

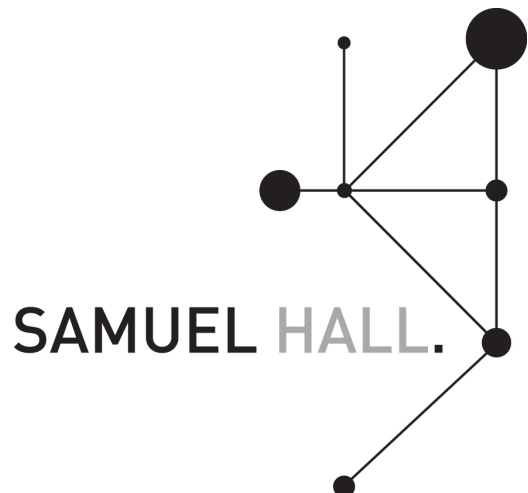


LOST IN CONSULTATION

International community failing at meaningful engagement with Afghan women

JUNE 2024

Endorsing organisations



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Design: Tonje M. Viken

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ORGANIZATION FOR POLICY RESEARCH
& DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

نهاد پږوهش و توسعه

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Executive summary

As the international community gathers in Doha for the third meeting of the Special Envoys on Afghanistan, the situation of women and girls who are contending with growing encroachments on their rights in Afghanistan continues to be a pressing concern. One of the most salient points that has been raised by women inside Afghanistan time and time again is the apparent lack of meaningful engagement with them by Afghanistan's international stakeholders, despite their enduring desire to have their say in matters that affect their lives and shape the future of their country.

One of the most salient points that has been raised by women inside Afghanistan time and time again is the apparent lack of meaningful engagement with them by Afghanistan's international stakeholders, despite their enduring desire to have their say in matters that affect their lives and shape the future of their country.

This brief was developed by a diverse group of local and international organisations working in Afghanistan and committed to bringing the rights and voices of women inside the country to the forefront of all discussions pertaining to Afghanistan's future. It aims to demonstrate that regular, timely and meaningful consultation is possible and the extent to which women and women-led organisations stand ready to engage. It also aims to add to the voices urging all domestic and international stakeholders to engage directly with women-led organisations active in Afghanistan, which represent diverse views

and nuanced opinions and experiences. These diverse voices must be heard to deepen the understanding of the challenges facing Afghan women and how they seek to contribute to efforts to find a way forward.

In February 2024, in anticipation of the meeting of Special Envoys and Special Representatives on Afghanistan (Doha II), the aforementioned group of organisations carried out a rapid, wide-scale consultation exercise to gather input, views and experiences and understand the degree to which women in Afghanistan have participated, and want to participate, in key policy windows and decision-making processes.

With specific reference to the consultation processes surrounding both Doha II and the UNSC-mandated Independent Assessment, we contacted over 450 registered women-led organisations from across Afghanistan to invite them to respond to a survey. 183 women-led entities responded, on the phone or in writing, to the initial consultation on 14-15 February 2024 - within just 48 hours. In the days that followed, an additional 30 organisations responded to the survey, bringing the total number of responding organisations to 213. This overwhelming response in such a short period of time indicates the readiness and commitment of Afghan women to participate in processes critical to their future.

The preliminary findings of the survey were shared in a letter with all stakeholders participating in Doha II in advance of the meeting, on Sunday 18 February. This brief provides a more detailed and nuanced reflection of the survey, its process and findings.

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94 percent said women's rights should have been prioritised in Doha.

This brief synthesises respondents' reported experiences about their engagement in international decision-making processes. From these responses, we have developed and verified three guiding principles, which are practical suggestions compiled from responses to the survey. In addition, we have synthesised the respondents' ideas about their proposed ways forward.

There was a range of unfiltered individual responses. They do not represent a 'unified position' of Afghan women or the organisations that facilitated this consultation. Rather, we hope this mosaic of perspectives will help inform a broader blueprint of action to ensure the full, equal, meaningful and safe participation of Afghan women in all relevant processes, and keep the rights of Afghan women and girls on top of the agenda of the international community's approach to their engagement with Afghanistan.

