



**Women, Peace and Participation (WPP)
&
Women in International Security (WIIS)**

**The impact of poppy cultivation and its ban on
women in Afghanistan**

Authors: Belquis Ahmadi and Forozan Rasooli

June 30, 2026

Table of Contents

Acronyms	1
Executive Summary.....	2
Key Takeaways	2
Recommendations.....	4
Introduction.....	5
Methodology and Study Limitations.....	6
Context and Background	7
Afghanistan's opium economy before the 2022 ban	7
Taliban's post-2021 counter-narcotics posture and the 2022 ban.....	9
Consultees' Responses to Questions	11
Gendered Impacts of Poppy Cultivation and its Ban	11
Roles and Participation in Poppy Cultivation and Processing	12
Household Economic Dependence and Income from Poppy Cultivation	13
Impact of the Poppy Ban on Household Income and Livelihoods	15
Alternative Income-Generating Activities and Barriers to Implementation	16
Challenges Facing Women's Access to Livelihood Opportunities.....	17
Perspectives on Livelihoods, Education, and International Engagement.....	19
Household Vulnerability and Social Outcomes of Economic Loss	20
Women's Expanded Roles, Work Burden, and Household Decision-Making Dynamics.....	21
Structural Barriers and Programmatic Gap Affecting Women's Livelihoods	23
Coping Mechanisms, Family Stress, and Trends in Child Labor and Early Marriage	25
Aid Effectiveness, Gaps, and Perception of International Support for Livelihood Development ...	27
Conclusion	29
Recommendations.....	31
For NGOs, the United Nations, and Donor Countries	31
For Private Sector.....	32
For Taliban De Facto Authorities in Afghanistan	33
Cross-Cutting Priorities.....	33
Annexes.....	35
A. About Strategizing a Seat at the Table Initiative (SSTI).....	35
B. Consultation Questionnaire	36

Acronyms

FGD	Focus Group Discussion
SSTI	Strategizing a Seat at the Table Initiative
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission for Afghanistan
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
WPP	Women, Peace and Participation
WIIS-Italy	Women In International Security-Italy
WG	Working Group

Executive Summary

The April 2022 ban on poppy cultivation has triggered widespread economic disruption in rural Afghanistan. The abrupt ban on poppy cultivation—issued by the Taliban emir through a decree on April 3, 2022, which prohibited cultivation, use, transportation, manufacture, trade, export, and import of all narcotics—has caused widespread economic disruption in affected regions, with particularly severe consequences for rural households, especially women-headed households. While the policy advances drug control objectives, it has eliminated a primary source of income for thousands of households without offering viable alternatives, thereby exacerbating poverty, food insecurity, and economic instability.

Women have borne a disproportionate share of the burden by taking on physically demanding work in agriculture, construction, and domestic service while continuing their caregiving responsibilities. At the same time, reduced employment opportunities for men have contributed to rising household tensions and increased domestic violence. Women also reported growing caregiving responsibilities related to opium addiction among male family members and in some cases, children.

Severe economic distress has led to the adoption of harmful coping strategies, such as child marriage and child labor. In conditions of acute economic distress, harmful coping mechanisms have emerged with notable regional variations. In Badakhshan, women reported no known cases of children being sold in their communities but highlighted a clear increase in child labor. In contrast, in Nangarhar, Kunar, and Helmand, women reported having witnessed or heard of families selling their children, alongside rising levels of child labor and early marriage.

Across all consultations, women emphasized the importance of ensuring their children's education, expanding employment opportunities for men, and creating accessible, home-based income-generating opportunities for women. At the same time, many reported being forced to withdraw their sons from schools and madrasas so they could contribute to household income. Women expressed particular dismay that even educated young men—including those with Bachelor's and, in some cases, Master's degrees—were unable to secure employment and often failed to find even daily wage labor.

