles**

PRINCIPLE	KEY EVALUATION FINDINGS
Humanitarian and development neutrality	UN Women aligned with human rights obligations and normative standards and maintained neutrality by prioritizing operational access in its approach to engagement with the DFA, applying a principled stance that avoids legitimizing discriminatory governance. However, tension remains between principled positioning and operational viability.
Gender equality and inclusion	UN Women stayed and delivered on its mandate for gender equality and women’s empowerment; ensured women’s participation, voice and leadership; adapted feminist principles to restrictive norms (e.g. budgeting for mahram); and facilitated and promoted the hiring of female staff.
Community-based delivery	Engagement with local CSOs, WCSOs, WFOs, INGOs and women-led networks enabled delivery at community level. However, partner requirements to engage/register with the DFA exposed some partners to risks and varied levels of principled adherence.
Safeguards and accountability	Standard monitoring and accountability mechanisms were limited due to context-specific constraints on women’s movement and voice.
Do no harm	UN Women avoided reinforcing discriminatory norms by taking a nuanced engagement approach with DFA institutions, informed by partners, as required for operational access. Application of human rights principles was adapted using culturally appropriate framing to reduce backlash. Explicit feminist language was generally avoided, yet UN Women’s approach to applying humanitarian principles was maintained.
Complementarity and coordination	The Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan supported principled stances in the HCT and the plan was influenced by the GiHA Working Group, e.g. redefining women-led organizations. UN Women has been advocating to ensure and sustain women staff’s participation in the humanitarian response (through mapping of associated costs) and supported the development of a Guidance Note focused on gender inclusive humanitarian response (2021) but uptake by other UN agencies remains unclear.

Source: developed by the evaluation team

While UN Women’s approach to applying humanitarian principles supported its credibility, some stakeholders consulted perceived the Entity’s engagement with the DFA to be too limited, affecting its influence on operational activities and leaving some partners exposed to operational risks such as having to negotiate approvals on their own. Some partners preferred to negotiate on their own and some successfully secured registration and Memorandums of Understanding, but others reported heightened risks without consistent UN Women support. CSOs noted incidents of harassment, confiscation of materials and scrutiny linked to visible engagement, while female participants also faced

occasional intimidation during commutes, both of which emerged as significant barriers to participation. Stakeholders, including INGOs and UN partners, noted that a more pragmatic and collective approach among these stakeholders³⁴ particularly in provinces with greater openness, could expand operational space, strengthen protection for partners and enhance UN Women’s capacity to influence conditions for women’s participation. The Country Office noted that its overall approach was nuanced according to the situation, with the aim of limiting risk and ensuring a do no harm approach at its core.

³⁴ The “Comprehensive Approach” was put forward by UNAMA in June 2025, after the evaluation data collection had been finalized. UN Women noted it was aligned with the broader UN approach. The Comprehensive Approach is outlined here: [briefing to the un security council by the secretary-generals special representative for afghanistan - 23 june 2025 .pdf](#)

4.2 COHERENCE AND CONNECTEDNESS

To what extent have interventions achieved internal and external coherence, within the Country Office portfolio and vis-à-vis the UNCT and HCT's work and efforts of other development and humanitarian partners (including through coordination platforms such as the Gender Theme Group, GiHA Working Group, HCT Afghan Women Advisory Group, coordination group for Outcome 3 of the UNSFA, and the Gender and Human Rights Strategic Thematic Working Group)?

FINDING 3

The Country Office has played a leadership role in United Nations and humanitarian coordination platforms, amplifying gender integration across humanitarian and development responses. While inter-agency partnerships enhanced joint delivery of outcomes, collaboration remained uneven across initiatives.

UN Women Afghanistan is an active member of the UNCT and HCT and plays a variety of roles, drawing on its coordination mandate. UN Women is the permanent chair of the GiHA Working Group; co-chairs the Women's Access and Female Staff Participation Working Group; functions as the Secretariat to the Afghan Women's Advisory Group to the HCT through the GiHA Working Group; co-chairs the UN Gender Theme Group; and co-chairs the Strategic Thematic Working Group on Gender and Human Rights. In relation to the UNSFA, UN Women co-chairs the Results Group on Social Cohesion, Inclusion, Gender Equality, Human Rights and the Rule of Law. UN partners noted that UN Women's co-chairing of key working groups has amplified gender integration across humanitarian and development responses. For instance, partners noted that the GiHA Working Group's advocacy helped to inform wider HCT approaches to apply humanitarian principles in Afghanistan, e.g. addressing barriers for female personnel, and the redefinition of women-led organizations for the Afghan context.

UN Women has collaborated with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), Resident Coordinator's Office and UN OCHA, including working in synergy to push for the adoption of humanitarian principles within the UN system response in Afghanistan, e.g. for the UNCT to retain female personnel. Such collaboration takes place within the framework of UN Women's wider collaboration with the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs to keep women's rights in Afghanistan on the international agenda.

The GiHA Working Group also emerged as a particularly effective platform for coordination and information-sharing, with multiple stakeholders reporting that the data, tools and resources produced by the GiHA Working Group were useful for integrating gender into responses and responding to the rapidly changing context for humanitarian action (see Box 2 for more details).³⁵

³⁵ Also noting that, although assessing a different time-period, the [Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation \(IAHE\) of the Afghanistan Humanitarian Response 2018–2021](#) reported it was unable to assess the impact of GiHA initiatives, particularly in relation to how guidance translated into improved accountability to women and girls.

BOX 2:

Highlights of GIHA strategic focus

Coordination on advocacy and harmonization of gender equality efforts in humanitarian action:



A joint mission on Accountability to Affected Populations, Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse.

Strategic communication and advocacy:



UN Women and partners advocate with the DFA for the participation of female staff in the emergency assessment of the crisis and for women's broader participation and access to services.

Assessment, analysis and monitoring:



Development of gender alerts, women-led CSO reports, impact of the ban on female aid workers, Afghanistan Intra-Agency Rapid Gender Analysis, Engaging Women in Humanitarian Responses – perspectives from people with disabilities.

Strategic advocacy to the HCT:



- Advocacy-led initiatives to women humanitarian staff and women-led CSOs' participation in the humanitarian response in Afghanistan featured in the Humanitarian Response Plan 2023 and the HCT Interim Protection Strategy. Advocacy contributed to a reported twenty-fold increase in funding for women-led organizations from the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund allocations between 2023-2025.
- Minimum Standards for Quality Programming in Afghanistan Accountability to Affected Populations, Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, Gender and Disability Inclusion endorsed by the HCT on 18 May 2023.
- The GiHA/Humanitarian Access Group *Snapshots* were presented to the HCT and provided recommendations and modalities for response.
- Inclusion of response plan indicators measuring humanitarian engagement with women's organizations and women's access to assistance.
- Establishment of the Women's Advisory Group, through which Afghan women provide strategic guidance to the HCT on strengthening women's access to assistance and entry points for engagement with the DFA with the aim of influencing policies and decision-making.

Technical advice, guidance and capacity development to Inter-Cluster Coordination Team and relevant clusters/thematic groups:



- The GiHA Working Group increased its collaboration with all clusters, and the Accountability to Affected Populations and Disability Working Groups to jointly integrate high-frequency indicators in the Humanitarian Needs Overview and Response Plan.
- Development of a training module – Gender-Responsive Research and Assessments – for humanitarian actors. The training sessions were attended by a total of 76 participants.

Information-sharing and management:



- Routinely shared information and issues of concern on gender, which could then be raised with the Inter-cluster Coordination Team, HCT and UNCT.
- Shared lessons learned and good practices on gender-responsive programmes, including through provision of platforms and events for local affected women to participate in these dialogues through local coordination structures.
- UN Women, as permanent chair of the GiHA Working Group, reportedly engaged with 180 cluster members in 2023 and 1087 cluster members in 2024 to improve the integration of gender in the humanitarian response.

Source: UN Women Afghanistan Country Office Strategic Note Reports and project reports 2023-2025

The Country Office shared an analysis by UN OCHA, indicating that, as of November 2025, Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund financial resources allocated to women-led organizations increased significantly, which the Country Office attributes to the efforts of the GiHA Working Group. In 2025, US\$ 5.07 million of US\$ 73.65 million Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund allocations (6.88 per cent) were directly allocated to eight women-led organizations. This represents a twenty-fold increase in resources compared to the US\$ 0.25 million allocated in 2023.³⁶

The Country Office's coordination efforts also included developing Gender Theme group's gender equality and women's empowerment advocacy messaging; revising the temporary UNCT operational guidance on mahram engagement for female UN personnel; implementing the Gender Scorecard and UNCT-System-Wide Action Plan on Gender Equality, as well as the UNCT Gender Parity Strategy; initiating a knowledge repository for gender equality and women's empowerment analysis; and, together with the UN Resident Coordinator's Office, conducting a UN personnel training needs assessment and capacity development plan endorsed by the UNCT. These efforts were referenced as having contributed to a more gender-sensitive UN system. Since December 2023, UN Women has supported a






Gender Equality Coordinator within the UN Resident Coordinator's Office, who has contributed to coordination and capacity strengthening for gender equality within the UNCT.

Coordination between the Country Office and other UN agencies varied depending on the project. Evaluation evidence pointed to UN Women's partnership with other UN agencies contributing to project outcomes and building on the value add of each agency, with UN partners noting the value of UN Women's gender expertise. Examples of this collaboration can be found in Box 3.

However, the Re-building the Women's Movement in Afghanistan project did not include formal collaboration with other UN agencies. Coordination between this project and a similar UNDP project Non-Governmental Organizations and Civil Society Organizations Capacity Building which had similar objectives and timelines but differing approaches³⁷ was limited and largely informal to avoid duplication and share good practices. A UN Women representative sat on the UNDP project's steering committee, but both agencies agreed that more systematic collaboration – particularly at project inception and closure – would have reduced duplication and reinforced each agency's impact.

BOX 3:

Examples of UN Women's joint activities with other UN agencies

 <p>The Country Office partnered with UNAMA on legal research, and with IOM, OCHA, UNESCO and UNHCR on various protection and education related initiatives.</p>	 <p>In partnership with UNAMA and IOM, the Country Office worked on the WPS agenda through regular women's consultations (previously quarterly and now bi-annual), advocating for women's participation in local dialogues and ensuring that Afghan women's perspectives inform policy and normative discussions, including UN Security Council briefings.</p>	 <p>In collaboration with a UN agency, the Country Office established dedicated spaces for women and girls within their Community Resource Centres and Transit Centres, providing multisectoral services, as well as piloted the integration of complementary vocational training services for women by UN Women' partner in the CRC in the eastern region.</p>	 <p>The Country Office collaborated with UNODC and WHO, delivering essential services to women, e.g. providing treatments to women with substance use disorder and vocational training for women in prison.</p>	 <p>The Country Office collaborated with UNOPS on the Awaaz Afghanistan initiative (nation-wide toll-free humanitarian feedback and complaints mechanism), with key informants noting that, through this project, the Country Office was able to expand the hotline to include female call centre operators and to improve the quality and accessibility of the call centre for female callers.</p>
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³⁶ Email shared by GiHA Coordinator dated 27 November 2025, with an Excel spreadsheet report on women-led organization funding for the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund 2023-2025.