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Key findings

- More than **two-thirds** of participating organisations expressed a keen awareness of the Doha II meeting. This is particularly noteworthy as many of these organisations, which we found to be instrumental in convening women and women's organisations, are not only aware but also primed for active engagement.
- Only **3 of the initial 183** respondents reported being consulted by the Independent Assessment team. This highlights the need for more inclusive and participatory processes.
- **86 percent** of respondents said they would have liked to have been consulted on the priorities for women in Afghanistan before the Special Envoy's meeting.
- Only **one** organisation who responded had been invited to participate as a civil society representative at Doha II. This invitation was rescinded the day before the meeting.
- **94 percent** said women's rights should have been prioritised in Doha.
- **92 percent** expressed a strong desire for a public report detailing the discussions at the meeting and any agreed outcomes or next steps. This underscores their commitment to transparency and accountability in the decision-making process.
- **All** respondents said receiving feedback on their inputs was 'important' or 'very important'.
- Asked if meetings such as the Special Envoy's meeting would be useful if women in Afghanistan were not consulted or invited to participate, the **majority said 'no'**.
- Asked for ideas on how to support Afghan women's participation, respondents focused on the needs of Afghan women and their readiness to **select their own representatives**.

Background and context

Afghanistan is the most serious women's rights crisis in the world, with Afghanistan ranking 177 out of 177 countries on the [Women's Peace and Security Index](#).

Since taking power, the de facto authorities have subjected Afghan women to exceedingly restrictive policies, which prevent them from accessing the full spectrum of their rights – including banning women from secondary and higher education, working for NGOs, political and social participation, access to public spaces such as parks and in some places a ban on them leaving the house without a mahram (close male relative).

As noted in various United Nations Security Council Resolutions, including United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2679 and the 9 November 2023 UNSC-mandated Independent Assessment, restrictions on Afghan women violate international obligations undertaken by the State of Afghanistan, including as a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and as a party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and other instruments to which Afghanistan is a party.

While the Independent Assessment's report and other reports note gains by Afghanistan's de facto authorities in relation to counterterrorism and counternarcotics, the report did not note any movement toward restoring Afghan women's access to their rights. The Independent Assessment Report has, in fact, placed the rights of Afghan women as one of the top priorities to be addressed in the international community's engagement with the de facto authorities.

As the Independent Assessment's report noted: "It is imperative that Afghan women participate in all forums that have an impact on Afghanistan's future and that options for Afghan women's meaningful and consistent participation are actively developed and implemented." In this light, it is incumbent on the international community to ensure that women in Afghanistan including – but not limited to – women in civil society, business, human rights defenders, women with disabilities, peacebuilders, teachers, health workers, civil servants, and those representing ethnic and other marginalised groups are full participants in all discussions and processes where decisions about their future and the future of their country are considered and discussed.

The guiding principles and proposed ways forward that have been derived from their consultation responses should be reflected in any outcomes determining the international community's approach to Afghanistan.

In February 2024, with the Special Envoys meeting in Doha (Doha II) fast approaching, a large constituency of stakeholders expressed concerns that human rights and women's and girls' rights were being sidelined in favour of security concerns and regional stability. These concerns were not limited to Doha II, but also pertained to other decision-making forums where consultations with, and the representation of, women from inside Afghanistan were perceived to be limited. With Doha II as a point of departure, we decided to substantiate this claim by conducting a rapid survey to broaden our understanding of how Afghan women assess their current role in international processes related to Afghanistan. We also aimed to demonstrate that meaningful consultation and engagement, and follow-up verification, can and should be done with women and women-led organisations across all 34 provinces in Afghanistan.

These consultation findings represent the views of 213 women-led entities on the inclusion of women-led organisations in Afghanistan. This brief presents a summary of those views, providing a broader understanding of the degree to which women in Afghanistan have participated and want to participate in policy discussions and international decision-making processes. Finally, this brief proposes a set of practical suggestions on how to significantly deepen the inclusion of Afghan women and ensure that Afghan women have a seat at the table nationally, regionally and internationally.

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The survey: consultation, methodology and process

Phase I: Initial survey

A 22-question survey was fielded to women-led organisations from all 34 provinces.¹ We asked for basic information about their staff and reach and the extent to which the Independent Assessment team had consulted them during their multiple visits to Afghanistan in 2023. We also asked if they had participated in consultations ahead of Doha II. Most questions were 'Yes/No' or multiple-choice, and three questions allowed for open-ended responses. In total, 213 organisations responded to the survey, either online or in telephone interviews.² The survey team followed up with phone calls to ensure receipt, provide clarification, and support participation.