Key Takeaways

Roles and Participation in Poppy Cultivation and Processing: Participants described widespread and diverse involvement in poppy cultivation and processing, with both men and women contributing across multiple stages of production. Roles included sowing, harvesting, collecting latex, and drying, as well as supporting activities such as food preparation, household management, and coordination of labor. Women's participation extended beyond informal support to include oversight of production and involvement in sales in some cases. Poppy cultivation was often organized as a collective household effort, involving family members and shared labor arrangements, including partnership farming. Poppy cultivation functioned as a cooperative household-based system, with

women playing an integral—though often unrecognized—role in both labor and economic management.

Household Economic Dependence and Income from Poppy Cultivation: Poppy cultivation was a primary source of household income, with many families earning enough to cover basic needs such as food, healthcare, and social obligations, and in some cases save or invest in small businesses. Beyond income, poppy and its by-products also supported household consumption. However, this income was highly variable, influenced by weather and climate conditions, market price fluctuations, and external pressures such as eradication efforts, bans, and conflict. While cultivation was often organized at the household level, control over income remained largely in the hands of men. Despite women's significant contributions to production and processing, many had limited access to financial decision-making.

Household Vulnerability and Coping Strategies: The loss of poppy income has significantly increased household vulnerability. Rising unemployment and declining earnings have forced many families to rely on debt, asset sales, reduced spending, and humanitarian assistance, which many respondents described as insufficient. The economic shock has also reduced access to food, healthcare, and education while contributing to increased household tensions, domestic violence, and deteriorating mental health. In the most severe cases, families reported resorting to harmful coping strategies, including child labor, early marriage, and the sale of children.

Livelihoods and Women's Economic Participation: Households reported a sharp decline in income following the ban on poppy cultivation, with many surviving on low and irregular earnings that are insufficient to meet basic needs. Most have shifted to alternative livelihoods such as small-scale farming, daily wage labor, domestic work, and small businesses; however, these provide low and unstable returns due to limited inputs, weak market demand, and subsistence-level production. Women face additional barriers to earning an income because restrictions on their movement and employment—imposed through Taliban policies and reinforced by their enforcement and conservative social norms—confine them largely to low-income, home-based work. Limited access to start-up capital, markets, and employment opportunities further constrains their livelihoods, particularly for women without male support. Following the loss of poppy income, many women have assumed greater responsibility for both income generation and unpaid caregiving, often engaging in physically demanding work, yet these expanded roles have rarely translated into greater decision-making power or economic empowerment.

Alternative Livelihoods and Barriers to Women's Economic Recovery: Households identified several alternative livelihood opportunities for women, primarily home-based activities such as tailoring, handicrafts, food processing, small businesses, livestock rearing, and small-scale farming. However, these activities generally provide low and unstable incomes due to limited start-up capital, poor market access, reduced NGO support, restrictions on women's mobility, and inadequate access to education and vocational training. Participants also reported unequal access to livelihood assistance, noting that aid distribution is often managed by male community leaders and further constrained by Taliban restrictions on interactions between unrelated men and women, limiting many women's ability to access available support. Some respondents also

described favoritism in beneficiary selection, with community leaders prioritizing relatives and acquaintances. For farming households, drought and inadequate irrigation further reduce productivity. Overall, participants emphasized that short-term support is insufficient and called for fair and transparent aid distribution, expanded vocational training, stronger market linkages, and sustained investment to enable women to achieve economic independence.

Aid Effectiveness, Equity, and Gaps in International Support for Livelihood Development: Participants reported significant concerns about the effectiveness and fairness in aid distribution, citing issues such as corruption, favoritism, and lack of transparency in distribution, which often prevent support from reaching the most vulnerable. They emphasized the need for direct, needs-based assessments, stronger monitoring, and more accountable systems. Current programs were seen as limited in scale and insufficient to address widespread needs, with many households—especially women—receiving little or no meaningful support. Respondents highlighted the importance of expanding livelihood assistance, including small business support, livestock, and agricultural inputs, alongside improved access to markets and essential services such as healthcare. They also stressed the need for consistent implementation of programs and greater inclusion of women’s voices in decision-making. Overall, participants called for more transparent, inclusive, and long-term approaches that can effectively address actual need, and support recovery and reduce dependency on aid.