³⁷ UNDP's grants aimed to engage 400 organizations, with half receiving grants for up to six months. UNDP's approach was first to train the NGOs (which included some WCSOs) and then provide the grants; whereas UN Women's approach was to select and provide funding and capacity-building in parallel aiming to help women's organizations stay operational for two years.

³⁸ UN Women. (2025). [Corporate Evaluation of UN Women's Support to Women's Participation in Peace Processes](#).

FINDING 4

While there are positive examples of cross-project collaboration and shared partnerships within the Country Office, overall synergies across teams and initiatives remain underutilized.

While the Country Office’s portfolio demonstrated promising examples of internal synergies, there is potential to leverage these synergies in a more systematic way. Evidence showed potential for integration at three levels: within projects, across thematic teams and across projects and partners. As highlighted in Table 2, in several instances, joint initiatives, shared expertise and overlapping implementing

partners created opportunities for collective action and cross-cutting results. However, collaboration often remained ad hoc, with limited coordinated planning even where overlaps existed. Overall, evaluation evidence points to significant untapped potential to move from isolated examples of internal coordination towards intentional, portfolio-wide synergy.

TABLE 2:
Good practices and areas for attention on synergies

LEVEL OF SYNERGY	GOOD PRACTICES	AREAS FOR ATTENTION
Within a project	<p>Selected partners engaged in multiple outcomes within a project, e.g. IOM was involved in both infrastructure development and consultation processes within the EU-funded project.</p> <p>WCSO grantees participated in knowledge exchanges across locations, with the support of sub-offices.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The WEE team’s technical expertise was not consistently engaged in women’s support centre initiatives, limiting integrated service and livelihood models. The WCSO capacity-building model was designed for partners with no prior UN funding experience, whereas other programme pillars work with responsible parties that have undergone standard risk-based capacity assessments. Although the WCSO model is not directly transferable, some lessons could have been relevant for broader capacity-strengthening efforts.
Across thematic teams	<p>Collaboration across WPS, EVAW, GiHA and WEE included nominating Afghan women for high-level events, demonstrating cross-pillar coordination.</p> <p>Capacity development activities and safe spaces were designed and implemented in ways that cut across multiple teams.</p>	
Across projects and partners	<p>The Essential Services Network facilitated coalition-building and brought together projects supported by different donors for collective action.</p> <p>The Northern Region sub-office convened CSOs engaged in different projects through integrated knowledge-exchange meetings, strengthening engagement across programmes.</p> <p>Some WCSOs engaged through the WCSO project became members of the GiHA Working Group, with one WCSO (who was also a Women’s Advisory Group member) also briefing the ECOSOC Humanitarian Forum in June 2025. A WPS partner under the USAID project provided organizational capacity-building across projects.</p>	<p>In 34 provinces where activities took place, seven provinces were common to four projects, yet coordinated planning to maximize complementarities across these locations was limited. While two partners were shared between the EU and USAID projects, and only one CSO worked across both the WCSO and USAID-funded outcomes, interactions between partners was limited. Most partners remained siloed within project-specific activities.</p>

Source: developed by the evaluation team

4.3 ORGANIZATIONAL EFFICIENCY

To what extent were UN Women’s resources, both financial and human, employed in the most efficient manner (including timely delivery of services, opportunities for optimizing resource utilization, human resources portfolio to support programmes, results-based management and knowledge management)?

FINDING 5

Strategic Note direct funding enabled the Country Office to sustain efforts and respond to emerging needs and disruption in a complex, dynamic environment.

The Country Office successfully increased Strategic Note direct funding from just one donor in 2020, US\$ 21,325³⁹ to 10 donors in 2023–2025, providing a total of US\$ 38 million.^{40,41} During the period from 2023 to 2025, the Country Office allocated 69 per cent of the funds to Development Results and 31 per cent for Organizational Efficiency and Effectiveness.⁴² The majority of Strategic Note direct funding mobilized by the Country Office was unearmarked, which gives the Country Office flexibility to decide how to use the funds within the framework of the Strategic Note. The personnel consulted noted that this flexibility allowed the Country Office to strategically address the human resources needed for implementation; support sub-office structures and cross-cutting personnel; address unforeseen needs, such as funding the earthquake response in Herat to meet the immediate needs of vulnerable people; support ERAW partners in embedding WEE in their activities as an entry point; and was useful in terms of reallocating funds due to the halt in USAID funding in January 2025, allowing for essential activities to continue despite the disruption. The Country Office also used Strategic Note direct

funding to fund catalytic activities, such as the 16 Days campaigns and strategic inter-agency monitoring missions.

Strategic Note direct funding also provided an avenue to build trust through strategic dialogues aimed at reframing the relationship from “donors” to “co-owners” and “partners” of the Strategic Note. This served as a consultative mechanism that engaged donors in dialogue on mutual priorities (including the strategic direction of the Strategic Note) and involved donors from its development stage, continuing throughout the implementation stage.

Country Office personnel noted challenges related to supporting the visibility of donors and balancing the reporting of detailed results, while ensuring the anonymity and protection of participants. Guidance on Strategic Note direct funding was issued on 24 April 2024, and minor adjustments were made to align Strategic Note narrative and financial reporting with donor needs. Discussions were ongoing to ensure alignment of narrative and financial reporting to meet the needs of donors while ensuring the protection of partners and project participants.

³⁹ Calculated based on UN exchange rate (EUR – US\$) as of 26 September 2025.

⁴⁰ Calculated based on UN exchange rate (EUR, ISK, NOK, SEK, DKK, NZD – US\$) as of 26 September 2025.

⁴¹ The 10 Strategic Note funding donors for the Afghanistan Strategic Note 2023-2025 include the governments of Spain, Norway, Finland, Austria (earmarked to Outcome 1.3), Canada, Iceland, Denmark, New Zealand, Latvia, Slovenia and SIDA.

⁴² Based on the Country Office’s Annual Work Plan.

FINDING 6

UN Women's procedures and policy exemptions enabled engagement with partners in this high-risk environment, without which programmes could not have been implemented. However, the policies and procedures were also difficult to navigate and required persistent internal negotiation to manage risks. Delays, in some instances, and financial system constraints hindered implementation and also posed risks that needed to be managed.

UN Women's Fast-Tracking of Programme Actions Procedure and Small Grants Policy Exemption allowed the Country Office to modify application of the Policy, Procedure and Guidance Framework, enabling time-bound and flexible programming in response to the complex emergency context.

Of the 57 partners across the four projects evaluated,⁴³ 37 partners (65 per cent) were contracted through fast-track procedures. Activated in December 2022, the fast-track procedures allowed for engagement with previously registered partners and enabled direct selection of CSOs. The fast-track procedures also permitted the waiver of certain requirements and Project Appraisal Committee reviews for new partners. The Country Office noted that this flexibility enabled collaboration with WCSOs.

The Small Grants Policy Exemption, approved for the first time in UN Women by the Executive Director after a rigorous three-month process, enabled the Country Office to engage WCSOs for grant-making purposes. Grants were disbursed through restricted channels and third-party providers, without open advertisement, and could be managed by an NGO partner⁴⁴ using a simplified application process in Dari, Pashto or English.

These arrangements were essential to implement the Re-building the Women's Movement in Afghanistan programme, which supported WCSOs in two phases: institutional capacity-building and direct programming for Afghan women. Grants could cover operational costs such as rent, security, transportation, salaries and equipment (up to 100 per cent of the grant value); be delivered via third-party money service providers; and could be extended up to two years when justified. A country-specific grants management system was also permitted.

While such flexibility was effective and appreciated by partners for its responsiveness and respectfulness,⁴⁵ challenges remained. Delays in contracting and payments in some instances, sometimes lasting over 40 days, undermined implementation and posed risks that needed to be continuously managed.⁴⁶ Reimbursement-based engagements created liquidity risks for some partners, forcing reliance on bridge funding.⁴⁷ Additional barriers included partners' limited access to financial systems, fluctuating exchange rates and shortages of trained financial staff of partners.

⁴³ EU, USAID and US Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs funded projects and the *Re-building the Women's Movement in Afghanistan* project.

⁴⁴ The Country Office explained that a partnership with ACBAR (leading coordination body of NGOs in Afghanistan) was established to undertake the grant-making process, which allowed for simple application, rolling calls for proposal and wide outreach to NGOs. ACBAR also completed the first screening of applicants, while the Country Office WCSO team carried out subsequent screening and selection.

⁴⁵ The WCSOs surveyed assessed the process of receiving grants from UN Women as effective, flexible and respectful: 68 per cent (N=43/63) of WCSO respondents to the evaluation survey reported this to be excellent and 21 per cent (N=13/63) as very good.

⁴⁶ Based on the evaluation team's review of UN Women's Partner Management System, of 34 planned instalments pertinent to 12 sampled fast-tracked partners, 28 (82 per cent) instalments were delayed. The gap between planned instalment and actual instalment ranged from 2 days to 222 days (approximately seven months). On average, the gap between planned instalment and actual instalment was 41 days.

⁴⁷ Meaning that the organization had to pull from their existing resources (either core or from other projects) to cover expenditure, which were then reimbursed through UN Women.

The fast-track approach demonstrated a willingness to take calculated risks, with most partners assessed as low risk.⁴⁸ However, risks associated with working in Afghanistan, such as political repercussions or bank account closures, required rigorous monitoring.⁴⁹ While pre-assessment ratings indicated high organizational capacity,⁵⁰ some agreements were terminated due to performance issues identified during implementation,⁵¹ reflecting the importance of continuous oversight and adaptive risk management in highly volatile contexts. These experiences point to opportunities to further refine assessment tools and tailor support to regions facing implementation challenges.⁵²

Stakeholders involved in partner agreement processing from both the Regional Office and headquarters expressed the need for more detailed information; while the Country Office highlighted that risk assessment meetings were held every six months, and detailed records were shared upon request.

