

THE IMPACT OF UN-HABITAT'S WORK ON WOMEN AND GIRLS LIVING IN INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS

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Since 1992, UN-Habitat has been working in Afghanistan to improve living conditions for people in vulnerable situations. While cities grew fast in recent years due to conflict-induced displacement, it is now climate change (reducing agricultural livelihoods), forced displacement from neighboring countries, as well as a large number of people in protracted internal displacement contexts, which have resulted in rapid urban growth. A recent study found that Kabul's built-up area expanded by 72% between 2008 and 2021. And cities keep growing.

Many people in vulnerable situations settle in informal, unplanned and underserved areas of cities – often in high-risk locations prone to flooding, landslides, and water shortages. Also, inadequate housing, no waste management, absence of sanitation and constant risk of forced evictions, add to those challenges. Women are most impacted by inadequate housing conditions, the lack of proper sanitation and hygiene, being responsible for providing water for the family, and the absence of basic services in those informal settlements. The current restrictions of the Taliban authorities on women and girls, ranging from their ban from education (above the age of 12), restrictions on employment and mobility and the ban of using public parks (among many others), force many of them to stay at home, making a safe and healthy living environment even more important for them.



Housing, Land and Property Rights – Aiming for Stability

Inequitable land rights are a major cause of gender inequality in Afghanistan. A UN-Habitat survey of over one million land parcels between 2013 and 2021 found that less than 5 per cent of ownership documents included a woman's name on it. Instead, women's relationship to land is typically secondary – established through their relationship with a male owner.¹ Consequently, gender inequitable land rights constitute a major cause of gender-based asset inequality, particularly given that land is usually a household's most valuable asset. UN-Habitat notes that restricted land rights also impact women's access to a range of development opportunities, including banking services, social programmes, and humanitarian assistance. Under the former government, UN-Habitat contributed strongly to including important legal provisions to secure women's land rights, but the events of August 2021 have resulted in ambiguity over the status of Afghanistan's land laws. Since then, UN-Habitat has not only urged the De Facto Authorities to safeguard the regulatory mechanisms that secure women's land rights but has developed and implemented projects that help to secure Land Rights for Gender-Safe Informal Settlements.

Improving Public Space as a Means of Protection

UN-Habitat's projects have focused for many years on improving women's living conditions, including at household level through housing and shelter solutions, advancing women's tenure rights, but also through vocational training or cash-for-work projects to improve livelihood opportunities. Additionally, UN-Habitat has also re-/built transformative community infrastructures at neighborhood level for improved access to basic services, such as water, education, health facilities, community centers, and public spaces.



¹ UN-Habitat, A Brief Guide to Women's Land Rights in Afghanistan (Kabul: UN-Habitat, 2020).

The design and implementation of projects that improve “public spaces” have a strong impact on women and girls: safe, well-lit and properly designed roads, streets or pathways reduce the risk of gender-based violence. Public spaces are planned and designed taking into considerations disaster-risk reduction measures such as proper drainage or include considerations for pedestrians, with an aim to support communities as a whole.

While “public parks” are not accessible for women at this point in time, UN-Habitat’s close consultations and participatory processes with communities have resulted in women being able to use some specifically designed community spaces or community centers, which women can now use to gather, to meet or learn new skills. Safe and inclusive public spaces contribute immensely to well-being, are spaces of hope, improve social cohesion and contribute to “vibrant neighborhoods”. The investments made also have a significant impact on communal tenure rights, which allow people to stabilize and recover after shocks.



UN-Habitat’s Female Community Mobilisers: Listening to Women’s Voices and Building Trust - for Women by Women

UN-Habitat’s female community mobilisers strengthen women’s participation in community decision making by listening to women’s voices and giving them the platform and opportunity. Building upon experiences from three decades and experiences gained in implementing large scale projects that focused on giving voices to communities like the National Solidarity Programme, the Cities for all programme or the Citizen’s charter (among many others), UN-Habitat works for and closely with community-based organisations, such as the (former) Community Development Councils (CDCs) or similar bodies at neighborhood level. While women are currently restricted from participating in formal decision-making processes, UN-Habitat’s female community mobilisers build trust in the neighborhoods they work in and, in many, separate consultations with women, listen to their needs but also give hope and enable women to formulate their priorities, which then shape UN-Habitat’s programming.



In addition to a better home and a safe neighborhood, many women express the dire need for contributing to their family's household income. In a time when women are cut out of many employment pathways, and struggle with restricted movements, many women who have been displaced, but also those having recently moved from rural areas, lack necessary skills. Apart from (re)building "spaces to learn" like the community centers, UN-Habitat has also provided vocational training to women and girls, and included them, where possible in cash-for-work programmes.



Giving Hope and Strengthening Resilience – A CALL FOR ACTION

The place we live in strongly impacts our resilience and well-being. "Basic Human Needs" include a home, a safe neighborhood and access to basic services and livelihood opportunities. Women in Afghanistan face many restrictions – and it is clear that without adequate access to education, women can not adequately at any scale contribute to the society and 50% of Afghanistan's human capital is lost. But Afghan women are resilient, they have shown a strong creativity for "making things work" within current limitations. Through improving living conditions for women and girls – which also benefit the entire population - we can support and empower them to find solutions and lead a dignified life.



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