Recommendations

For NGOs, the United Nations, and Donor Countries

- Carry out regular needs assessments at the district and village levels and engage directly with women to include their views in program development.
- Develop programs that provide start-up funding to families affected by the ban on poppy cultivation to help them start alternative income-generating activities.
- Provide vocational training, literacy, and professional development programs based on local market needs.
- Advocate with the Taliban for the protection of women’s basic rights and access to economic opportunities.
- Explore regulated and legal uses of the crop to support livelihoods. Under strictly controlled systems, poppy can be cultivated for medical purposes.

For the Private Sector

- Strengthen women’s livelihoods by supporting the establishment of small businesses, agricultural activities, and local industries, coupled with targeted skills development in quality production, marketing, and job creation.
- Expand women’s financial inclusion by facilitating access to microfinance and cooperative models that enable collective investment and risk-sharing.
- Invest in the development of local value chains—such as small-scale processing, storage, and transportation systems—to enhance productivity, profitability, and long-term sustainability.

- Create dignified and locally acceptable employment opportunities for women in sectors such as food processing, textiles, dairy production, and garment manufacturing, aligned with market demand and cultural context.

For the De Facto Authorities in Afghanistan

- Ensure that policies and regulatory frameworks do not hinder the implementation of women-centered livelihood programs, including vocational training and home-based income-generating activities for women.
- Expand employment opportunities for both men and women to alleviate household economic pressures.
- Address social risks—such as child marriage, child labor, and the sale of children—through preventive rather than punitive approaches, with policies focused on tackling the root causes of harmful coping mechanisms rather than penalizing families driven by economic distress.
- Assess the impacts of existing policies that may be contributing to increased poverty and pushing families toward extreme and high-risk coping strategies.

Introduction

This study was commissioned under the Strategizing a Seat at the Table Initiative (SSTI)¹ of Women for Peace and Participation (WPP) with financial support from Women in International Security-Italy (WIIS-Italy)² to support evidence-based engagement in the UN-led Doha Process. For more information about SSTI please see [Annex A](#). The initiative contributes research and policy analysis to the two technical working groups on Counter-Narcotics and Private Sector Development, established following the Third Meeting of Special Envoys on Afghanistan (Doha III) to facilitate practical dialogue on issues affecting Afghanistan's economic recovery and humanitarian situation. These working groups bring together representatives of Taliban de facto authorities, United Nations agencies, member states, international financial institutions, and Afghan participants to identify practical approaches to addressing key socio-economic challenges.

While the broader SSTI initiative supports both thematic areas, this report focuses specifically on the Counter-Narcotics Working Group. Since its establishment, the Working Group has examined the implementation of the opium cultivation ban, alternative livelihoods, drug prevention and treatment, and law enforcement cooperation. These discussions carry profound implications for millions of Afghans whose livelihoods have been shaped by the narcotics economy, yet limited attention has been paid to the

¹ SSTI is an initiative of Women, Peace and Participation developed through consultations with diverse Afghan women leaders from inside and outside Afghanistan, including civil society activists, academics, entrepreneurs, diplomats, and former public officials.

² WIIS Italy has supported the implementation of the activities, within the framework of its project “Participation and Resilience: Women in Peace and Security Processes in Ukraine and Afghanistan” co-funded by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. First launched in 2021, the initiative focuses on the contribution of Afghan women to an inclusive and peaceful future for their country. WIIS Italy is a strategic collaborator of WPP supporting the SSTI initiative.’

differentiated impacts of these policies on women, rural households, and vulnerable communities.