Partners offered various suggestions to enhance the efficiency of the grant-making process, including further enhancing organizations' institutional capacities to absorb the funding; timelier responses from Country Office personnel; more flexibility in budget processes; and simplifying monitoring and evaluation tools and reporting requirements.

⁴⁸ Of 27 CSO implementing partners engaged through fast-track procedures that were assessed against technical capacity, governance and management structure, and financial and administrative management, 24 CSOs (89 per cent) were assessed by the Country Office as low-risk and 3 CSOs (11 per cent) were assessed as moderate-risk. Of 10 sampled partner agreements, all partners had included a Risk Register in their proposal.

⁴⁹ The Country Office applied a structured financial and organizational monitoring system to manage these risks. A dedicated financial management firm was engaged to oversee compliance, train partners and improve internal controls. The WCSO team also implemented its own Organizational Capacity Assessment Tool, regular bi-weekly check-ins and pre-notified M&E visits to ensure a do-no-harm approach and safeguard both partners and beneficiaries.

⁵⁰ The WCSO team developed its own organizational capacity assessment tool to assess the capacity of all WCSOs engaged through the small-grant modality before and after receiving the small grant. The assessment tool aimed to assess WCSOs' (a) overall strategy and organizational structure; (b) leadership and management; (c) financial resources; (d) programming and stakeholder engagement; and (e) human resources. However, unlike risk-based capacity assessments which are required for regular partners, this capacity assessment did not include assigning a risk-rating to the WCSOs. Of 37 pre-capacity assessments of a sample of WCSO grantees analysed by the evaluation team, 17 (46 per cent) were assessed as having high capacity, 18 (49 per cent) as having medium capacity and 2 (5 per cent) as having low capacity.

⁵¹ In the evaluation team's review of a sample of seven agreements that were terminated, four organizations had received a score of "high" in the pre-assessment.

⁵² 31 WCSO grants (of 140) were terminated during either Phase One or Phase Two: 29 of which the Country Office reported were due to non-compliance, and 2 because they received grants from another fund, which was prohibited under UN Women's conditions. Analysis of where the organizations were located identified that a high percentage of grants in Herat were terminated (36 per cent, N=4/11), followed by Mazar (26 per cent, N = 7/27).

4.4 EFFECTIVENESS AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO SUSTAINABILITY

To what extent have the Country Office's contributions across UN Women's triple mandate advanced gender equality and the empowerment of women in Afghanistan, in a context fundamentally hostile to these issues? What are the shared strategies or approaches that have proven effective and what are the enabling factors?

FINDING 7

The Country Office's efforts improved the well-being of women and girls through innovative, multisectoral services that enhanced safety, health and empowerment. Looking ahead, it is essential to address access barriers, ensure the sustainability of results and clearly define UN Women's comparative strengths in this area within the broader UN system in Afghanistan.

The Country Office reported that the number of women accessing protection services in Afghanistan through UN Women increased from 14,652 in 2023 to 136,544 in 2024.⁵³ These efforts aimed to improve the well-being of women and girls through innovative, multisectoral services that enhanced safety, health and autonomy. Centre managers and service users emphasized that a core value of the centres was their role in providing regular opportunities for women's voices to be heard, fostering solidarity and offering a platform to channel their priorities.

Based on evidence shared by the Country Office and its programme partners, culturally sensitive, multisectoral interventions were effective in expanding access to essential services and securing operational clearance from the DFA. Inclusive approaches (such as re-designing community spaces) reduced stigma and encouraged community uptake. Working with priority groups provided additional pathways to deliver much needed services within existing constraints.

Based on a needs assessment, the Country Office developed a Partners' Engagement Strategy, which reportedly provided a framework for strengthening

partners' institutional and technical capacity. Some centres consulted noted that the INGO programme partners engaged by the Country Office played an important role by delivering ongoing, hands-on mentoring and support to CSO partners.⁵⁴

Despite these achievements, access barriers limited the reach and inclusivity of services (see Box 4). Major concerns included the short duration of many interventions; intermittent suspension of service points due to DFA restrictions; and delays caused by the DFA's requirement to re-register extended partner agreements, which in some cases shortened the implementation period.

Stakeholders noted that the short-term counselling or vocational training provided by the women's support centres sometimes lasted only a few months, and service users noted that this did not allow women to fully recover from trauma, master new skills or sustain livelihoods, raising concerns that women were left vulnerable in these circumstances.

⁵³ UN Women Afghanistan Country Office Annual Report 2024 (internal document).

⁵⁴ These initiatives, implemented under the EAW Capacity Development Plan and Partner Engagement Strategy, focused on psychosocial services (PSS), violence against women prevention, M&E and project management. In 2024, the Country Office reported supporting 24 CSOs, reaching 658 individuals, to strengthen their capacity to deliver and monitor quality services in a complex and crisis-affected environment.

The Country Office's ability to bring forward women's perspectives and evidence from the ground was noted as an important added value, helping to inform other UN agencies' strategies on gender-based violence and coordination within this area of responsibility. However, stakeholders emphasized the need to ensure that resources and efforts are not spread too thinly given the scale of needs, and against the backdrop

of funding cuts. The current development funding context suggests that UN Women should be more specific about what areas to prioritize and, critically, what to deprioritize. While the services provided were consistently rated as high quality, the Country Office should continue to map how these interventions link to and complement broader UN system efforts to ensure scale and reach to the most vulnerable.

BOX 4:

Evidence from evaluation surveys – effectiveness of services provided by women's support centres

SURVEY OF INDIVIDUALS RECEIVING SERVICES THROUGH WOMEN'S SUPPORT CENTRES

Total number of respondents: **536**

249

accessed Counselling/
Psychosocial support



82%

(N=204/249) of respondents who received Counselling/
Psychosocial support services rated the quality of the services as "very good" and 76 per cent (N= 189/249) reported a very positive impact.



37%

(N=196/536) of respondents reported Distance to service centres was identified as the most common obstacle, followed by cost to access services by 18 per cent (N=94/536) of respondents.



FINDING 8

The Country Office's efforts to sustain the women's movement in Afghanistan were critical in an environment where women's rights were severely restricted, although results remain fragile given women-led and women-focused CSOs' financial reliance on UN Women and systemic barriers in the Afghanistan context.

The Country Office played a pivotal role in sustaining women-led and women-focused CSOs at a time when many gender equality and human rights organizations were forced to close due to requirements imposed by the DFA, including restrictive registration policies that prevented women-led organizations from being recognized.⁵⁵

The Country Office's support to WCSOs, and CSOs more widely, was acknowledged by stakeholders as instrumental in preserving operational continuity and amplifying the voices of Afghan women at a time when they risked being silenced. Female CSO staff consulted during the evaluation highlighted the psychosocial value of earning a salary⁵⁶ and sustaining a sense of purpose, particularly after many had previously lost work due to DFA restrictions on women's employment or due to lack of funding.

Besides financial grants, the Country Office also provided extensive capacity development to WCSOs on organizational, project and financial management, alongside skills in proposal writing, budgeting, fundraising, monitoring and evaluation, advocacy, digital skills and safeguarding/prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse. CSOs engaged through other Country Office efforts (e.g. women's support centres) further noted that INGO partners designated by the Country Office as programme partners played an important role by delivering hands-on, ongoing

institutional capacity-related mentoring and support at the community level. This overall package of support enabled WCSOs/CSOs to deliver diverse services spanning women's economic empowerment, psychosocial well-being and education.

Despite these achievements, stakeholders noted that capacity strengthening activities were sometimes too short, generic or constrained by online delivery, which limited interaction, private space and reliable connectivity. While the WCSO programme team reported that, as of September 2025, 20 WCSOs have secured additional funding from other sources, many WCSOs consulted by the evaluation team remained dependent on UN Women support, with insufficient assistance in identifying alternative funding sources (see Box 5). The short-term nature of WCSO grantee-funded projects also limited stability, which was compounded by limited funding. For example, one WCSO reported receiving 700 applications for just 50 places on an economic empowerment project.

DFA restrictions further heightened risks, with shifting registration requirements creating uncertainty for female staff and operations. Stakeholders also emphasized the importance of stronger platforms for collaboration and collective advocacy, pointing to the Essential Services Network as a promising but underutilized model.

BOX 5:

Evidence from the evaluation survey – capacity strengthening interventions

SURVEY OF WCSO MANAGERS SUPPORTED UNDER THE RE-BUILDING THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN PROJECT

Total number of respondents: **63**

94%



(N=59/63) of the WCSOs surveyed reported that grant funding allowed them to remain operational; 79% (N=50/63) reported that it enabled them to pay staff salaries; and 68 per cent (N=43/63) indicated that it allowed them to hire new staff.

97%



(N=61/63) of WCSOs engaged in Country Office-led capacity-building; and 69% (N=42/61) found the quality to be either "excellent" or "very good".

75%



(N=47/63) of WCSOs reported being completely reliant on UN Women funding. Proposal writing was the top capacity gap identified by WCSOs (87%, N=55/63).

⁵⁵ Under the WCSO project, the Country Office reported supporting 28 CSOs to transition into formally registered NGOs and facilitated the registration of 91 WCSO projects with relevant de facto ministries.

⁵⁶ For instance, under the *Re-building the Women's Movement in Afghanistan* project it was reported that 743 women and 377 men were supported with staff salaries.

FINDING 9

Women's Economic Empowerment emerged as both a vital survival mechanism and an entry point for wider programming, although efforts remained small-scale.

