

# LISTENING TO WOMEN AND GIRLS DISPLACED TO URBAN AFGHANISTAN

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## Summary

*“ I can't tell you my problems because it will make me cry*

Over 800,000 Afghans are currently recorded as displaced, a number to which almost 150,000 was added during 2014 alone as communities across the country sought to flee rising insecurity and violence. A growing number of these internally displaced people (IDPs) are heading to Afghanistan's major urban centres, where they reside in ramshackle temporary dwellings on, oftentimes, huge informal settlements located on the outskirts of cities. Compared with other Afghans these IDPs are more likely to be non-literate, to have lower rates of school enrolment, to live in larger households (but with lower household incomes), to be unemployed and to be highly food insecure. In short: extremely vulnerable and living on the margins of society.

Yet, despite their huge visible presence in all of Afghanistan's major cities, these urban IDPs are finding their humanitarian conditions deteriorate and needs grow the longer they remain displaced. Many came to the cities in the belief that they would find the safety, support and services that would allow them to protect their families. Now they remain in limbo: unable to return and unable to survive. Recent research sheds new light on the disproportionate risks and especially dire conditions facing women and girls trapped in displacement in Afghanistan's cities.

## Key Findings

1. **Displaced women and girls across Afghanistan's cities are increasingly marginalised and isolated.** Displaced young women and girls are often kept in 'prison-like' seclusion, not permitted to venture outside their homes and unable to seek much needed assistance. Only 40 per cent of respondents said women could gain permission to leave their dwelling in order to visit friends. This drastically reduces their access to education, health care and livelihood opportunities.

*“ We miss the outside world so much and feel like prisoners here. Prison is better; at least you are fed well*

2. **Displaced women and girls across Afghanistan's cities are not able to access education.** Despite impressive increases in rate of schools enrolment nationally, it is a different story for IDP women and girls, of which 71 per cent report never having attended school.

*“When it comes to the education of the children, I feel very helpless. There is a tent where the children study, but it fails to provide proper education. It is just sort of time passing”*

3. **Displaced women and girls across Afghanistan cities are suffering unacceptable levels of hunger.** Many women respondents fear for the survival of their children. Nearly half of those interviewed reported that they are forced to buy food on credit.

*“The children ask for food that we do not have. I cry with my crying children at times*

4. **Displaced women and girls across Afghanistan's cities are at increased risk of forced and early marriage.** Representing a form of income, they are increasingly married off to older men who are able to pay bridewealth/dowry.

*“Yesterday my brother told me that you are getting married. You don't need school and education*

5. **Displaced women and girls across Afghanistan's cities are suffering high levels of psychological trauma and have no mental health assistance support to turn to.** Many female IDPs are struggling to cope, experiencing palpable levels of despair at a lack of support during displacement and facing significant and unmet mental health needs.

*“We are deep in unpleasant thoughts night and day*

## **Key Recommendations**

- IDPs trapped in displacement in Afghanistan's urban informal settlements must be more regularly assessed and receive more humanitarian assistance to address their needs.
  - Urgent and focused efforts must be taken to enroll more displaced girls in education across Afghanistan's urban informal settlements.
  - Better identifying and responding to the mental health needs of displaced women and girls must be prioritized in Afghanistan's urban informal settlements.
  - IDP women and girls must be better targeted by humanitarian actors, with a mixed package of support provided far earlier in the displacement cycle.
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