The objective of this study is to contribute evidence to these policy discussions by examining the socio-economic and gendered consequences of Afghanistan's evolving counter-narcotics policies, particularly following the Taliban's ban on opium cultivation. The analysis combines a review of available literature with qualitative interviews conducted with 22 women between the ages of 23 and 55 from 16 districts across four provinces significantly affected by the narcotics economy. The interviewees represented diverse socio-economic backgrounds, including 10 women from landowning farming households and 11 women whose families relied on cultivating land owned by others. Household sizes ranged from four to thirty members.

Drawing on these lived experiences, the report examines how the opium ban has reshaped household livelihoods, economic resilience, and gender dynamics, while identifying opportunities for sustainable alternative livelihoods and underscoring the importance of integrating gender-responsive analysis into future counter-narcotics policies.

Methodology and Study Limitations

This study adopts a two-pronged methodology. First, it draws on a desk review of publicly available literature, including surveys, analytical reports, policy documents, and press releases related to Afghanistan's opium economy, narcotics policy, and their socioeconomic and gendered impacts. Key sources include UNODC's Afghanistan Opium Survey 2023, subsequent updates on cultivation trends, UNAMA statements related to the Doha Process, and recent UNODC research on the gender dimensions of Afghanistan's drug economy.

Second, the study is informed by primary qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with twenty women from fourteen districts across Nangarhar, Kunar, Helmand, and Badakhshan, all of whom were directly affected by the narcotics economy and/or the poppy cultivation ban. Interviews, conducted via encrypted WhatsApp calls lasting one to three hours, explored participants' experiences, livelihood strategies, and household dynamics. Participants were identified through trusted local networks to enable access in a highly restrictive environment. Efforts were made to ensure diversity in age, marital status, education, and land tenure. The interview questionnaire is provided in [Annex B](#).

The study has several limitations. The qualitative sample is small and not intended to be representative of the wider population; rather, it provides insight into the lived experiences of women and households affected by the poppy ban. Data collection was constrained by poor internet connectivity, requiring multiple interview sessions in some cases. Fear of surveillance and possible repercussions also made many participants initially reluctant to speak, necessitating repeated follow-up calls to build trust. In some households, women required permission from male family members to participate, while in others, male

relatives remained present during interviews, potentially influencing participants' willingness to speak freely. Despite these constraints, measures were taken to ensure ethical engagement and to document participants' experiences as accurately as possible.

Context and Background

The purpose of this study is to complement international efforts to address the interconnected challenges of narcotics production, usage, economic fragility, and gender inequality in Afghanistan. It builds on the outcomes of a July 2024 conference held in Italy, convened with a delegation from the Strategizing a Seat at the Table Initiative (SSTI) and co-organized by Women for Peace and Participation (WPP) and Women in International Security Italy (WIIS-Italy), while responding to the long-term need for women's meaningful participation in policy discussions. A key recommendation from that meeting was the need to identify and bring together Afghan subject-matter experts and researchers—particularly women—to support thematic working groups established under the UN-led Doha Process in early 2024.

This approach recognizes that Afghan women remain largely excluded from technical and policy discussions on Afghanistan, despite being among those most affected by economic shocks, restrictive governance policies, and enforcement measures. SSTI seeks to address this gap by conducting consultations and research that capture lived realities on the ground, generating solutions informed by those directly affected, and amplifying their voices and priorities in international policy forums.

To support this objective, SSTI has launched its first consultation on the impact of the Taliban's 2022 ban on poppy cultivation on women and households that previously depended on the poppy economy as their primary source of income. The findings will be shared with women members of the UN-led Counter-Narcotics Working Group, Special Envoys, and other relevant stakeholders.