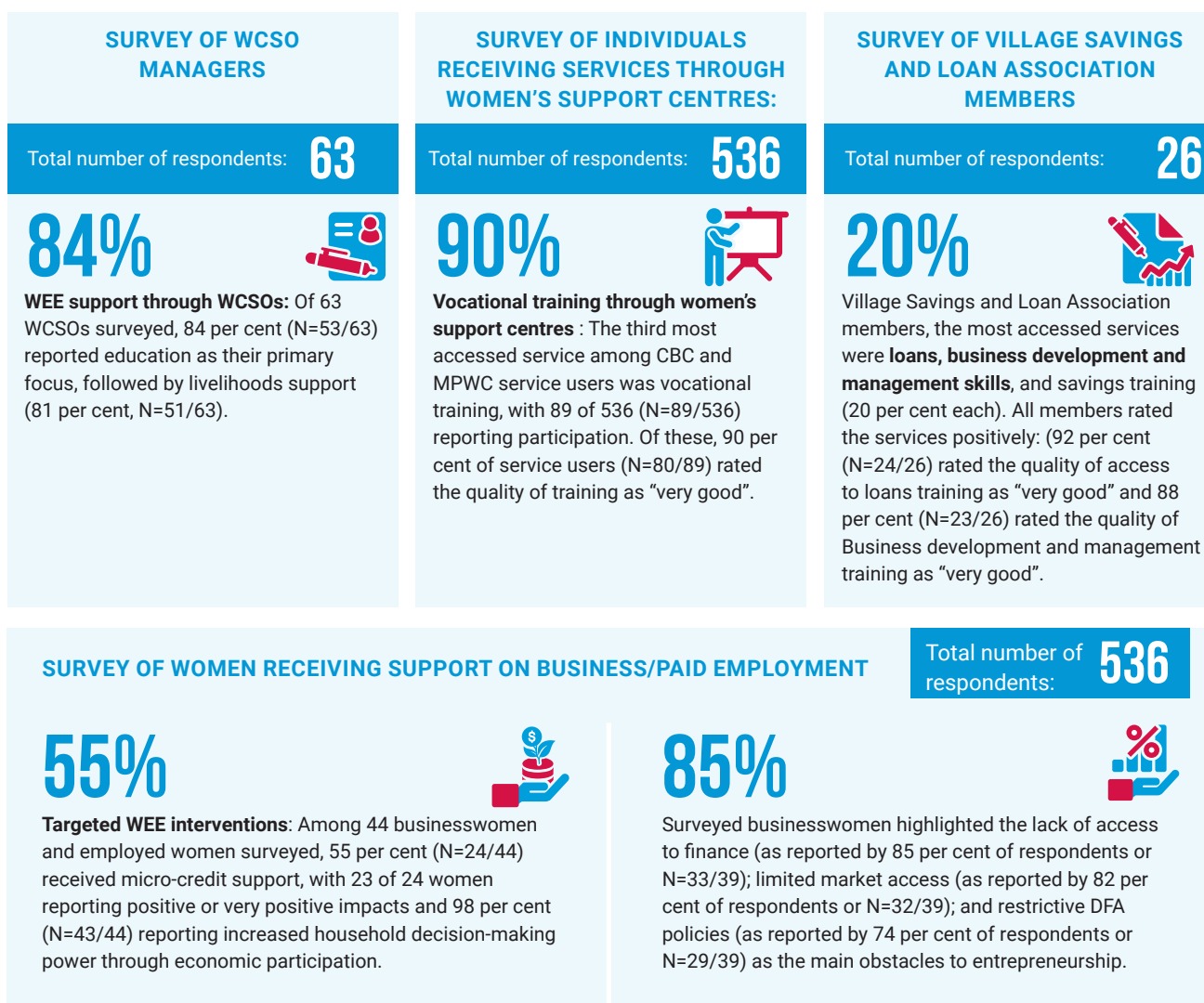
In certain fields, Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) was one of the few areas where the DFA permitted women's engagement, making it an important entry point for Country Office programming. WEE was advanced through multiple channels: some WCSOs implemented WEE initiatives that provided livelihood support; protection services, as noted in Findings 1 and 7, also incorporated WEE-related activities; and the Country Office further pursued targeted WEE interventions such as vocational training, livelihood support, business development training, micro-credit, village savings and loan associations,

and paid employment opportunities. Survey data indicated positive outcomes associated with these diverse interventions (see Box 6).

Through these interventions, the women consulted stated they had gained employable skills; started micro-enterprises; improved savings; and, in some cases, progressed from subsistence-level production to more commercially viable activities. Some education-focused WCSOs also supported community initiatives such as preschools and online schooling, maintaining women and girls' hope and aspirations despite DFA restrictions.

BOX 6:

Evidence from surveys – WEE interventions



However, sustainability was limited by systemic barriers. As Box 6 notes, surveyed businesswomen faced three key barriers to entrepreneurship: limited access to finance, restricted market opportunities and constraining DFA policies. Participants consistently emphasized the need for stronger market linkages, advertising support, access to bazaars and export markets, and long-term mentoring to sustain results. Women also noted that training was often short-term and lacked follow-up, constraining the development of viable businesses. Some interventions were misaligned with market realities, focusing on traditional crafts in already saturated sectors, which further constrained opportunities for sustainable livelihoods. Country Office personnel explained that the emphasis on conventional skills (tailoring, handicrafts, cooking) was a deliberate strategy as entry points. While relevant during the immediate operational crisis, stakeholders

and Country Office personnel acknowledged the need to gradually shift towards more contemporary and non-traditional skills, including digital and business development, and to forge stronger connections with private-sector actors.

Some Country Office and private-sector stakeholders consulted noted that, following the DFA takeover, the Country Office initially lacked expertise in private-sector engagement but has subsequently begun exploring partnerships with entities to re-think approaches to entrepreneurship development. While many WEE projects remained micro-scale and survival-oriented, stakeholders highlighted that WEE should not only be used as an operational entry point but also leveraged to foster sustainable entrepreneurship and employment opportunities, where possible, along with other UN partners or private-sector actors.

FINDING 10

The Country Office's support was vital in protecting and empowering gender equality activists in Afghanistan and amplifying their voices in global spaces. More context-responsive and participatory approaches are required to further strengthen these efforts and ensure alignment with priority needs.

At a strategic level, gender equality activists emphasized that UN Women's support was essential to sustaining their activism and enabling access to protection services, and regional and international advocacy networks. Afghan women's voices were amplified in global spaces such as the first and second Doha negotiations,⁵⁷ regional pre-consultations ahead of CSW69, with the priority theme being Beijing +30 and the Central Asia Women Leaders' Caucus. Gender equality activists reported that participation in these platforms enhanced solidarity, mutual learning and access to advocacy opportunities, while also providing visibility for Afghan women's perspectives in high-level dialogues. Both UN partners and gender equality activist interviewees noted that the Women's Advisory Group (see Finding 3) and consultations with Afghan women led by Women Community Volunteers (see Finding 11) created opportunities to amplify the voices of Afghan women leaders and contributed to advocating for greater accountability on the situation of Afghan women's rights in international spaces.

Direct support to gender equality activists constituted a critical and timely intervention in the aftermath of the 2021 political transition, when risks to gender equality activists sharply increased. Gender equality activist respondents to the evaluation survey were positive about the Country Office's support (delivered through civil society partners). Evaluation evidence pointed to participants' increased awareness of online threats, stronger account protection and greater confidence in navigating digital risks. The adapted Online Protection and Digital Security: User Guide⁵⁸ was identified as a key resource by gender equality activist organizations, originally developed by the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq and later adapted to the Afghan context by UNAMA and UN Women. However, some challenges were identified by participants including complex training content; limited inclusion of women with low digital literacy; and training sessions perceived as too brief. Survey findings also revealed some misalignment between gender equality activists' priority needs and the services received.

⁵⁷ However, the third Doha meeting in June 2024 excluded civil society, including Afghan women, from formal discussions based on the Taliban's demand as a precondition of its participation. Rights groups and Afghan women activists condemned the exclusion arguing that it undermined the credibility of the United Nations. See the Human Rights Watch Report: [UN Meeting Blocks Afghan Women from Agenda, Participation | Human Rights Watch](#)

⁵⁸ UN Women. (2024, February). *Online protection and digital security: Guidance for supporting women human rights defenders and women's civil society organizations*. <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2024/02/online-protection-and-digital-security#view>

FINDING 11

The Country Office has filled a critical data gap on Afghan women's experiences since 2021 through its innovative direct engagement of women in Afghanistan; knowledge products; raising awareness and building coalitions to strengthen the gender sensitivity of UN and humanitarian systems; and global advocacy for Afghan women's rights.

Evaluation evidence identified that the Country Office played a unique role in generating and disseminating high-quality gender data and analysis on Afghanistan at scale, filling a vacuum created since the 2021 take-over. Stakeholders, including donors, UN agencies, INGOs, research organizations and international civil society, consistently highlighted UN Women as one of the few agencies producing statistically representative, countrywide gender data, providing a constant reminder of women's rights issues through platforms such as the GiHA Working Group. At the international level, UN Women also used its evidence and analysis to inform its engagement and advocacy on Afghanistan, for example in the UN Security Council and UN General Assembly and in relation to the first, second and third Doha processes. Bilateral partners noted that these contextual updates and information on Afghan women's perspectives were essential in informing their international engagement on Afghanistan.

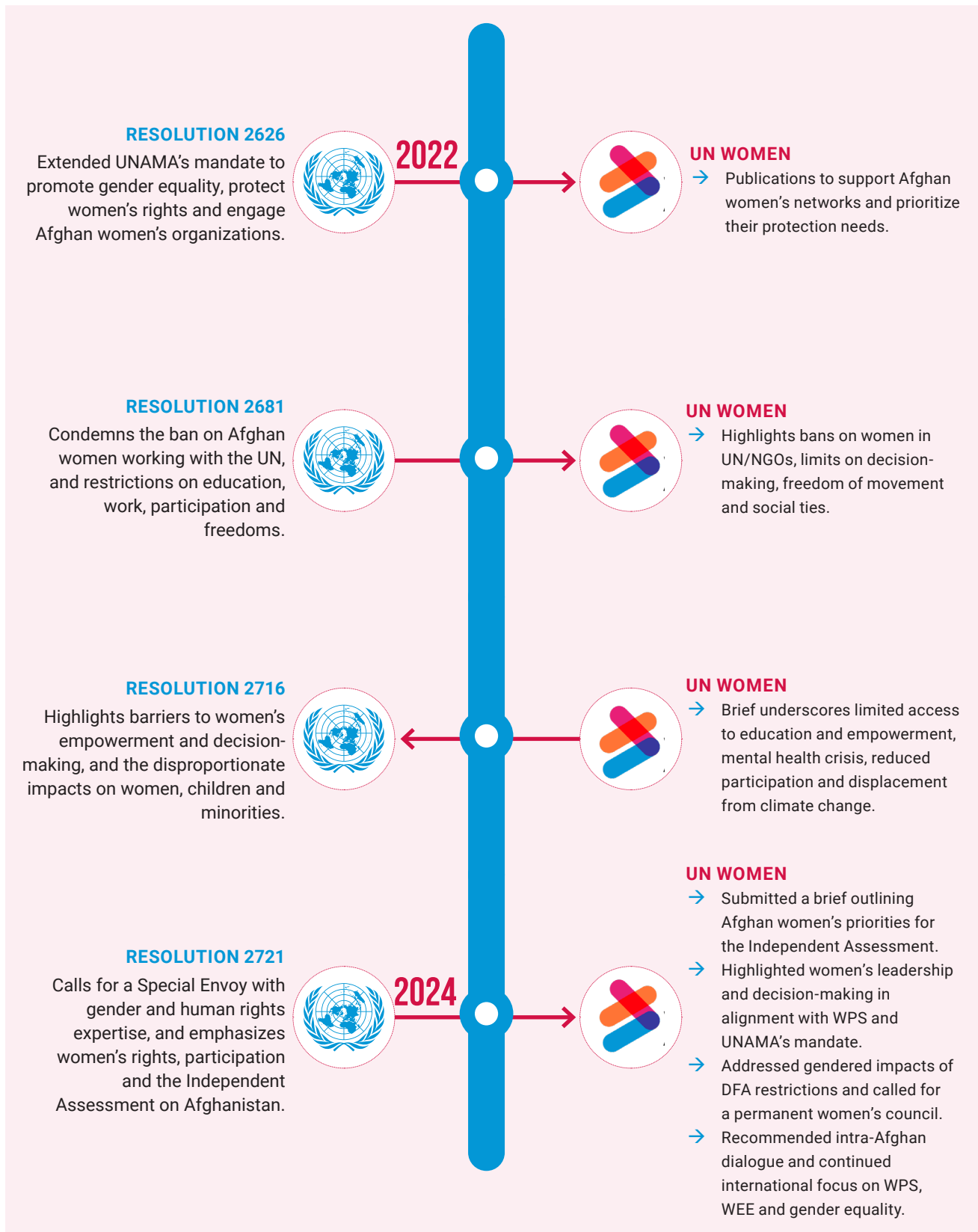
Knowledge products were widely perceived as relevant, credible and useful, including large-scale surveys, thematic research (on marriage practices, counter-narcotics, economic stabilization) and conceptual framing (e.g. broadening the definition of WFOs). The