Phase II: Analysis, findings, and guiding principles

The organisers analysed and synthesised basic findings to provide a rapid summary of findings in advance of Doha II. This summary was shared with United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Guterres, Under Secretary-General DiCarlo, Special Envoys and other senior UN representatives ahead of the meeting. The findings reflect quantitative analysis responses, as well as providing some quotes from the three open-ended questions. Based on the findings, we have identified three guiding principles for all decision-making processes pertaining to Afghanistan's future. In addition, we have compiled a list of practical solutions drawn from the answers to the open-ended questions on the proposed ways forward to ensure that women in Afghanistan are represented, and their access to their full spectrum of rights is considered in any political discussion.

Phase III: Feedback and verification

Between 26 February and 5 March 2024, all participating organisations were informed of how their inputs had so far been shared with members of the international community. In addition, 25 percent were contacted as a sample group based on organisation size, sector, and geographic location and asked to verify the guiding principles and provide more clarity

and detail. These key informants were also asked if they agreed with the three guiding principles. Less than 1 percent of respondents disagreed with the guiding principles.

Limitations

Some limitations to our outreach should be noted. For example, while some private sector entities and coalitions did participate in the survey, we did not specifically reach out to the private sector. Where the private sector is concerned, the de facto authorities are noted to have maintained policies supporting women's activities in small enterprises. These voices were not significantly represented in our survey. Greater efforts should be made to engage these businesswomen in discussions and consultations. NGOs and INGOs working in livelihoods may be one channel to access this engagement.

The respondents

213 women-led organisations from all 34 provinces of Afghanistan participated in the survey. The organisations varied greatly in size, with a range of 1 to 200 female staff. The women-led organisations had a total number of 3,827 female staff, while women accounted for 6,390 members in responding associations or member organisations – 10,217 female staff or members in total. Collectively, our respondents had a reported overall reach of 1,467,243 female programme participants, beneficiaries, or clients in the past year. With an assumed average family size of 7; the indirect reach of the women-led organisations respondents is estimated to be some 10 million people, or 5 million women and girls.

This overwhelming response in such a short period of time indicates Afghan women's readiness and commitment to participating in processes critical to their future. It also demonstrates that engaging with local women-led orgs affords the international community an opportunity to reach millions of women, girls, boys, and men, across the country.

¹The organisations which participated in this survey are active in all 34 provinces, with Kabul, Herat, Kandahar, Nangarhar, and Bamiyan, in this order, being the most represented provinces of operation, while Panjshir, Samangan, and Takhar were the least represented provinces.

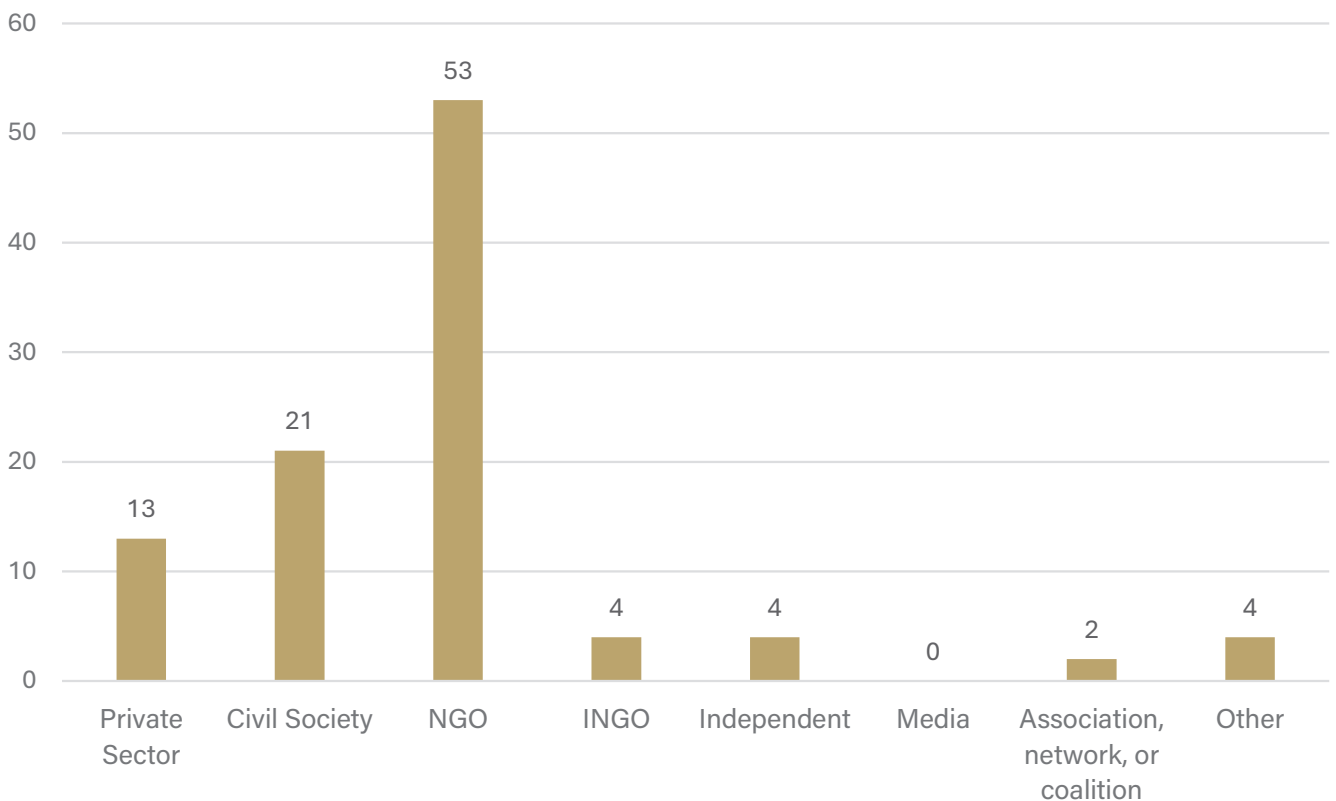
²183 respondents completed the survey, which was available in Dari and Pashto on 14-15 February, in time to synthesise initial findings in advance of the meeting in Doha. An additional 30 organisations responded after the initial deadline. Their responses were included in this report.