Afghanistan's opium economy before the 2022 ban

Poppy cultivation and the use of opium and hashish products have long been part of rural life in Afghanistan. On November 23, 1957, during the reign of King Mohammad Zahir Shah, the government issued a five-article regulation that replaced earlier provisions and formally prohibited the cultivation, trade, purchase and sale, import, export, and the use of opium.³ An earlier regulation dated July 31, 1956 authorized farmers to cultivate opium under state control, requiring them to deliver their harvest to government representatives in exchange for cash payment.⁴

³ Afghanistan, *Usulnama-yi Man'-i Zira'at, Tijarat, Kharid wa Furush, Warud wa Sudur wa Isti'mal-i Tiryak dar Afghanistan* [Regulation on the Prohibition of the Cultivation, Trade, Purchase and Sale, Import, Export, and Use of Opium in Afghanistan], 2 Qaws 1336 (Solar Hijri), Afghanistan Center at Kabul University (ACKU)

⁴ Afghanistan, *Usulnama-yi Tiryak* [Opium Regulation], 9 Asad 1335 (July 31, 1956), Afghanistan Center at Kabul University (ACKU)

These activities usually took place at the household or village level and involved mostly men, with some women working as laborers or helping with processing⁵. Poppy farming increased sharply after the Soviet invasion in 1979, when state institutions collapsed and many families turned to high-value crops to survive and to support war-related economies. During the 1980s and 1990s, ongoing conflict and weak governance allowed poppy cultivation to spread further, as armed groups—including mujahideen factions and later the Taliban—collected taxes from the production and trade of these crops.⁶

A defining characteristic of Afghanistan's opium economy is the exceptionally high labor demand associated with poppy cultivation, which shapes both household participation and vulnerability. Studies by the World Bank⁷ show that cultivating one hectare of opium poppy can require approximately 350 person-days of labor per year, compared with around 40 person-days for wheat. This stark difference means that poppy farming depends heavily on intensive labor inputs, drawing on both household members and hired workers. During peak agricultural periods, families often mobilize all available labor, including women and children, to meet these demands. As a result, households involved in poppy cultivation may become more exposed to economic and social risks, particularly when income from poppy is disrupted but labor and caregiving responsibilities remain high.

Under the first Taliban regime, the group exercised control over large poppy-growing areas and benefited from the opium economy through taxation and regulation of production and trade. On January 8, 2001, Taliban leader Mullah Omar issued a three-article decree imposing an absolute ban of poppy across the country.⁸ On August 21, 2000, the Taliban issued a decree regarding the enforcement of legislative documents of the Ministry of Interior, specifically the Law on Combating Narcotic Drugs. This followed an earlier decree of August 20, 2000, which endorsed the enforcement of legislative documents of the Ministry of Interior, including the Law on Combating Narcotic Drugs. Beyond prohibiting the cultivation, trade, and use of opium and its by-products, the law also assigned institutional responsibilities. In particular, it mandated the Ministry of Public Health to develop and formalize regulations for the medical use of narcotic substances,

⁵ Hamid Azizi, Natascha Eichinger, and Monika Roszkowska, *Afghan Women and the Opiate Trade* (Vienna, Austria: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2022), 34 pp., <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/drug-trafficking/crimjust/news/unodc-launches-report-on-afghan-women-and-the-opiate-trade.html>

⁶ William Byrd and Christopher Ward, *Drugs and Development in Afghanistan*, World Bank Social Development Papers, Conflict Prevention & Reconstruction Paper No. 18 (Washington, DC: World Bank, December 2004), <https://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/156391468740439773/pdf/30903.pdf>

⁷ Christopher Ward and William Byrd, *Afghanistan's Opium Drug Economy* (Washington, DC: World Bank South Asia Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Working Paper, December 2004), <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/158651468767124612/pdf/311490PAPER0AF-100SASPR0no051Dec0171.pdf>

⁸ Afghanistan Center at Kabul University (ACKU), [acku_risalah_knf3092_fay47_1421_n795_dari_title17.pdf](https://acku.risalah_knf3092_fay47_1421_n795_dari_title17.pdf)

including their production, processing, import and export, sale and distribution, storage, transportation, and authorized use.⁹

Another decree issued on September 4, 2001, mandated the authorities of the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice to act against the use and production of hashish, which was deemed under Islamic law to be a reprehensible substance that weakens—and may even eliminate—human intellectual faculties. The decree granted the Minister and all relevant officials’ full authority to identify and completely eradicate any locations where hashish or its production facilities were found.¹⁰

These bans led to a dramatic and rapid collapse in production, and by the 2000–2001 growing season, Afghanistan’s opium output had fallen to historically low levels. However, the impact of the ban was short-lived. Following the removal of the Taliban from power after the U.S.-led intervention in late 2001, poppy cultivation quickly resumed, as farmers returned to opium production in the absence of effective state control and viable alternative livelihoods.

