



GENDER ALERT NO. 1



# Earthquake in Herat Province

9 October 2023

Photo: UN Women partner/WASSA

*This Gender Alert has been developed by the regional Gender in Humanitarian Action (GiHA) Working Group in Western Region together with the National GiHA WG and the Women Advisory Group (WAG) to the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) in Afghanistan. The Gender Alert is based on updates, information and reports received from women organizations and humanitarian actors engaging with women in the Herat province, Western Region of Afghanistan.*

On 7 October 2023, a magnitude-6.3 earthquake rocked Herat province, in Western Afghanistan, followed by three aftershocks of magnitude 6.3, 5.9 and 5.5, and other smaller shocks. Most casualties and damages were located in four villages in the Zenda Jan district. As of 8 October, 2,000 were estimated to have died, over 9,000 were injured and 1,300 houses, representing almost 100% of all houses, were completely destroyed<sup>1</sup>. This alert aims to provide insights on the immediate and medium term needs of women and girls affected by the earthquake.

## Findings: situation of women and immediate needs

- **Protection concerns for women and girls are on the rise:** 63% of KII participants in an IRC assessment who reported that their community members have access to latrine said that those latrines were not safe for women and girls to use<sup>2</sup>. 100% and 96% of KII respondents mentioned that girls and women respectively were more at risk.
- Women first responders and health workers in Herat regional hospital highlighted that **soap, underwear, menstrual hygiene products are lacking**, while food items were deemed available in sufficient quantities.
- Preliminary reports evidenced that affected communities required **immediate psychosocial support**, to

<sup>1</sup>Gender breakdowns of these figures are not available at this point

<sup>2</sup>International Rescue Committee, Herat Earthquake Rapid Assessment, 9 October 2023

complement other health interventions. Women health workers reported that the recurring aftershocks trigger strong reactions from patients, evidencing high-level of trauma. The earthquake is likely to worsen the mental health crisis that Afghan women are experiencing. 89% of women from the Western Region had already shared that their mental health had gotten worse in the period April to July 2023<sup>3</sup>.

- Initial reports from women also highlighted that many casualties were caused by the most powerful aftershocks, and populations' lack of earthquake safety and preparedness. **Women may be more at risk of not obtaining information on earthquake preparedness**, due to restrictions imposed on their rights and mobilities, as well as restrictions imposed on women humanitarian workers.
- Following the destruction of entire villages by the earthquake, initial reports mention that women-headed households, unaccompanied minors and unaccompanied elderly, were being relocated to a camp located in Herat City. **Women headed households in particular may experience this relocation differently as they may not have a man who can access services on their behalf, and may no longer be able to rely on informal networks to receive information and assistance.**

## Points of concern for a gender inclusive earthquake response

**Gender-responsive ES-NFI interventions are needed:** 15 months ago, when a magnitude-5.9 earthquake hit Khost and Paktika provinces, women had already “underlined the need for urgent temporary shelter which is adapted to women, girls and other at-risk groups’ safety”,<sup>4</sup> as well as the importance of providing non-food items, including clothes, dignity and hygiene kits. Women and women-focused CSOs operating in Herat province have conveyed similar concerns and priorities for humanitarian assistance.

**Advocacy for women’s participation is critical:** Women are more than ever at risk of being left behind as the restrictions imposed on Afghan women continue to limit the availability of assistance and services provided to women, by women. A few months after the restrictions on female NGO and UN staff, Afghanistan is facing a natural disaster that requires an inclusive, comprehensive and quick response. This will be impossible as long as women humanitarian staff continue facing increasing restrictions in their attempts to reach the most vulnerable. Women

have already reported that they are more comfortable when aid is provided by another woman: restricting women humanitarian workers’ access to the field will mean that women will be less likely to have access to basic information to mitigate the risk associated with natural hazard events and disasters. Further, when allowed to access sites to assess the situation or provide assistance to women, female humanitarian staff, as do female beneficiaries, are expected to have a mahram accompany them. The humanitarian community is required to dedicate financial resources for this purpose. Restrictions imposed on women have a cost which may impact the number of persons who can be included in the response, with female beneficiaries likely to be the first ones impacted. Advocacy for more flexible mahram requirements is critical to ensure women can be reached in a swift manner. (See GiHA advocacy messages developed for the purpose of advocating for female aid worker’s inclusion in the response)

**Building back in an inclusive way:** women affected by the earthquake are at acute risk of displacement, losing economic opportunities, which will impact their ability to rebuild their lives and recover their livelihoods. Initial reports also evidenced that women engaged in home-based income generating activities (e.g., weaving, beekeeping, etc..) will lose their main source of income for a longer period. Women organizations also reported potential significant losses in economic and livelihoods opportunities for affected women and women headed households. These sources of income and women’s empowerment opportunities are at risk and will require financial and technical support from humanitarian and development actors following the crisis.