evidence informed key advocacy spaces, such as the Commission on the Status of Women and Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) submissions, Security Council debates and international donor approaches. For example, publications by UN Women and its partners were referenced in the 9354th meeting of the UN Security Council and aligned with Resolution 2716's focus on barriers to women's empowerment and the disproportionate impacts on women, children and minorities. Figure 4 illustrates examples of alignment between thematic content in UN Women publications and Security Council resolutions from 2022 to 2024, showing how the publications were either informed by, or in some cases helped inform, UN Security Council Resolutions, including calls for inclusive assessments, gender expertise and women's participation.⁵⁹ Even where publications were primarily informed by resolutions, this alignment demonstrated UN Women's role in translating global commitments into practice, by supporting mandate implementation and reinforcing the evidence base on women's rights in Afghanistan.

⁵⁹ This analysis by the evaluation team was undertaken only for the top ten downloaded publications.

FIGURE 4:

Examples of alignment between thematic content in UN Women publications and Security Council Resolutions from 2022 to 2024



Source: developed by the evaluation team

Evidence generation supported through the Country Office also directly shaped discourse on discriminatory practices. The ODI-supported report [Living under the Taliban: Gender, Insecurity and Child Marriage in Afghanistan](#) documented how Taliban edicts reinforced early marriage, with 69 per cent of respondents to a survey administered as part of the ODI report⁶⁰ reporting knowledge of underage marriages. Findings informed global advocacy, including a high-profile event at the Commission on the Status of Women and submissions to CEDAW. Similarly, data generated and knowledge exchanged through resources such as the Expert Group Meetings⁶¹ supported policy briefs, advocacy and international calls to further integrate gender in international legal frameworks to strengthen accountability for women's rights violations. GiHA-related publications and contributions on strategic advocacy, coordination, and harmonization of gender equality efforts in humanitarian action are outlined in Box 2.

The Country Office established a network of trained Women Community Volunteers across provinces to lead regular consultations on women's situations, enabling grassroots perspectives to be systematically captured and channelled into national and international decision-making. The consultations offered one of the

few large-scale platforms for women from all 34 provinces to share their experiences and priorities, ensuring their perspectives informed UN and Member State decision-making. Stakeholders widely recognized this as a unique value-add, especially as restrictions tightened and women became increasingly invisible. These consultations were cited in Secretary-General Reports,⁶² referenced during Security Council briefings and drew significant traction in donor forums.⁶³ Other knowledge products also had strong reach, such as the Projections for Afghan Women and Girls brief⁶⁴ and the Gender Country Profile⁶⁵ both of which were widely cited in international forums and media.

Stakeholders noted that UN Women's publications, while useful, could be more engaging and strategically disseminated to maximize impact. There is also no formal mechanism to track how knowledge products influence international discourse, and visibility remains inconsistent. For example, the evaluation team reviewed publicly available records identifying that references to women's rights were made in selected briefings and outcome texts during the period.⁶⁶ These gaps point to the need for more systematic strategies to ensure alignment, visibility, dissemination and accountability in how knowledge is used.

⁶⁰ ODI-Global is an independent think tank that worked on the research: <https://odi.org/en/about/>. The data for this survey on child marriage was drawn from 11 provinces: Baghlan, Balkh, Bamyan, Daykundi, Farah, Faryab, Herat, Jawzjan, Kandahar, Nangarhar and Paktia. A representative survey was administered to 2,799 women using both online and in-person tools.

⁶¹ The Country Office sought to leverage the [Expert Group Meetings](#) for coalition-building by facilitating participants to build alliances and momentum around Afghan women's rights through various meetings, events and joint reports. The first Expert Group Meeting on International Strategies and Tools to Address the Situation of Women and Girls in Afghanistan was convened in Istanbul in 2023. It brought together Afghan women leaders and international legal and political experts to reflect on legal and political implications in the Afghan context. Building on this foundation, the second Expert Group Meeting, held in 2024, sought to sustain momentum by creating spaces for critical policy dialogue and advancing the operationalization of normative frameworks addressing the situation of Afghan women and girls.

⁶² Including for both Security Council and annual reports on Women, Peace and Security.

⁶³ The evaluation team's analysis of publications confirmed consultation summaries were among the most viewed and downloaded UN Women outputs, with the June 2023 summary ranking first in both views (N=2,042) and downloads (N=383).

⁶⁴ The evaluation team's analysis of publications: 6th most viewed, 4th most downloaded.

⁶⁵ The evaluation team's analysis of publications: 9th most viewed, 8th most downloaded.

⁶⁶ Of 17 Security Council press releases on Afghanistan issued between 2022 and 2024, only one explicitly referenced women's rights. Beyond press releases, explicit references were identified in a limited number of Security Council engagements. These include the UNAMA SRSG briefing of 8 March 2023, which described Afghanistan as the most repressive country globally for women's rights, and Security Council resolution 2681 (April 2023), which explicitly condemned restrictions on Afghan women's rights, including bans on women working for the United Nations. Through June 2025, explicit references to women and girls' rights were made in a small number of instances, including in the Secretary-General's reporting to the Council and in selected Member State statements (notably by the United Kingdom), as well as in a joint Security Council signatories' statement. Civil society briefings to the Council in 2025 also highlighted systematic violations of women's fundamental rights. No explicit references to women's rights were identified in publicly indexed Security Council press materials or searchable briefing records for 2022, while publicly searchable records for 2024 were limited.

4.5 HUMAN RIGHTS AND GENDER EQUALITY

To what extent have Country Office interventions fostered change and increased local stakeholder capacity (including CSOs and women's rights organizations), while integrating human rights and gender equality principles and the commitment to leave no one behind, to the extent possible, given the complex situation in Afghanistan for women?

FINDING 12

The Country Office demonstrated commitment to reaching marginalized women and challenging discriminatory gender norms through inclusive programming, some engagement of men and communities, and feminist approaches. However, the depth and consistency of these efforts were constrained by contextual limitations.

Stakeholders emphasized that, in Afghanistan, all women are vulnerable given the restrictive context, and commended UN Women's consistent efforts to engage them. Even within this reality, the Country Office and its partners sought to prioritize the most marginalized, including internally displaced persons, returnees, female prisoners, out-of-school adolescent girls, female-headed households, women living with disabilities, minority women and youth. Evaluation survey results from people receiving services from Country Office-supported women's support centres confirm that some efforts were inclusive: women and

households with disabilities, low-income and medium-income groups, and minorities accessed services at higher or different rates than others.

WCSOs were encouraged to identify vulnerable participants by conducting formative research using social and local media; mobilizing women-led outreach teams; and liaising with community leaders, elders and the DFA. WCSOs also facilitated inclusive participation by creating safe spaces, adapting educational content,⁶⁷ ensuring accessibility of training and leveraging women's networks. Stakeholders noted that these approaches fostered community acceptance and, in some cases, shifted attitudes towards marginalized women's participation.

BOX 7:

Evidence from surveys – effectiveness of services from Country Office supported women's support centres in reaching the most vulnerable

SURVEY OF WOMEN RECEIVING SUPPORT ON BUSINESS/PAID EMPLOYMENT

Total number of respondents: **536**



Persons with disabilities:

Higher access to psychosocial support (38 per cent N=9/24, 36 per cent N=19/53, 30 per cent N=31/105) versus households without any persons with disabilities (28 per cent N=190/684). Quality: 82 per cent (N=148/182) rated services "very good." 70 per cent of WCSOs (N=44/62) reporting reaching women with disabilities.



Income levels: Low/medium-income households more likely to access vocational training (13 per cent N=48/380 low; 12 per cent N=30/243 medium; 6 per cent N=11/197 high income).



Internally displaced households: Most accessed service for internally displaced person households was Counselling/ Psychosocial Support with 69 per cent (N=62/90) rating services as "very good", compared to non-internally displaced persons (89 per cent N=142/159).



Minorities: Of the 23 respondents from households from a minority group, Primary health services (N=8/23), Counselling/Psychosocial support (N=5/23) and Learning (N=2/23) were the most accessed services with vocational training services not accessed by any. Both Primary health services (N=8/8) and Counselling/ Psychosocial support (N=5/5) received 100 per cent ratings of "very good" quality.

⁶⁷ The Country Office notes that these educational activities were undertaken discreetly, and risk measures were put in place by organizations to keep participants safe.

Noting that, in the current context, there are extreme difficulties in identifying and meaningfully and safely engaging the most marginalized and vulnerable groups, the evaluation identified ongoing gaps with respect to information related to engaging persons with diverse SOGIESC and vulnerability criteria were sometimes inconsistently applied, with partners reporting that targeting strategies were not always focused on the most marginalized.

The Country Office’s commitment to disaggregated data was widely recognized as crucial for identifying vulnerable groups. However, restrictive conditions limited representation, meaning that the most marginalized voices may still be underrepresented. For example, the regular women’s consultations (refer to Finding 11) and snowball and telesurvey approaches were not always able to reach women without phones, those with literacy and mobility barriers and internet access restrictions. Nevertheless, the innovative network of Women Community Volunteers engaged across the country to collect data on the situation of women and girls in Afghanistan provides an opportunity for continuing and strengthening future efforts to reach the most marginalized.