While 193 organisations identified themselves by name, 19 preferred to remain anonymous. Some organisations elaborated on who they are, their reach, and their activities, such as basic needs, advocacy, and litigation. In light of particular ground realities, and because permission to identify organisations was not requested during the survey or subsequent contacts, a decision was made to refrain from identifying any of the participating organisations.

53 percent of respondents self-identified as NGOs, followed by civil society (21 percent) and private sector (13 percent). However, while associations, networks, and coalitions represented only a small percentage of respondents, their memberships and reach were by far the largest (see figure below).

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Sector of work



Findings

The collaboration that made this brief possible was just one of numerous examples that demonstrate women in Afghanistan – in all their diversity – are able to coordinate and eager to participate. The findings are a powerful testament to the scale, spread, and enthusiasm among women-led organisations in Afghanistan to shape their future, despite all the challenges they face. Decision-making and policy forums offer important opportunities for the international community to demonstrate its commitment to Afghan women. By ensuring that Afghan women have a seat at the table, Afghanistan’s international stakeholders can stress that the rights of Afghan women are non-negotiable.

Barriers and enablers

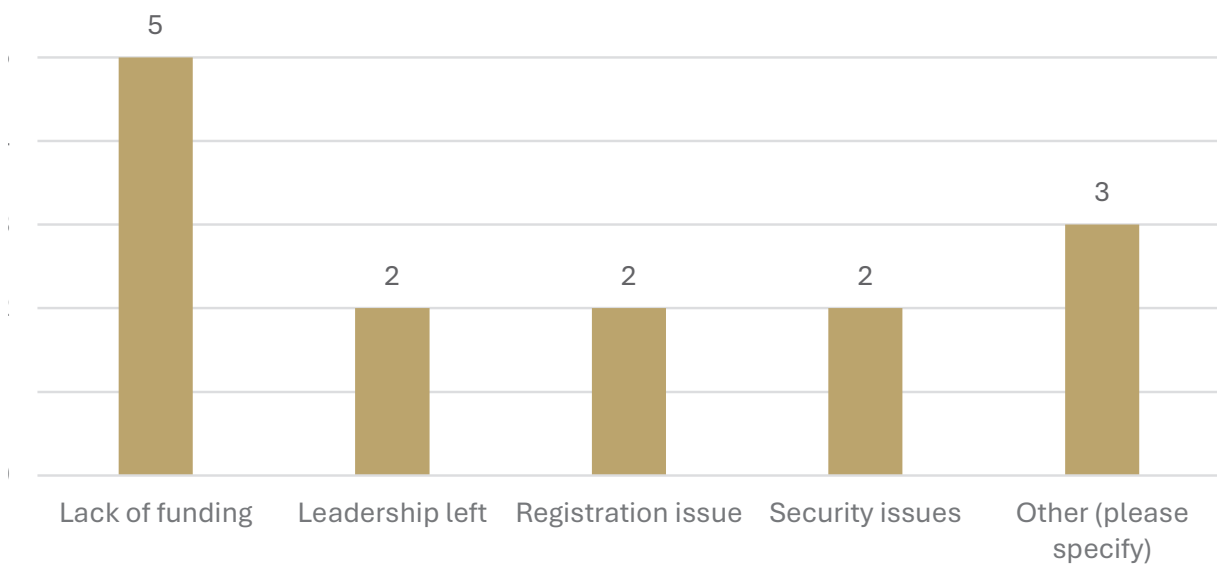
Seven percent of the respondents reported that their organisations are no longer operating, 55 percent of which cited ‘lack of funding’ and ‘security issues’ as the main two reasons they had ceased operations. The cumbersome registration process and the emigration of the organisation’s leadership from Afghanistan were also cited as triggers that halted activities. In the “other” category, organisations cited the ban on women working for NGOs and other restrictions enforced by the authorities. Notably, the lack of funds is seen as a more significant barrier than the restrictions imposed by the de facto government. This is something the donors should take note of when prioritising aid to Afghanistan and ensure that funding is earmarked for women-led organisations.³