During the Republic era, successive regulations and legislative measures were introduced to curb and ultimately eradicate poppy cultivation. Despite these efforts, by the early 2010s Afghanistan had emerged as the world’s dominant producer of opium, supplying roughly 90 percent of the global illicit market. Production remained heavily concentrated in a limited number of provinces, particularly in the south and southwest of the country. While the opium economy generated large overall revenues, the financial benefits were unevenly distributed. Most profits accrued to powerful traders, traffickers, and armed or political actors involved in taxation and protection, while small farmers typically received only a limited share and remained economically vulnerable.¹¹

Taliban’s post-2021 counter-narcotics posture and the 2022 ban

After taking Kabul in August 2021, the Taliban’s spokesperson, Zabiullah Mujahid in a press conference in Kabul, said,” We are assuring our countrymen and women and the international community, we will not produce any narcotics... From now on, Afghanistan will be a narcotics-free country, but it needs international assistance. The international community should help us so that we can have alternative crops. We can provide alternative crops. Then, of course, very soon, we can bring it to an end.” In April 2022, the Taliban de facto authorities announced a broad ban on narcotics, covering cultivation,

⁹ Afghanistan Center at Kabul University (ACKU), فرمان مقام امارت اسلامی افغانستان در مورد انفاذ اسناد تقنینی وزارت: ۶/۵/۱۴۲۱: ۴۶۰ تاریخ

¹⁰ Afghanistan Centr at Kabul University (ACKU), acku_risalah_knf3092_fay48_1422_n799_dari_title30.pdf

¹¹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2011* (Vienna: UNODC, 2011), https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afghanistan_Opium_Survey_2011.pdf

production, and trafficking.¹² The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reported that the ban resulted in a dramatic reduction in opium poppy cultivation. On March 17, 2023, the Office of Administrative Affairs of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan published on X an image of Decree No. 510 (dated 16 Sha'ban 1444 AH), issued by Haibatullah Akhundzada and titled *“Decree of the Supreme Leader, the Commander of the Faithful (may God preserve him), regarding the prohibition of cannabis (‘bhang’) cultivation in the country.”* The decree states that anyone who violates the ban by cultivating cannabis will have their crop destroyed and will be punished in accordance with Sharia law. The relevant authorities are instructed to prevent the cultivation of cannabis and to take serious action against violators. The courts are also obliged to punish offenders in accordance with Islamic law.¹³

The Afghanistan Opium Survey 2023¹⁴ estimated that cultivation fell to approximately 10,800 hectares in 2023, representing a 95 per cent decline from an estimated 233,000 hectares in 2022. UNODC cautioned that this abrupt contraction generated severe economic disruption and heightened vulnerability in already fragile rural communities.

According to later reporting by UNODC, opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan increased modestly in 2024 after the dramatic collapse following the 2022 ban, rising by an estimated 19 percent to around 12,800 hectares.¹⁵ The report also noted that high opium prices and dwindling stockpiles could provide incentives for farmers to resume cultivation, potentially extending into regions outside traditional growing areas and even into neighboring countries.

The UNODC February 2026 report¹⁶ indicates that Afghanistan's drug landscape is evolving rather than diminishing. While the use of traditional substances such as opium and cannabis remains widespread, there is a growing shift toward synthetic drugs, including methamphetamine, as well as the misuse of pharmaceutical products. The report further underscores that drug use is closely tied to poverty, unemployment, and psychological distress, with many individuals resorting to substance use as a coping mechanism in response to economic hardship and health-related challenges.