UN Women continues to highlight the importance of engaging men in humanitarian crises such as Afghanistan, particularly to question harmful masculinities and to promote caregiving and non-violent behaviour as essential elements of

gender-transformative change, while also challenging restrictive norms and increasing women’s safety, access to services and participation.⁶⁸ Although the Country Office did not have a formal male engagement strategy, it undertook several initiatives to involve men and communities in gender equality and women’s empowerment. These included outreach through mosques; engagement with religious and community leaders; and awareness-raising with mahrams and male relatives such as husbands, fathers and brothers. Effective practices included employing male outreach staff, covering mahram-related costs and framing discussions within culturally and religiously supportive narratives. Stakeholders increasingly recognized that the active involvement of men as allies, particularly husbands and fathers, is required to ensure sustainability.

Social norms programming included community dialogues, radio dramas, advocacy networks with elders and religious leaders, and other culturally grounded approaches. While promising, these interventions were small in scale and constrained by operational and financial limitations. Observable results on norm change were limited, although this is consistent with the reality that shifting harmful norms is a long-term process, unlikely to yield major outcomes in a short period under such restrictive conditions.

BOX 8:

Evidence from surveys – community engagement

SURVEY OF COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Total number of respondents: **39**

46%



The top activity engaged in by community members was **Participation in advocacy networks** reported by 46 per cent of community members (N=18/39). 67 per cent (N=12/16) reported it as “very good” quality with 61 per cent (N=11/16) reporting a “very positive” impact on the respondent and 56 per cent (N=10/16) reporting a “very positive” impact on the community.

41%



Community dialogues (Social cohesion and conflict resolution) was the second most engaged in activity by 41 per cent of community members (N=16/39). This activity had the highest ratings in terms of quality with 88 per cent (N=14/16) reporting it as “very good”. However, ratings were much lower in terms of impact with only 31 per cent (N=5/16) reporting a “very positive” impact on the respondents and only 6 per cent (N=1/16) reporting a “very positive” impact on their community.

⁶⁸ UN Women. (2023). Men, masculinities and humanitarian settings: Guidance note.



Photo: UN Women/Sayed Habib Bidell

UN Women strengthens Afghan women's leadership and influence by partnering with women's organizations, providing them with financial support, training and mentorship. UN Women reported supporting more than 200 organizations in Afghanistan – most of them women-led or women-focused.

5

LESSONS LEARNED AND PROMISING PRACTICES

The lessons learned draw on insights from the evaluation and are intended to inform broader efforts working to advance women’s rights in Afghanistan. They reflect evidence-based lessons that may be applicable to other humanitarian or crisis settings, particularly those with complex political environments, diverse stakeholders and evolving gender equality priorities.

FACTORS OF SUCCESS	LESSONS LEARNED
Investing in the organizational resilience of CSOs sustains feminist movements and service delivery	Building the resilience and capacities of CSOs, especially women-led or women-focused CSOs is critical for sustaining programming, protecting staff and advancing women’s empowerment, especially in restrictive and crisis-affected contexts. Strong, autonomous women’s movements are a precondition for lasting progress.
Flexible and adaptive programming enhances effectiveness in volatile contexts	Adaptive programming, grounded in risk assessments, trust-based donor relationships and strong local networks, enables operational continuity, responsiveness to shifting needs and the safe participation of women and girls.
Integrated, multisectoral approaches expand accessibility and impact	Linking protection, psychosocial support, livelihoods and gender-based violence services within community-based safe spaces creates multiple entry points, reduces stigma and improves relevance and uptake of services.
Sustainable impact requires longer-term and diversified funding	Short-term or single-donor projects undermine continuity and trust. Building resource mobilization capacity, securing longer-term commitments and embedding sustainability strategies are essential for systemic change.
Principled engagement safeguards women’s rights and operational space	Balancing the application of humanitarian principles with the need for operational and programmatic adjustments given the complex realities on the ground, while leveraging UN Women’s coordination and normative mandates, is essential to uphold women’s rights and create operational space in restrictive environments.
Robust data and evidence amplify women’s voices in decision-making processes	Investing in context-specific data collection, drawing on local networks and disseminating evidence through coordination and advocacy spaces ensures that women’s diverse priorities inform national, regional and global agendas.
Strategic use of normative and coordination mandates safeguards women’s rights	Leveraging UN Women’s coordination and normative mandate remains imperative to advance a more gender-sensitive approach within the UNCT in highly restrictive contexts, such as Afghanistan.
Policies and procedures that clearly articulate risk tolerance, and embed flexible decision-making and exception mechanisms, enable faster and more responsive action in crisis contexts.	Broader systems and procedures of an organization need to be continuously reviewed and/or strengthened to ensure they are <i>fit for purpose</i> enabling effective humanitarian and crisis responses.



Photo: ©UN Women

Ahead of the cold winter, through local partners, UN Women distributed winterization kits to women and their families displaced by the eastern Afghanistan earthquake in 2025. UN Women also provided food, cash, non-food items and mental health support to women and girls impacted by the natural disaster.

6

CONCLUSIONS

UN Women Afghanistan has played a vital role in ensuring that Afghan women and girls – among the world’s most marginalized – are not left behind. The Country Office’s efforts have been instrumental in sustaining WCSOs, WFOs and gender equality activists – critical actors which require continued support and funding. In the face of shrinking civic space, it is essential to keep the spotlight on women and girls in Afghanistan and to amplify their voices and realities to global audiences to sustain momentum and solidarity.

Relevance and strategic alignment

CONCLUSION 1:

UN Women’s efforts in Afghanistan demonstrated the Entity’s critical relevance in keeping women’s rights on the agenda both within the UN system and at international levels, in an environment of extreme restrictions. Although requiring persistent negotiation and navigation internally and within the UN system, UN Women’s efforts demonstrated an ability to operate and continuously adapt responses to shifting contextual challenges.

Country Office interventions were highly relevant and addressed the most critical priorities for women and girls in the country through offering a broad range of services, including mental health, literacy, economic empowerment and protection services in a context marked by institutional collapse and changing restrictions on women’s rights.

A central consideration informing adaptation within the Country Office’s work was the need to minimize risk and do no harm. Regular assessment and mitigation of risks, quality context analysis, local-level presence, strong communication with partners and support from senior management for flexibility were all crucial factors which enabled the Country Office to maintain its relevance and viability. Partner organizations leveraged their local networks and trusted relationships to assess community needs and stay informed about political and social developments, which was communicated to UN Women.

The Country Office also recognized the vital importance of WCSOs in providing essential activities and services to women. WCSOs are extremely fragile and on the brink of collapse in Afghanistan due to DFA restrictions, significant capacity gaps, the economic crisis

and broader development aid restrictions. Despite this context, UN Women found ways to support grassroots women’s organizations by utilizing accessible, flexible and adaptive approaches to sustain them.

Based on Findings 1 and 2

CONCLUSION 2:

Despite operating in a highly restrictive and politically sensitive environment, UN Women’s approach with the DFA has helped foster a more enabling environment for advancing support to women and girls. The Country Office is reviewing strategies in line with the broader UN system to ensure that partners are fully supported. While these efforts involved considerable risk, they underscore the necessity of calculated risk-taking in complex settings.

UN Women is widely recognized for its application of human rights, humanitarian and feminist principles in ways that are appropriate to the Afghanistan context, although UN Women’s current position on engagement with the DFA requires some adjustments. The Country Office is also widely recognized for its contribution to ensuring that the UNCT and HCT adopted an approach to applying humanitarian principles, including committing to the continued employment of female UN personnel.

Maintaining principled engagement with the DFA can help safeguard UN Women’s values while maximizing space for gender equality programming. Nevertheless, in some cases, UN Women could have provided stronger accompaniment and support to its partners to assist them in navigating pathways with the DFA on implementation.

Based on Finding 2

Coherence and coordination

CONCLUSION 3:

UN Women successfully leveraged its coordination mandate to contribute to a more gender-sensitive response by the UN system and the HCT in Afghanistan, despite pushback. As funding reduces, advancing gender equality and women's rights in collaboration with UN partners and through coordination activities will become increasingly central to UN Women's work in Afghanistan and a stronger focus on this may be needed.

UN Women built strong credibility with other UN entities in Afghanistan due to several factors, including staying and delivering during the Taliban takeover; its principled stance in relation to women's rights and the DFA; its relevant technical expertise and unique knowledge production activities; and its networks with women's rights organizations. Through its joint programmatic and coordination work and its support for the Gender Equality Coordinator position in the UN Resident Coordinator's Office, UN Women contributed to improving the gender sensitivity of the UN system in Afghanistan in several ways.

UN Women's coordination efforts with CSOs and WCSOs facilitated access to strategic networks, contributing to the long-term viability of these organizations. Establishing formal networks such as the Essential Services Network were vital to facilitate collaboration. Knowledge exchanges were highly valued and uniquely relevant in this context. Some WCSOs related how these knowledge exchanges fostered collaboration among women-led organizations and activists, laying the foundation for a strengthened women's movement. The evaluation noted a demand from CSOs for stronger facilitation of peer learning and cross-organizational collaboration. Improved coordination among WCSOs, INGOs, donors and UN agencies would strengthen movement-building and resilience, advancing women's organizing despite the challenging context.

CONCLUSION 4:

There is room to strengthen internal coordination for enhanced coherence, including in relation to common strategies and priority areas such as building the capacity of WCSOs and women's economic empowerment.

Internal collaboration among the Country Office's thematic teams could be improved. Given the critical need to strengthen the capacities of CSOs, particularly women-led and women-focused CSOs, there is room to share lessons learned and good practices from the Country Office's efforts in this area, building a model for capacity-building and adopting this across teams, which has yet to happen. Synergies could also be better leveraged for WEE, which is used as an entry point for work on other thematic areas. There is a risk that the WEE agenda could be diluted or distorted by mainstreaming it across all programming without a coherent strategy. UN Women personnel suggested this challenge could be addressed by placing WEE expertise within each of the thematic teams, or by providing additional capacity within the WEE team so that it can offer meaningful technical support to other thematic areas. It was also noted there is space to improve coordination and knowledge-sharing among UN Women's implementing partners working across different thematic areas and projects.