Responses to our open questions indicated that there was a perception among many of the consultation’s participants that the international community tends to fall back on a limited cadre of women, the vast majority of whom are now based outside of Afghanistan.

A shortcoming of the survey design was that it did not enable participants to pick more than one response to this question. However, it is notable that when asked to choose, the top response to the question asking which organisations were still supporting their work was ‘other women-led organisations.’ It is, therefore, critical for women-led organisations to be included in discussions and processes related to the rights of women in Afghanistan, not only because of the criticality of their individual voices but also because these organisations coordinate with and support each other.

Reasons for not being operational

Skipped: 211 Answered: 9



³ For a deeper analysis of barriers, please refer to this 2022 study on [barriers facing women-led CSOs in Afghanistan](#).

In the "other" category, the next top entities women-led organisations said supported them were UNDP, UN Women, Women for Women International, and individual supporters.

Excluded from consultations

Close to 70 percent of respondents said they were aware of the Doha II meeting. 83 percent, including all networks, associations, and coalitions, said the Independent Assessment team had not consulted them during their multiple trips to Afghanistan in 2023. Only eight organisations said they had been consulted by an international organisation in the lead up to Doha II – 5 were consulted by UN Women, 2 by UNAMA, 1 by a representative of the Norwegian government. One respondent reported being consulted by a representative of the de facto government.

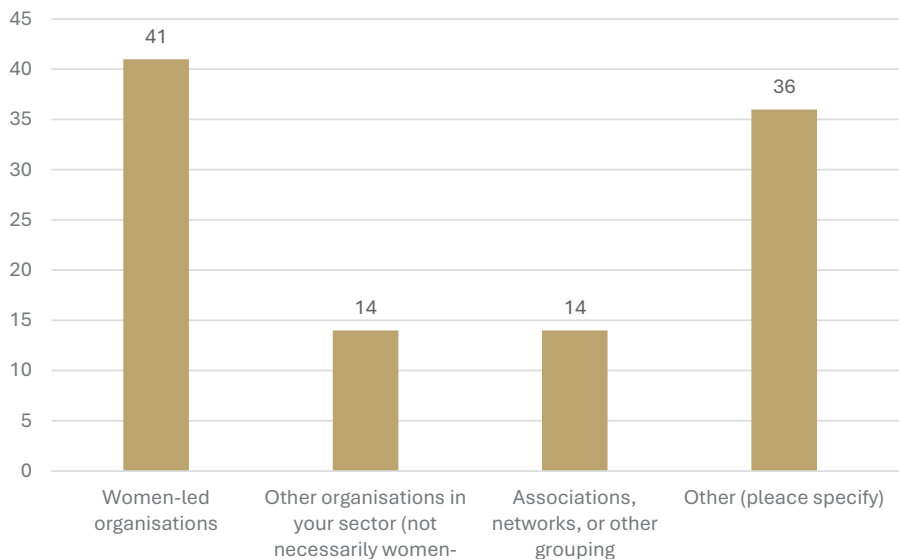
It is important to note that the Independent Assessment team did not consult any of the member associations or organisations that responded to the survey, nor were they consulted in the lead-up to the February meeting in Doha.