¹² Ayaz Gul, “Taliban Ban Opium Poppy Cultivation in Afghanistan,” Voice of America, April 3, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-ban-opium-poppy-cultivation-in-afghanistan/6513193.html>

¹³ Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. “Decree on [subject, e.g., narcotics/hashish ban],” posted March 17, 2023. X (formerly Twitter). https://x.com/AOP_IEA/status/1637067100366725120

¹⁴ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), “Afghanistan Opium Cultivation in 2023 Declined 95 Per Cent Following Drug Ban: New UNODC Survey,” *UNODC Press Release*, November 5, 2023, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2023/November/afghanistan-opium-cultivation-in-2023-declined-95-per-cent-following-drug-ban--new-unodc-survey.html>

¹⁵ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), “Afghanistan: Opium Cultivation Increased by 19 Per Cent in Second Year of Drugs Ban, According to UNODC,” press release, October 2024, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2024/October/afghanistan--opium-cultivation-increased-by-19-per-cent-in-second-year-of-drugs-ban--according-to-unodc.html>

¹⁶ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). *Afghanistan Drug Use Assessment*. Vienna: UNODC, February 2026. https://www.undp.org/afghanistan/publications/afghanistan-drug-use-assessment?utm_source=chatgpt.com

The next sections will present the findings from consultations with twenty women across sixteen districts in four provinces, whose household economies were previously dependent on the poppy economy. These sections present their lived experiences, the gendered impacts of the ban, and the coping strategies adopted in response to the loss of income, providing grounded insights into the socio-economic consequences at the household and community levels.

Consultees' Responses to Questions

Gendered Impacts of Poppy Cultivation and its Ban

Afghanistan's narcotics economy has long affected women and men in different ways. Although opium and poppy cultivation, processing and trafficking are often portrayed as activities dominated by men, women have historically contributed in substantial but largely unrecognized ways through unpaid labor and household responsibilities that support agricultural livelihoods, including illicit production. As documented in UNODC's *Afghan Women and the Opiate Trade*,¹⁷ women and children commonly undertake unpaid and labor-intensive tasks associated with poppy cultivation and processing.

"I supported my family at every stage—from planting and harvesting poppy in the fields to helping manage household expenses from the income we earned." — 44, Badakhshan

"We all worked together—my husband, children, and relatives—to cultivate and process poppy, and the income covered our basic needs, but after conflict and the ban, our situation became much harder." — 55, Kunar

The harms linked to narcotics in Afghanistan extend well beyond cultivation and trafficking and penetrate deeply into household health, caregiving, and social dynamics. Desk-based research and UNODC-supported drug-use surveys¹⁸ indicate that drug consumption has increased over time and that women are frequently exposed to addiction within the home, often as caregivers to dependent family members.

"I carry many responsibilities—I care for my opium-addicted husband and my young children. This hardship is everywhere—poverty has become so severe that even young men are taking their own lives. I know families who surviving on one meal a day. When I got to market sometimes, I see young men standing in long lines hoping for daily work that never comes." — 45, Nangarhar

¹⁷ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Afghan Women and the Opiate Trade* (Vienna: UNODC, 2010), https://www.unodc.org/documents/hiv-aids/Afghan_women_and_the_opiate_trade.pdf

¹⁸ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *World Drug Report 2024* (Vienna: UNODC, 2024), <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/world-drug-report-2024.html>

These patterns place additional emotional, physical, and economic burdens on women, particularly in households already affected by poverty. Women are increasingly required to assume multiple roles—as primary caregivers, income earners, and emotional anchors within the family—often without adequate support or resources. The combined pressures of economic hardship, male unemployment, and substance dependency within households not only intensify women’s workload but also expose them to heightened stress, social isolation, and deteriorating mental health.

