

# Stand with Afghan Women and Girls in all of their diversity: A Global Imperative

We stand in unwavering solidarity with the resilient and courageous women and girls in all of their diversity<sup>1</sup> of Afghanistan, who are enduring an unprecedented and brutal gender backlash. In just three years, Afghan women in all of their diversity<sup>2</sup> have been reduced to public enemies, and subjected to extreme vulnerability as their fundamental rights and freedoms are systematically stripped away. Since the Taliban's takeover in 2021, the Global Fund has allocated over US\$150 million to fight HIV, TB, and malaria, build resilient and sustainable systems for health, and respond to COVID-19 in Afghanistan<sup>3</sup>.

**Women living with HIV:** The HIV situation in Afghanistan is increasingly concerning, with an estimated 13,000 people living with HIV in 2024. Women are at higher risk e, facing significant challenges in accessing healthcare due to deep-rooted gender inequalities and societal stigma. Limited healthcare infrastructure, compounded by the humanitarian crisis, leaves many women unaware of their status or unable to access critical testing and treatment services. Social, cultural, and structural barriers continue to impede their ability to seek the care they desperately need.<sup>4</sup>

**Malaria and TB remain a public health concern and women are at higher risk:** Women, particularly those who are pregnant, are at high risk of **malaria**, which can lead to severe maternal anaemia, miscarriage, stillbirth, or low birth weight. The lack of access to **long-lasting insecticidal nets (LLINs)** and diagnostics, especially in rural areas, exacerbates their vulnerability.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, **tuberculosis (TB)** remains a major health concern, with **72,000 new cases in 2021** in the country, according to the World Health Organisation<sup>6</sup>. Crowded living conditions, malnutrition, and limited access to healthcare make women in rural areas to live at more risk. The stigma

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<sup>1</sup> W4GF focuses attention on women and girls in all of our diversity and our intersections, addressing issues faced by women living and/or affected by HIV, TB, and Malaria including heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, intersex, non-binary, transgender women, sex workers over 18 years old, and adolescents, girls, and young women. We address challenges of indigenous, displaced, migrant, and refugee women; and women with disabilities.

<sup>2</sup> This includes women living HIV or affected by TB and malaria; women who identify as heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex or non-binary; women who use drugs; sex workers over 18-years old; adolescent girls and young women; Indigenous women; women who are sometimes displaced internally; migrants and refugees; women and girls who are or have been incarcerated; and women with visible and invisible disabilities.

<sup>3</sup> Global Fund. (February 22nd, 2024) *Global Fund to Provide Emergency Services to 1.3 Million Afghan Returnees*. Find more: <https://www.theglobalfund.org/>

<sup>4</sup> UNAIDS (2023) Afghanistan. Find more: <https://www.unaids.org/en/regionscountries/countries/afghanistan>

<sup>5</sup> Global Fund. (February 22nd, 2024) *Global Fund to Provide Emergency Services to 1.3 Million Afghan Returnees*. Find more: <https://www.theglobalfund.org/>

<sup>6</sup> WHO, Afghanistan, 2022. Source: <https://data.who.int/indicators/i/13B4226/C288D13?m49=004>

associated with TB further isolates women, preventing them from seeking timely care and increasing the risk of the disease spreading within families and communities.<sup>7</sup>

**Access to Healthcare and Maternal Health:** The Taliban's oppressive policies, including the ban on women working in NGOs and international organisations, have drastically impacted access to healthcare, leaving women in dire situations. Projections indicate a **50% increase in maternal mortality** and a **45% rise in early childbearing by 2026**.<sup>8</sup>

**Mental Health Crisis:** The erosion of rights has fueled an alarming mental health crisis among Afghan women. In April 2024, **68% of women** reported their mental health as “very bad” or “bad,” with only **10%** describing it as “good” or “very good.” Moreover, a significant number reported knowing someone who had attempted suicide since August 2021, underscoring the severe psychological toll of ongoing oppression.<sup>9</sup>

**Education and Economic Impact:** The Taliban's suspension of women's access to higher education not only shatters their personal ambitions but also represents a significant economic blow. The projected cost to the Afghan economy is estimated to be **USD 9.6 billion by 2066**. The economic loss due to the exclusion of women from education and the workforce underscores the broader developmental challenges facing the country as a result of these gender-based restrictions.

**Deterioration of Social Relationships and Safety:** Isolation is becoming an increasing reality for Afghan women. **96%** report a lack of trust in others, even their neighbours, out of fear of being reported. Additionally, **64%** of women feel unsafe leaving their homes alone, reflecting a severe erosion of their freedoms and safety. The environment of fear and surveillance is stifling women's ability to live with autonomy and dignity.<sup>10</sup>

In a time when their voices are being systematically silenced, we must raise ours in concern and support of them. We echo their rights and demands for justice and gender equality and we raise concern about how funding is declining for Afghan women and girls in all of their diversity. Just the Global Fund itself as one of the main financial supporters of Afghan refugees, investing 28.3 million dollars for this population in the 7th Grant Cycle, has decreased the allocation for the country from 114 million in grant cycle 6 to 70 million in gran cycle 7. That is why we call upon the Global Fund and the international community to take decisive action to protect and uplift women and girls in all of their diversity in Afghanistan.

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<sup>7</sup> World Health Organization. (May 21st, 2024) *New report flags major increase in sexually transmitted infections, amidst challenges in HIV and hepatitis. Find more: <https://www.who.int>*

<sup>8</sup> UN Women. (2024). *Resolve of Afghan women in the face of erasure: Three years since the Taliban takeover*. UNWomen.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> UN Women. (2024).

## Our Call to Action:

### 1. Sustainable Funding for Afghan Women's Organisations:

The international community must commit to long-term, flexible funding for Afghan women-led civil society organisations. These organisations are on the front lines, advocating for women's human rights and providing essential services like education, and health, while fighting against girls' forced marriages, despite increasing restrictions. Sustained support is crucial for their continued operation.

### 2. Increase Funding Allocations and Prioritise Gender Equality:

We call upon the Global Fund to increase the allocation for Afghanistan and dedicate at least 30% of all international aid explicitly to gender-transformative programmes and women's rights so they can access appropriate HIV, TB, malaria and health services. This ensures that women's and girls's issues remain at the forefront of humanitarian aid efforts and that their rights are not sidelined in broader responses.

### 3. Integrate Women's Rights in All Humanitarian Actions:

Gender equality and women's and girls's rights must be embedded as a cross-cutting theme in all humanitarian and development interventions in Afghanistan. We especially advocate to prioritise the scaling up of gender-transformative programs in health for Afghan women and girls in all of their diversity in every action taken, ensuring that no one is left behind.

**We call on all those who believe in the principles of gender equality, justice, and human and health rights advocates to join us in this urgent fight. Stand with Afghan women and girls in all of their diversity, amplify their voices, and advocate for the restoration and complete guarantee of their human and health rights. Together, we must push until Afghan women and girls are no longer silenced but recognised as equal, empowered members of society.**

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