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10 Gender Gaps in Afghanistan's Urban Neighborhoods: Emerging Trends

Key findings from UN-Habitat assessments on issues impacting marginalized populations in urban and peri-urban informal communities, including IDPs and returnees

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Afghanistan's rapid urbanization, fueled by internal displacement, forced returns, and a worsening economic crisis, continues to intensify gender inequalities in urban and peri-urban informal settlements across the country. Data collected through UN-Habitat surveys conducted in communities with high representation of marginalized populations shows that the enabling environment potential of urban areas is not narrowing damaging gender gaps but, rather, widening them.

Under current De Facto Authority (DFA) rule, nearly all traditional avenues for women's and girls' safety, dignity and empowerment in Afghanistan have been dismantled, from formal education, freedom of movement in public spaces and employment, to public participation and civic leadership. For women and girls in urban informal settlement areas in particular, these restrictions intersect with a

unique set of vulnerabilities—including insecure housing and land rights, unsafe public spaces, limited access to WASH services, and shrinking livelihood opportunities—to compound the inequality. These findings complement recent reports from, amongst other partners, UN Women (see [Gender Alert – August 2025](#) | [Four Years of Taliban Rule: Afghan Women Resist as Restrictions Tighten](#)).

In this factsheet, UN-Habitat Afghanistan presents findings informed by key trends in data collected from community-level project implementation between 2023 and 2025 in the cities of Herat, Jalalabad, Kabul, Kandahar and Nangarhar. The findings illustrate ten specific areas of widening inequality impacting women and girls living in urban and peri-urban informal settlement areas across the country and provide critical insights for future interventions and project design.

Urban displacement is exacerbating the conditions for women's vulnerability

Urban informal settlements host a growing concentration of female-headed households, returnee families, widows, and women without male support networks. These households face layered disadvantages related to income, housing security, and access to services. Urban density and lack of social or familial networks weaken traditional coping mechanisms, increasing women's isolation and dependence on outside support.

Women are increasingly excluded from urban economic life

Urban labor markets remain largely inaccessible to women in Afghanistan. Restrictions on mobility, lack of safe transport, childcare responsibilities, and formal and informal bans on women's employment severely limit income-generating opportunities. Female-headed households are disproportionately affected, relying on humanitarian aid or debt. Urban poverty therefore has a distinctly gendered profile, reinforcing dependency and long-term vulnerability.

Insecure Housing, Land and Property (HLP) rights disproportionately affect women

Urban informal settlements are characterized by widespread tenure insecurity, which has acute consequences for women, and female-headed households and widows are the demographics least likely to possess documentation or legal recognition of land and housing. Fear of eviction restricts women's freedom of choice when it comes to housing by discouraging investment in home improvements and weakening access to

services and justice mechanisms. HLP insecurity also heightens protection risks, particularly following displacement, divorce, or the loss of a male relative.

Gender-blind urban infrastructure increases safety risks for women and girls and robs them of privacy and dignity

Deficits in basic urban services place disproportionate burdens on women and girls who very often navigate unsafe environments and long distances to reach necessary public amenities such as community water points. Furthermore, inadequate sanitation, lack of lighting, and shared or public latrines undermine privacy, dignity, and safety, particularly at night. Poor road conditions restrict access to schools, markets, and health facilities, compounding women's isolation within urban spaces, and urban infrastructure that is not designed in a gender-sensitive or responsive manner actively restricts women's freedom of movement and participation in city life.

Urban service access gaps in health, nutrition, and WASH affect women and girls first and most

In Afghanistan, proximity to urban centers does not guarantee access to health services. Women face persistent barriers to maternal, reproductive, and general healthcare due to distance, cost, lack of female health workers, and documentation requirements. Food insecurity in urban areas disproportionately affects women, who often make sacrifices of their own needs first, and menstrual hygiene management remains severely constrained by lack of privacy, facilities, and affordable materials. All these issues combine to severely undermining women's health and dignity in urban neighborhoods.



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Adolescent girls are facing compounding risks in urban areas

Adolescent girls living in urban and informal settlements experience intersecting risks linked to the ban on schooling, poverty and early marriage, as well as formal and informal restrictions and risks when in public spaces. Population density in informal settlements impacts girls' mobility and visibility, while the lack of education and absence of psychosocial support increases the likelihood of permanent disengagement from learning and social life. These risks are amplified in urban returnee communities.

Women's voices remain marginal in urban decision-making

Women are becoming increasingly and systematically excluded from community decision-making processes in urban neighborhoods due to both formal restrictions and pervasive social norms. Community governance structures, settlement committees, and local planning mechanisms remain male-dominated, limiting women's influence over service prioritization, infrastructure investments, and risk mitigation. Even where consultation mechanisms exist, women's participation is often symbolic rather than substantive, weakening the responsiveness and equity of urban programming.

Gender-based violence (GBV) is structurally embedded in urban environments

Urban design and service gaps directly contribute to an exacerbated risk of gender-based violence (GBV). Poor lighting, unsafe pathways, population density, and issues around insecure tenure intersect to create environments where women and girls' safety specifically is compromised in urban neighborhoods. GBV risks are particularly acute in informal settlements, perpetuating damaging gender norms and negatively reinforcing restrictions on women's movement and participation in public life.

Disaster risk preparedness and information access is limited for women in urban neighborhoods

Urban women are often excluded from disaster preparedness, risk awareness, and information-sharing mechanisms, with low participation in training and community meetings limiting their ability to respond to shocks such as flooding, winter hazards, or evictions. Without access to these public meeting spaces, women do not have a voice in risk identification and are unable to influence response and mitigation discussions. Media-based communication channels (radio and television) remain critical for reaching women who are restricted from public gatherings.

Women's participation improves urban outcomes when safeguarded

Where women are meaningfully engaged in settlement planning, mapping, and prioritization, outcomes improve, particularly around safety, service access, and risk identification. However, participation alone is insufficient. Without structural safeguards, women's voices remain unheard and/or undervalued within male-dominated governance systems and urban integration risks perpetuating deeply rooted gender inequality rather than addressing it.

Insights

In Afghanistan's rapidly expanding urban and peri-urban informal neighborhoods, the reality for women and girls is that their existence is layered with disadvantages that stem from unsafe urban design, insecure land tenure, and exclusion from decision-making. Ultimately, without gender-responsive planning, informal urbanization has become a central driver of vulnerability and evidence shows that closing urban gender gaps

requires integrated approaches that link housing and land security, safe infrastructure, livelihoods, and meaningful civic participation. UN-Habitat Afghanistan works in cooperation and partnership with other actors to reduce the risks for women and girls in urban and peri-urban areas and to ensure their inclusion in decision-making at neighborhood level. UN-Habitat also works to promote socio-economic empowerment and ensure adequate living conditions (including adequate housing and shelter, access to public services and safe public spaces) through humanitarian and Basic Human Needs (BHN) approaches, as well as championing Durable Solutions programming and implementation.

The urban gender gaps presented in this factsheet should not be treated as secondary to rural challenges, rather they demand focused, context-specific strategies. Humanitarian and BHN actors must act with creativity and persistence, designing interventions that protect the rights of women and girls, enable safe livelihoods, and sustain community-based pathways for inclusion in response to, and not despite, the realities of Afghanistan's urban landscape.



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