



## **Briefing on the Operational Response of UN-Women in Afghanistan**

### *Summary*

UN-Women's operational response in Afghanistan is complex due to the situation of women. UN-Women invest and scale-up its work in support of achieving a positive impact in women's empowerment at this critical juncture in its history. UN-Women's engagement in Afghanistan builds on the work and lessons of the past and expands successful interventions under the strong leadership of the government of Afghanistan and the civil society in support of national commitment on gender equality.

The paper will: (i) share the main strategy and content of UN-Women's operational response in Afghanistan; (ii) explain the new approaches and methods used to maximise UN-Women's relevance and contribution; and (iii) highlight opportunities for support of women's empowerment in Afghanistan.

## UN-Women's Operational Response in Afghanistan

The National Unity Government's priorities in the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework (ANPDF) underscores its overarching goals in reducing poverty and improving the welfare of Afghan people. The government is committed to deliver on the provisions of the United Nations Security Council resolution 1325, through developing a National Action Plan on the resolution with a costed budget. The government is firmly committed to the implementation of the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda expressed at the Brussels' Conference on Afghanistan Communique. In the Kabul Peace Process II, held on 28 February 2018, the President reiterated the need to include women at the peace table, with reference to the Afghanistan National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security.

Afghanistan has acceded to many treaty obligations relevant to governance and women's participation. Although significant barriers remain, progress has been made in recent years in the advancement of women in Afghanistan. For instance, in 2017 the number of female police officers in the Afghan National Police has increased to 3,379. The government has established a legal framework (Anti-harassment Law, new Penal Code) and complaint mechanisms (specialised EVAW courts, Prosecutions offices, anti-harassment committees) in key ministries and universities to address violence against women and sexual harassment. The government also demonstrated efforts to increase the role of women in peace processes by adding new female members to the High Peace Council.

Despite the progress that has been made, structural constraints remain, and barriers to the fulfilment of the rights of women and girls have limited overall progress on the achievements of gender equality in Afghanistan. All major social indicators continue to show a consistent pattern of gender inequality in almost all dimensions of their lives.

UN-Women has anchored its strategic focus in Afghanistan on key emerging issues, and its work is fully aligned and in support of the One UN Strategy Paper for Afghanistan 2018-2022 and supports the implementation of Afghanistan's National Peace and Development Framework (2017-2021), including supporting the implementation of relevant National Priority Programmes.

The strategic priorities of the UN-Women Afghanistan Country Office (ACO) build on UN-Women's comparative advantages in Afghanistan including: its convening role with civil society to promote engagement with global normative frameworks; its strong partnership with ministries associated with women affairs and the ACO's programme areas; its partnerships with local stakeholders and community organisations to drive programming which ranges from support to implementation of government policies and programmes to direct implementation of community-based solutions; its ability to leverage inter-linkages across programmatic areas; its unique global technical expertise; and its historical record of delivering large projects and achieving impact.

The ACO focuses its work on four strategic priority areas to support the implementation of global norms and standards for gender equality and the empowerment of women.

**1. Women Peace and Security:** Afghanistan's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2015-2022) was launched in Kabul in June 2015. A key focus on

the ACO's work on women, peace and security is supporting implementation of Afghanistan's National Action Plan. The ACO works with government and civil society partners to create an enabling environment for implementation, monitoring and reporting of the NAP 1325 in Afghanistan. This includes advocating for adequately financed accountability frameworks for the NAP 1325 that are monitored by the government; ensuring the government is provided with the technical expertise to implement and report on the NAP 1325; ensuring that civil society has the capacity and resources to monitor the NAP 1325 and carry out evidence-based advocacy for implementation of the women, peace and security agenda in Afghanistan.

**2. Ending Violence Against Women and Girls:** Violence against women and girls is one of the most prevalent forms of human rights violations in Afghanistan. To live free from violence, women and girls need a robust, coordinated response to the violence they face that includes accessible, high-quality essential services and comprehensive, transformative prevention programming across all levels of the socio-ecological model. To respond to the high level of violence against women and girls in Afghanistan, the EAW programme leverages and contextualises the best global evidence on prevention of VAW to transform the social norms that perpetuate gender inequality and violence against women and girls, and in parallel, strengthens services for survivors of violence.

Recognising that work to prevent violence increases demand for survivor services, the ACO continues to work with the government and CSO partners to develop capacity and best practice standards and guidelines to ensure that women and girls who experience violence have access to quality essential recovery services. This includes supporting the development of decentralised service delivery to ensure those living outside the main urban areas can access services and supporting the coordination of service delivery across sectors.