## Recommendations to humanitarian actors

### Immediately to all clusters

- Advocate in every meeting with the DfA for the **participation of Afghan women staff throughout the earthquake response**, in assessments, delivery of services such as health, shelter, food and cash, and monitoring of humanitarian assistance provided to populations affected by the earthquake (See GiHA advocacy developed for this purpose)
- Ensure humanitarian actors can hold **women-only discussions** and directly assess needs of affected women, with women staff. This includes assessing women’s preference on shelter location and rebuilding.

<sup>3</sup>Extract from UNAMA, UN Women and IOM, Summary report of country-wide women’s consultations, September 2023, available from, <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/09/summary-report-of-country-wide-womens-consultations>

<sup>4</sup>GiHA Afghanistan, Gender update #1: Earthquake in Paktika and Khost, June 2022, available from: <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-07/af-Gender-Alert-1-Paktika-and-Khost-Earthquake.pdf>

- **Continue addressing immediate humanitarian needs of women, ensuring that women heads of household are reached through assessment exercises and included in the list of beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance.** This includes ensuring there are women volunteers and key informants in the community and their insights can be taken into account to triangulate referrals from community leaders, as they are more likely the most vulnerable households and women in the community.
- **Ensure women have access to safe feedback mechanisms, including face-to face feedback mechanisms which are preferred by women<sup>5</sup>, to ensure that they can voice their needs directly.**

**FSAC:** Ensure that nutritional supplementation is available and meets the needs of all girls and women, including pregnant and lactating women, women with disabilities and ongoing health conditions. Ensure dedicated distributions can be set up for women headed households, with women staff.

**ES-NFI:** Ensure that temporary shelters provide spaces of privacy for girls and all women, including pregnant and lactating women, in order not to create further protection concerns. Ensure NFI distributed include products for women such as underwear and hygiene kits. Initiate targeted distributions to women and girls of blankets, warm clothes, shoes and chadors.

**WASH:** 44% of respondents to the IRC assessment highlighted they no longer had access to water points<sup>6</sup>. In coordination with ES NFI, ensure provision and access to gender-sensitive WASH facilities and services in all temporary and collective shelters, as well as provision of sufficient WASH commodities in all health facilities. Initiate awareness-raising initiatives provided by female staff, focusing on water treatment, menstrual hygiene, hygiene practices, etc.

**Protection:** Train non-gender-based violence (GBV) specialist humanitarian staff to identify GBV survivors, and refer survivors to PSS providers. Undertake preventive action together with other clusters to ensure safe shelter location for women and girls and mitigate protection concerns.

**Health:** Ensure women health workers can access and provide services to women affected by the earthquake. Provide immediate psychosocial support (PSS) and services to women by women, in health facilities and in temporary shelter sites.

**In the coming months:**

**Continue advocating** with the DfA to provide an exemption to the restrictions on Afghan female humanitarian staff for emergency situations, when humanitarian assistance needs to be organized following a natural hazard event (including but not limited to earthquake, floods and landslide)

**Fund women-led and women-focused organisations in Herat province with flexible funding** so that these organisations can scale up the response and response to women’s needs on the medium term

**Provide livelihoods and economic opportunities to affected women through income-generating activities**, enabling them to build on existing skills and trainings, and ultimately to rebuild their lives.

**Continue mapping the specific needs of vulnerable populations at risk of being left out such as WHH**, including in internally displaced populations and temporary makeshift camps.

**Engage women in reconstruction planning and efforts** to ensure the response meets the needs of entire communities and address specific needs of vulnerable groups.

**For more information: Claire Van Loveren – GiHA co-chair (Western Region): [Claire.vanloveren@unwomen.org](mailto:Claire.vanloveren@unwomen.org)**

<sup>5</sup>OCHA, Engaging Marginalized Women in Afghanistan in Decision-Making and Accountability, June 2022, available from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/engaging-marginalized-women-afghanistan-decision-making-and-accountability-findings-feedback-system-design-workshops-carolyn-davis-ocha-afghanistan-accountability-affected-people-advisor-april-2022>

<sup>6</sup>International Rescue Committee, Herat Earthquake Rapid Assessment, 9 October 2023