88 respondents said they would have liked to be consulted on the priorities for women in Afghanistan ahead of the Doha meeting taking place. Two respondents reported that they had been invited. Upon follow-up, however, it emerged that one response was in error, and the second reported that their invitation had been rescinded before the event following the de facto government's decision not to attend the meeting in Doha. Nevertheless, 46 percent of respondents still think that such meetings are useful, even if women inside Afghanistan are not consulted or invited to participate.

“ Women's rights should be counted as equal to security concerns/terrorist activities. When there is any security concern about Afghanistan's soil being used as a potential threat to the interests of developed countries, all possible resources are mobilised to mitigate risks. Even the authorities are pressured to be accountable. Why are human rights, and particularly women's rights, not treated the same? ”

What organisations in Afghanistan are supporting your work in the country?

Skipped: 115 Answered: 105



Responses to our open questions indicated that there was a perception among many of the consultation's participants that the international community tends to fall back on a limited cadre of women, the vast majority of whom are now based outside of Afghanistan, leading to a heightened sense of exclusion among the respondents who continue to reside inside the country. This limited selection of women also indicates the international community's lack of understanding of the complex web of female associations and how to identify and connect with female leaders in various communities. This has profound consequences for Afghan women's representation and participation in crucial processes.

The findings above are significant and should be noted by the international community, including the UN conveners of such forums, as an indication that women in Afghanistan are watching activities related to their future as they unfold.

Emphasis on women's rights

The findings emphasise the fact that most respondents think women's rights should be a priority in all discussions and that a critical step to ensuring women's access to their full spectrum of rights is through their participation and representation. 94 percent of respondents thought women's rights should be a priority for discussion in Doha as well as a central part of other thematic discussions (e.g. on the humanitarian crisis, a political process, climate change, counter-narcotics, counter-terrorism, and economic and development efforts etc.).

Concerning the usefulness of international meetings without the participation of women from inside Afghanistan, our respondents were of two minds. While 54 percent said they do not believe these forums are useful without their participation, some 46 percent believed them to be useful even without their engagement. The responses reflect one of the most persistent concerns of Afghan women: being abandoned as the world turns away from the question of their rights. Women inside Afghanistan seek, first and foremost, direct participation and, second, allies.

Transparency

Transparency is a major concern, with all respondents saying receiving feedback on their inputs as well as the content of the discussions at international meetings was important. The vast majority (70 percent) believed feedback to be very important. In this light, the survey team has already provided one round of feedback to participating organisations. The team has also contacted a sample of 25 percent of respondents to relay the content of the initial findings letter sent to the Special Envoys in Doha II and to verify the guiding principles and proposed ways forward included in this brief. It is recommended that the United Nations and other conveners of meetings and forums discussing the future of Afghanistan relay the content and outcomes of their deliberations.



Afghan girls learn how to sew in a vocational training course sponsored by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). Photo: UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

Guiding principles

Three guiding principles, based on this consultation and verified through follow-up with 25 percent of the surveyed organisations, are as follows:

1. Respect for women's rights: women's rights must be a core objective of the international community's engagement with Afghanistan and a priority agenda item for discussions in any upcoming forums related to the situation in Afghanistan (including Doha III), as well as a central part of other thematic discussions (e.g. on the humanitarian crisis, climate change, counter-narcotics, counter-terrorism, and economic and development efforts). Furthermore, the full reintegration of Afghanistan into the international system must be contingent on meeting, and not merely progress towards, international obligations of the State of Afghanistan. These obligations include the protection of rights enshrined in CEDAW, ICCPR, ICESCR, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in law and policy, as well as establishing institutions and rule of law practices that enable their enforcement.

2. Accountability and transparency: the international community should provide full public reports on how they plan to address women's rights following all decision-making and policy forums in the future. We urge the international community to ensure that public briefings are made available so that women in Afghanistan have the opportunity to understand how their perspectives and recommendations inform the international community's approach.

3. Authentic, committed inclusion: any future mechanisms should be designed to support engagement in a way that allows Afghan women to participate fully, equally, and meaningfully.