Based on Findings 3 and 4

Efficiency

CONCLUSION 5:

While programming in Afghanistan carries significant risks, UN Women's oversight mechanisms provide valuable lessons in risk management in a complex crisis context. Strategic Note direct funding has improved the Country Office's operational efficiency in a highly constrained environment. Its sub-office presence and flexible implementation strategies have strengthened local engagement and helped mitigate risks. Robust oversight systems, transparent communication and adaptive approaches have been essential in maintaining accountability while advancing support for women's rights. The challenges experienced by the Country Office in engaging WCSOs also raise questions about whether the Small Grants Policy, within the broader scope of the corporate Crisis Response Policy and Procedures, is fit for purpose in crisis settings.

Strategic Note direct funding allowed the Country Office to meet human resource needs; support sub-office structures and cross-cutting personnel; address unforeseen needs; and move funds to priority areas amid funding cuts. UN Women's Fast-Tracking of Programme Actions Procedure also offered important solutions to a Country Office operating in a humanitarian crisis and emergency context, providing flexibility in specific programme areas for a time-bound period.

The Country Office's experience with the Small Grants Policy highlights a broader organizational challenge with engaging grassroots organizations. However, UN Women's core commitments, as outlined in its Strategic Plan, include supporting the women's

movement. Therefore, policies and procedures should be fine-tuned to ensure that the realities of these grassroots organizations are taken into consideration in a broad variety of contexts, including in crisis settings.

While this evaluation did not assess broader crisis response, operational, and programmatic policies and systems, the findings point to the need to review and strengthen crisis response, operational, and programmatic policies and systems, to ensure they are fit for purpose in humanitarian and prolonged crisis contexts, with shared responsibility across relevant headquarters units. UN Women headquarters reported having advanced efforts to strengthen grant-making procedures, including a new grant policy under consultation.

UN Women should continue to strengthen risk management and streamline decision-making in complex crisis contexts. In particular, improving communication across Country Office, Regional Office and headquarters could enhance clarity on risk assessments and support organizational learning in crisis contexts. Continuously reviewing the security of platforms, such as UN Women's existing partner management platform is essential.

Operational bottlenecks, including staff turnover, some instances of delayed contracts, weak inter-partner coordination and some gaps in contextual sensitivity at times limited efficiency, accountability and trust. Monitoring and evaluation systems, although functional, revealed some gaps in partner capacity and internal responsiveness.

Based on Findings 5 and 6

Effectiveness and sustainability

CONCLUSION 6:

The initiatives supported by the Country Office generated important and valued impacts in the lives of women and girls, strengthening livelihoods and mental health, ensuring unique access to protection services and support to gender equality activists.

Economic empowerment programming provided a strategic entry point to gender equality and women's empowerment programming in a restrictive context. Although there were mixed results, there is evidence of short-term economic benefits, agency and psychosocial well-being. UN Women contributed to meeting women's needs for basic services, including protection services and spaces to meet and build solidarity, although the Country Office was not always able to reach the most vulnerable women. The Country Offices' emphasis on women-led programming offered a unique source of hope and support, and could strengthen women's mental health and help to challenge harmful attitudes and norms undermining women's abilities.

Limitations of programming on the lives of women and girls included small budgets, short project durations, limited reach of participants and the lack of more comprehensive approaches to sustainability and addressing harmful social norms. Additional challenges included limited access to finance and markets, and barriers to access programme activities and services, including due to distance and transport costs, security concerns and lack of access to a trusted mahram. However, although project activities may not have generated sustainable income or results for all project participants at this stage, they did create safe spaces for women and girls to connect and support each other and further develop their critical consciousness. Therefore, programmes played an important role towards women's movement-building.

Based on Findings 7, 9 and 10

CONCLUSION 7:

UN Women's efforts in Afghanistan have demonstrated the Entity's unique advantage in its ability to leverage its triple mandate to document and amplify the experiences, priorities and voices of women living in Afghanistan in key international spaces and with key partners.

UN Women leveraged its mandate, networks and credibility to amplify the voices of the women and girls of Afghanistan at a time when they are systematically marginalized. The Country Office demonstrated its capacity to balance the requirement for robust research with significant do no harm considerations. The Country Office also demonstrated the value of UN Women's triple mandate through its ability to tap into the grassroots level to produce and disseminate data and statistics on the situation of Afghan women. This informed both coordination and normative efforts and fed back into UN Women's own programming.

The Country Office's knowledge production, based on engagement with Afghan women and WCSOs, reached the highest levels of normative influence at the UN Security Council and through bilateral partner consultations. Such contributions are especially meaningful in the context of Afghanistan's "information famine" where silence and denial are widespread, and independent media has collapsed. UN Women's approach in documenting women's experiences and channeling women's priorities in Afghanistan therefore provides a valuable model which can inform the Entity's work in other restrictive contexts.

Based on Finding 11

CONCLUSION 8:

UN Women's support for WCSOs in Afghanistan remains vital, offering key lessons for sustaining grassroots women's organizations in crisis settings and beyond. Its approach to applying humanitarian principles, centred on women's leadership, equitable employment and tailored funding helped WCSOs and WFOs build capacity and resilience despite severe restrictions. Long-term support is essential to sustain organizational strengthening efforts and towards rebuilding the broader women's movement.

Recognizing that WCSOs are vital conduits for women's voices and priorities, the Country Office has shown that progress towards a stronger women's movement is possible, even in highly restricted environments. The Country Office has provided core and flexible funding, tailored capacity-building, mentoring and knowledge exchange to strengthen WCSO capabilities and readiness for future programming. WCSOs were able to maintain safe spaces, empowering female staff and providing technical and financial support to women in their communities.

Through timely financial and technical assistance, the Country Office enabled continued operations and strengthened the institutional resilience of WCSOs/WFOs. Initiatives applied accessible, flexible and adaptive approaches to support these actors, accompanied by strong oversight mechanisms.

While WCSOs have built organizational capacities to operate effectively and prepare for future gender equality programming, without continued funding and support, there is a significant risk that WCSOs will lack the resources and capacity to sustain their work.

Improved coordination among WCSOs, INGOs, donors and UN agencies remains essential to advancing women's organizing and social norms change in Afghanistan's challenging context.

Based on Finding 8

Human rights and gender equality

CONCLUSION 9:

The Country Office and its partners employed meaningful efforts to reach marginalized groups, including gender equality activists, female-headed households, adolescent girls and women prisoners, recognizing the extremely challenging circumstances for reaching the most marginalized.

WCSOs were particularly well placed to engage with marginalized women and girls, and to ensure programming met the prioritized needs of women and girls, drawing on WCSOs' valuable contextual knowledge, skills, experiences and access to affected populations.

The Country Office's research efforts used nationally representative data samples and intentionally attempted to reach women in rural and remote settings, including through innovative means such as its network of Women Community Volunteers across the country.

The Country Office made important efforts to engage male family and community members to support women and girls to access protection-related services, and gender equality and women's empowerment programming. However, the absence of a clear and systematic strategy for engaging family and community members emerged as a gap. The evaluation findings also underscore the need to strategize on how to achieve more inclusive outreach to marginalized women, including women with disabilities and persons with diverse SOGIESC, ensuring sensitive, do no harm approaches.

Grassroots initiatives, particularly those involving religious leaders and male allies, showed potential in shifting gender norms. However, progress towards women's movement-building and social norms change was significantly limited in the context of current restrictions and severe challenges for women's rights.

Based on Finding 12



Photo: ©UN Women/Sayed Habib Bidell

Frequent power outages once disrupted a market run by women business owners in central Afghanistan, limiting their ability to sustain and expand their operations.

In 2024, UN Women installed a solar power system, providing reliable, renewable electricity. As a result, UN Women reported that women business owners saved USD 87,500 in just one year and doubled their collective annual income.

7

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations aim to build on the Country Office’s significant achievements and further strengthen its contributions amid shifting global funding priorities. Considering reduced development assistance, the recommendations emphasize the need for strategic prioritization and enhanced coordination with UN agencies, and were refined through consultations to ensure they are both feasible and responsive to the evolving funding landscape.

RECOMMENDATION 1: STRATEGIC RELEVANCE AND ALIGNMENT

Continue to leverage UN Women’s triple mandate to champion Afghan women’s rights through sustained advocacy, flexible support and context-driven programming.

Based on Conclusions 1 and 7

Priority: MEDIUM

Timeline: LONG-TERM

Suggested steps to be taken:

- Continue to leverage UN Women’s mandate and global advocacy platforms to champion the rights of Afghan women and girls, underscoring the importance of sustained investment across all three pillars, normative, coordination and operational, despite the challenging context.
- Sustain and amplify support for WCSOs, WFOs, gender equality activists by prioritizing flexible funding, fostering resilient grassroots networks and robust data collection to ensure Afghan women’s realities are elevated in international policy forums.
- Programme design to be grounded in continuous, participatory needs assessments to ensure relevance to evolving priorities and the lived realities of women and girls. This should inform the adaptation and integration of activities and services across thematic areas to better align with community-specific risks, constraints and opportunities.
- Continue prioritizing systematic, participatory data collection and widespread consultations to capture the diverse experiences and priorities of Afghan women and girls, including marginalized groups. Adapt methods to overcome mobility, literacy and access barriers.
 - Continue using the evidence base to inform adaptive programming in Afghanistan and amplify Afghan women’s voices in international forums and policy spaces. Strategically disseminate knowledge products within UN Women and to external stakeholders to influence advocacy, coordination and policy development.
 - Build on networks such as Women Community Volunteers to reach marginalized women and ensure inclusive participation.
 - Regularly update data collection and analysis approaches to respond to evolving risks and restrictions, safeguarding participants and the integrity of the evidence.
- Capture and share the knowledge and experience developed since 2021 to inform gender equality strategies in Afghanistan and other restrictive contexts, while considering potential risks in dissemination.

To be led by: Country Office Senior Management in consultation with thematic leads.

Impact: Strengthen the resilience of women’s organizations and ensure their realities continue to shape international policy, even under restrictive conditions.

Difficulty: Medium – requires sensitive risk management and continuous participatory assessments under volatile conditions.

If not implemented: Risks loss of institutional memory related to effective adaptations and reduced relevance of UN Women’s programming in a dynamic and rapidly changing context.

RECOMMENDATION 2: COHERENCE AND COORDINATION

Strengthen strategic partnerships, coordination and internal integration to maximize collective impact.