**3. Women's Political Empowerment & Leadership:** Deterioration of the security situation before and during elections intimidates voters, especially women, from registering and going to the poll stations. Increasing instability also affects women coming forward as candidates. To address the under-representation of women's engagement in elections and in political leadership in Afghanistan and to strengthen the voice of women leaders in governance issues, the ACO continues to support Women's Political Empowerment and Leadership.

To ensure transformative programming, the ACO collaborates with UNAMA and UNDP to implement comprehensive programming throughout the entire electoral cycle. The ACO builds on its programmatic experience in the region to partner with civil society and national authorities to encourage and enable more women to register and vote, and to support a cadre of women leaders interested in running for office and/or leading at the community level, as well as to change the social norms determining how women are perceived as leaders. The ACO do this by supporting women leaders, candidates and aspirants to engage in political life and civil society organisations to engage in community awareness programmes and national campaigns.

**4. Women's Economic Empowerment:** Economic growth prospects continue to be dampened by volatile security, high unemployment, and economic and political uncertainty. This is further compounded by traditional cultural practices, which constrains women's movement outside the domestic sphere. Yet as more women enter public and political spheres, attitudes towards women's economic rights and agency are shifting in a positive direction, which may lead to more liberal views across

society.<sup>1</sup> Women are currently over-represented in the informal sector, where most work is unregulated, labour rights are unprotected, and job security is vulnerable to economic volatility.

The ACO continues to develop its work in WEE through a focus on women in the informal sector, both in increasing their engagement in economic activity and addressing their rights and safety. Across all strategies, the WEE programme ensures a continued focus on supporting women from the informal sector, specifically from rural areas, including refugees and returnees and those with disabilities. Engagement with the women's private sector and business organisations is also a key strategy to the implementation of the WEE programme.

**Intersectionality and Gender Inequality:** Gender inequalities are such in Afghanistan that women and girls are one of the most marginalised and vulnerable populations. Other than gender, further forms of discrimination and marginalisation co-exist, which compound gender inequality. The ACO work to ensure all programme approaches consider these intersectional vulnerabilities. Specific groups of women are especially vulnerable including refugees and returnees, widows, single-headed households, drug-users or partners of drug-users, those exposed to climatic risk such as drought exacerbated by climate change, those marginalised by inadequate economic opportunities and poor public service delivery (especially rural women and women with disabilities), and those stigmatised, oppressed and discriminated against.

Due to pre-existing inequalities, women and marginalised groups are disproportionately impacted by humanitarian crisis. In addition to the risk of being killed in or due to direct impacts of conflict and displacement, women face secondary impacts such as increased rates of gender-based or sexual violence, unequal access to humanitarian assistance, loss of economic opportunities and an increased workload. To ensure the full integration of gender and in humanitarian action, and that Afghan women can lead and fully participate in humanitarian response, the ACO focuses on two streams of work: ensuring that humanitarian planning, response frameworks and programming are gender responsive; and supporting Afghan women to lead response to humanitarian crisis.

## **UN-Women's Role and Partnership**

Coordination forms a key strategy of the ACO to ensure that its normative and programmatic mandates are achieved. The ACO builds on the One UN Plan and its "delivering as one" focus to mobilise the entire UNCT to address GEEW. Beyond the UN system, the ACO has escalated engagement in key coordination forums, elevating the ACO's role where appropriate to fully leverage UN-Women's convening and coordinating mandate for the benefit of overall national efforts on GEEW.

At national and local level, the ACO maintains programmatic partnerships with a broad range of ministries, departments, provincial and local authorities. The Ministry of Women's Affairs, and a wide range of other ministries, are key partners across all programmatic areas. The ACO continues to foster its relationship with civil society with both a convening and coordinating focus, and with a programmatic focus by continuing to enhance partnerships with national and provincial CSOs. Leveraging UN-Women's coordinating and convening mandate on engagement with civil society

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<sup>1</sup> Addressing the Obstacles for Afghan SMEs to Employ Women and Support Their Economic Empowerment (2016)

organisations who work on women's rights is a priority cutting across the ACO's work, which has the power to propel the progress of all national actions on gender equality and women's empowerment. The EVAW and WPS programmes are developing innovative partnerships with non-traditional actors, for EVAW specifically in the faith-based sector. Transforming harmful norms is also key to WPS and WPEL programming, and synergies and commonalities in the transformation of these norms is embedded in the programme design to leverage broad-based synergies and approaches.