Any mechanisms developed should:

- Create regular and formal opportunities for Afghan women to participate in decision-making processes, supporting the diverse representation and inclusion of Afghan women. This is in recognition of the essentiality of women's perspectives, voices, and participation to reach lasting, inclusive, and just solutions. Opportunities should include space, time, and support for Afghan women to select and brief their own representatives, as well as support their selected representatives' preparations for formal or informal engagement.
- Understand 'diverse representation' to extend to all segments of the population across various sectors, including various professional sectors, and across ethnic and religious minorities across all 34 provinces of Afghanistan.
- Engage regularly and meaningfully with diverse Afghan women's organisations and individuals to ensure their nuanced views and perspectives inform all aspects of engagement, including networks, associations, and coalitions that represent collective voices.



Facilitating community radio and other digital platforms were among the suggestions that came up in the survey. (Photo: Tahmina Osta/UNAMA)

Proposed ways forward



Women in Afghanistan are watching activities related to their future as they unfold. (Photo: Wanman Uthnami on Unsplash)

“ Women should be an important part of all discussions about Afghanistan because they are 50 percent of the country. They were not the reasons for the wars, they are the victims of political changes in the country. ”

From open-ended responses

Respondents were asked to reflect on “the best ways to make sure women’s voices in Afghanistan are represented, and their access to their full spectrum of rights is prioritised in any political discussion.” Their responses provided a revealing blueprint for action.

Answers to the open-ended questions show that women inside Afghanistan are concerned about being marginalised in ongoing international processes. Moreover, they overwhelmingly seek to select their own representatives. Over 45 (50 percent) of around 90 open-ended responses focused on the need for women in Afghanistan to represent themselves, to pick their own representatives, to be invited to participate and to have meaningful engagement.

In Afghanistan

- Provide flexible, core, long-term and strategic financial support to women-led and women-focused CSOs/NGOs.
- Provide platforms, spaces, and opportunities for Afghan women to communicate with each other and the world outside, including:

Innovative, secure and accessible communication strategies and facilities that respect cultural sensitivities, such as **digital platforms and community radio**, which would allow women’s stories and perspectives, including those in rural and remote areas, to reach wider audiences, both nationally and internationally; and

Safe spaces for women to gather, share experiences and access legal and psychosocial support that can also serve as hubs for **advocacy, empowerment and resilience-building**.

- **Bring the dialogue home.**

Host **events inside Kabul**, such as a formal international and regional conferences in Kabul, to discuss international instruments with the de facto authorities-



Enlisting male support is crucial to ensure women's inclusion in the long run. (Photo: Norwegian Afghanistan Committee)

Create space for women inside Afghanistan to engage in meaningful dialogue with the de facto authorities

Establish mechanisms to invite and facilitate the wide participation of women inside Afghanistan.

- **Mobilise male support**

Integrate the women's rights conversation, including by engaging intentionally with male allies and directing aid at gender-sensitive NGOs and private sector entities.

Implement **gender sensitive and rights-based programmes** targeting all segments of society, including men and boys, to foster a cultural shift towards gender equality and respect for women's rights.

“ Engaging men as allies in the fight for women's rights and representation in political discussions is crucial. Men can play a key role in advocating for gender equality and supporting women's voices. ”

“ Education programmes should focus not only on providing academic and vocational training to girls and women but also on redefining masculinity and promoting positive gender norms among boys and men. ”



The international community needs to let Afghan women identify the path toward restoring their access to their rights. (Photo: Wanman Uthnami on Unsplash)

Internationally

- Avoid normalising discriminatory practices and implement measures (including international political pressure) to prevent actions that could unintentionally support or normalise the de facto authorities' discriminatory policies, norms, and values.
- Utilise international forums, alliances, and diplomatic channels to pressure the de facto authorities to include women in the political process and link international recognition and non-humanitarian aid to advancing women's rights.
- Commit to Afghan women's direct representation in all forms of political negotiations and discussions, ensuring their perspectives and needs directly influence policies and agreements.
- Build a global solidarity movement to keep the rights of Afghan women in the international spotlight, ensuring continuous global advocacy and support.
- Engage with international human rights organisations, diplomatic channels, and global advocacy groups to describe and introduce a defined pathway for women's meaningful inclusion and engagement.

“ The best way is to invite women's representatives to attend the meeting, not the women selected by the UN, without any consultation with women. ”



Last day of school.
(Photo: Jafar Mousavi)