Based on Conclusions 3 and 4

Priority: MEDIUM

Timeline: MEDIUM-TERM

Suggested steps to be taken:

- Maximize collective impact and movement-building by formalizing and expanding multi-stakeholder gender platforms.
- Facilitate structured peer learning and cross-organizational collaboration among WCSOs, CSOs, INGOs, donors and UN agencies.
- Enhance internal coordination and knowledge-sharing to improve coherence across thematic areas, especially in civil society capacity-building and WEE.
- Embed WEE expertise within other thematic teams or expand the team's technical capacity to provide consistent cross-pillar support.
- Develop and implement clear internal strategies and joint planning processes to ensure that WEE is leveraged as a strong entry point for advancing protection, participation and rights for women and girls.
- Advocate for the consolidation of existing gender coordination mechanisms within the UN system.
- Expand the use of joint programming approaches that have proven effective to ensure scarce resources are strategically pooled and deployed.
- Expand structured opportunities for peer learning, knowledge exchange and coalition-building among WCSOs, gender equality activists, INGOs and other CSOs, leveraging existing platforms such as the Essential Services Network to sustain movement-building and resilience in restrictive operating contexts.
- Intentionally connect more CSO networks with UN agencies, INGOs and donors to reinforce accountability, avoid duplication and strengthen collective impact, ensuring that grassroots priorities inform and shape coordinated responses at multiple levels.

To be led by: Country Office Senior Management, supported by the Coordination and Access Team and sub-office personnel.

Impact: Stronger partnerships and coordination will amplify collective impact, safeguard civic space and reinforce UN Women's credibility.

Difficulty: High – Requires navigating complex interests and maintaining alignment across partners and the UN system.

If not implemented: Risks fragmented efforts, reduced impact and weakened trust in UN Women's leadership.

RECOMMENDATION 3: EFFECTIVENESS

Continue to deliver high-impact, inclusive services and scale proven approaches for women's empowerment.

Based on Conclusions 6 and 7

Priority: HIGH

Timeline: MEDIUM-TERM

Suggested steps to be taken:

- Continue supporting CSOs in the provision of essential services such as gender-based violence response and psychosocial support through flexible, long-term support and strategic partnerships, including within the UN system.
 - Address transport barriers to accessing gender-based violence service centres and collaborate with UN entities to establish longer-term CSO contracts for continuity and safety.
- Prioritize flexible protection for gender equality activists, including direct cash assistance for safe accommodation.
- Expand access for marginalized women and girls, especially in remote areas, by collaborating with CSO partners.
- Maintain WEE as a key strategy for gender equality, prioritizing initiatives with strong sustainability potential and addressing barriers to engagement.
 - Ensure WEE initiatives are complemented by programmes addressing urgent needs such as mental health, rights awareness and essential services.
 - Develop partnerships to expand livelihood programmes, informed by detailed needs assessments, and equip women with contemporary, non-traditional skills.
 - Provide structured peer-to-peer learning, knowledge-sharing and network-building for women entrepreneurs to strengthen fundraising and operational sustainability.
- Continue supporting girls and women's education, including scholarships for online and international study, recognizing its critical role in promoting economic independence.
 - Respond to funding cuts and increasing restrictions by advocating for continued support, emphasizing the broad societal benefits of educating women and girls.
- Given limited impact and contextual constraints in Afghanistan, consider whether to discontinue efforts focused on changing gender-discriminatory social norms.

To be led by: Country Office Senior Management

Impact: Improve well-being, expand opportunities and advance gender equality for women and girls, especially those most marginalized. Focusing on essential, high-impact services while de-prioritizing others would ensure sustainability, continuity of protection services and more strategic use of scarce resources.

Difficulty: High – Requires sustained resources, effective partnerships and tailored outreach to diverse groups.

If not implemented: Risks reduced service coverage, persistent barriers for marginalized women and missed opportunities for sustainable empowerment.

RECOMMENDATION 4: EFFICIENCY

Optimize operational systems, risk management and resource allocation for agile, accountable delivery appropriate for crisis contexts.

Based on Conclusion 5

Priority: HIGH

Timeline: MEDIUM-TERM

Suggested steps to be taken:

- Initiate a cross-divisional review, led jointly by relevant HQ units, to assess and strengthen crisis response, operational, and programmatic policies and systems to ensure they are fit for purpose in humanitarian and prolonged crisis contexts, drawing on the issues identified in this evaluation and others.
- Optimize operational systems for crisis contexts: Reinforce timely fund disbursement, standardized reporting and efficient internal information flows. Clarify and document roles between Country Office, Regional Office and headquarters to support effective operations.
- Continue to enhance risk management and accountability: Strengthen monitoring and evaluation systems with contextual sensitivity, expand partner training on M&E protocols (especially for sensitive data) and prioritize investments in secure, streamlined contracting and partner management systems.
- Secure long-term resources and Strategic Note funding: Advocate for long-term project timelines to accommodate delays and maximize training impact. In resource mobilization, emphasize the value of Strategic Note direct funding and seek to link new funding to this approach rather than donor-specific projects. Maintain transparent engagement with funding partners.
- Align systems with crisis contexts: Ensure headquarters partner management systems and policies (including Small Grants Policy) are adapted to complex crisis environments, enabling engagement with grassroots organizations and applying necessary security measures.
 - Advocate for the headquarters partner management system to be aligned with needs and requirements in complex crisis contexts, as experienced in Afghanistan, i.e. system requirements sometimes conflicted where policy exemptions were applied and perhaps additional layers of security should be assured.
 - Advocate that headquarters review the Small Grants Policy to reflect realities on the ground and ensure that UN Women can engage grassroots organizations in any context.
- Promote organizational learning: Enhance transparent communication and organizational learning on crisis contexts. Document and share lessons from Afghanistan on principled risk-taking, flexible funding and robust oversight to inform ongoing policy and procedural updates.

To be led by: Country Office Senior Management, Partnerships team, Operations team and PSMU in collaboration with the relevant Regional Office and headquarters teams

Impact: Improved risk management and oversight would enhance accountability, accelerate operations and strengthen UN Women's ability to sustain programming under crisis conditions. Continued advocacy for Strategic Note direct funding would secure flexible funding, sustain programme agility and reinforce transparent donor relations.

Difficulty: High – requires system upgrades, training and harmonization across the Country Office, Regional Office and headquarters. Requires sustained advocacy and alignment of donor agreements, especially in a shrinking funding environment.

If not implemented: Operational bottlenecks and inconsistent oversight will persist, undermining delivery and weakening accountability in high-risk settings. Scarce resources will be spread too thinly, undermining service continuity and leaving women without critical protection and economic support. Risks loss of flexible modalities, leading to fragmented projectized funding and reduced adaptability in volatile contexts.

RECOMMENDATION 5: CONTRIBUTIONS TO SUSTAINABILITY

Continue strengthening and prioritizing the approach to building institutional resilience for women-led organizations, supporting them to secure long-term, adaptable funding and share good practices.

Based on Conclusion 6

Priority: HIGH

Timeline: SHORT-TERM

Suggested steps to be taken:

- Prioritize long-term, flexible and core funding and strategic partnerships to strengthen the institutional resilience and sustainability of women-led organizations, including investment in fundraising and financial management capacities.
- Building on the comparative advantage of WCSOs, the Country Office to continue to channel flexible support to grassroots organizations that have trusted access to marginalized groups and experience in implementing inclusive programming.
- Place stronger emphasis on network-building among CSOs to expand their ability to raise funds, sustain operations and maintain collaboration.
- Deliver tailored and customized capacity-building approaches that align with the diverse organizational capacities and projects being implemented.
- Advocate for other donors to provide sustained, adaptable support to WCSOs, while strengthening WCSOs' capacity to access and manage such funding to ensure continuity of services for women and girls despite shrinking civic space and ongoing risks.
- Ensure good practices and models for building CSO capacities are shared and adopted by all Country Office teams and even the broader UN Women organization.

To be led by: Country Office Senior Management in consultation with the WCSO team and with support from all programme teams.

Impact: Enable women-led organizations to sustain operations, adapt to changing contexts and continue delivering vital services for women and girls, even amid shrinking civic space and ongoing risks.

Difficulty: High – Requires sustained donor commitment, strategic partnerships and tailored capacity-building to address diverse organizational needs and ensure financial sustainability.

If not implemented: Risks include organizational fragility, service interruptions, reduced impact for women and girls, and increased vulnerability of WCSOs to funding cuts and external pressures.

RECOMMENDATION 6: HUMAN RIGHTS AND GENDER EQUALITY

Continue to advance principled engagement, protection and inclusive participation for all women and girls.

Based on Based on Conclusions 2, 8 and 9

Priority: HIGH

Timeline: LONG-TERM

Suggested steps to be taken:

- Finalize and implement a clear strategy for engagement with the DFA that balances risk management with safeguarding civic space for women's rights.
- Continuously strengthen risk management and oversight, including transparent communication, mapping provincial variations in DFA restrictions and learning from other UN agencies' approaches (such as closed-door advocacy and the UN's Comprehensive Approach).
- Support partners, especially WCSOs, with technical guidance, joint advocacy and safe negotiation tools to navigate DFA restrictions without compromising core principles.
- Sustain essential services for women, including psychosocial support, and flexible protection modalities for gender equality activists.
- Apply a standardized vulnerability matrix and intersectional analysis to guide equitable targeting and inclusive outreach. Develop and apply a standardized vulnerability matrix informed by robust intersectional analysis to guide equitable targeting across all programme components. This should include systematic tracking and responses which are tailored to the needs of underrepresented groups (e.g. marginalized women, including, persons with diverse SOGIESC and women living with disabilities) to ensure inclusive outreach and meaningful participation.
- Develop and implement a clear, systematic strategy for engaging family and community members, including male allies and religious leaders, to create safer entry points for women and girls' participation.

To be led by: Country Office Senior Management in consultation and with support from all programme teams.

Impact: Provides a unified approach for all actors, reducing ad hoc decisions and ensuring consistency in safeguarding civic space for women's rights. Strengthens credibility and risk mitigation while maintaining humanitarian access.

Difficulty: High: Requires balancing political sensitivities, security risks and human rights principles under restrictive conditions.

If not implemented: Fragmented engagement, increased operational risks and potential erosion of civic space for women's rights. Higher likelihood of arbitrary restrictions and loss of trust among partners.

UN WOMEN EXISTS TO ADVANCE WOMEN'S RIGHTS, GENDER EQUALITY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS.

As the lead UN entity on gender equality and secretariat of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, we shift laws, institutions, social behaviours and services to close the gender gap and build an equal world for all women and girls. Our partnerships with governments, women's movements and the private sector coupled with our coordination of the broader United Nations translate progress into lasting changes. We make strides forward for women and girls in four areas: leadership, economic empowerment, freedom from violence, and women, peace and security as well as humanitarian action.

UN Women keeps the rights of women and girls at the centre of global progress – always, everywhere. Because gender equality is not just what we do. It is who we are.



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