"Many women are facing mental health problems because there is no work at home and they are not allowed to go outside. I believe almost all women are affected. I, myself feel very lonely, I cry over small things, and for me life feels like a tiring prison." — 28, Helmand

As highlighted by the UNODC in its February 2026 report¹⁹, drug use among women in Afghanistan is significantly underreported due to entrenched stigma, restrictive social norms, and legal risks. Although there is limited publicly available information on the prevalence of drug use among women, this does not imply that women are not affected. In 2007, the first women’s treatment facility—the Sanga Amaj Women’s Drug Treatment Center—was established in Kabul, reflecting early recognition of the issue. At the time, estimates suggested that approximately 120,000 women and 60,000 children were affected by drug addiction.²⁰

While this study did not specifically examine drug use among women and children, there is a clear need for further research in this area. Such research would be particularly challenging under current conditions, given the Taliban’s punitive approach to drug use, including reports of public flogging and imprisonment. Nevertheless, with careful and ethical methodologies, it remains possible to document these experiences and better understand the scope and gendered dimensions of drug use.

Roles and Participation in Poppy Cultivation and Processing

Participants described a range of roles in poppy cultivation and processing that reflect both direct and indirect forms of participation within the household economy. Many individuals were actively involved in key stages of production, including sowing seeds, cutting poppy pods, collecting latex, and drying the harvest. These tasks often required significant time and coordination, particularly during peak agricultural seasons. In addition to their own labor, participants frequently worked alongside husbands, children, and extended family members.

¹⁹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). *Afghanistan Drug Use Assessment*. Vienna: UNODC, February 2026. https://www.undp.org/afghanistan/publications/afghanistan-drug-use-assessment?utm_source=chatgpt.com

²⁰ Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN). “Heroin Dulls Hardships for Afghan Women.” *ReliefWeb*, May 27, 2013. https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/heroin-dulls-hardships-afghan-women?utm_source=chatgpt.com

"After my father passed away, I took responsibility as the eldest daughter and worked alongside my brother in poppy cultivation, from sowing seeds to collecting latex." — 27, Nangarhar.

Women also played important supporting roles, such as preparing food, managing household logistics during cultivation cycles, and, in some cases, overseeing aspects of production and coordinating seasonal workers and facilitating the sale of opium. During the off-season, women supported their families in cultivating and harvesting wheat and vegetables, as well as collecting firewood.

"I partnered with farmers by providing fertilizer while they handled cultivation; we split the harvest equally, and I oversaw the fields and managed the sale myself." — 50, Badakhshan.

These accounts illustrate that women's involvement extended beyond supplementary labor, forming an integral part of the production system, even where their contributions remained informal, unpaid, and largely unrecognized. While some women earned direct income from their work, others received only a small share of earnings or pocket money for personal expenses.

"We farmed both our own and others' land—up to 10–15 jeribs (4.94 acres– 7.41 acres)—growing poppy on about five or six, hiring laborers for planting while I took part in harvesting until cultivation was banned in 2022." 28, Helmand

These responsibilities indicate that involvement was not limited to manual labor but also extended to decision-making and economic management. However, the level of engagement varied. Some respondents had limited or indirect involvement due to factors such as education, caregiving responsibilities, or other obligations outside agriculture. Despite this, they often remained connected to the process through household-level contributions or occasional participation during critical stages.

"We all worked together—my husband, children, and relatives—to cultivate and process poppy, and the income covered our basic needs, but after conflict and the ban, our situation became much harder." — 55, Kunar.

Cooperation and mutual support were important parts of poppy cultivation. During busy times, families often helped each other by sharing labor to manage heavy workloads. Many households also used partnership farming, where they shared the costs and divided the harvest equally, usually 50/50, between landowners and farmers or among families. These practices show that poppy cultivation was not only an individual activity but also a system based on cooperation and shared economic relationships.

Household Economic Dependence and Income from Poppy Cultivation

Poppy cultivation and sale represented a major source of household income for respondents, with annual earnings ranging from approximately 700,000 to 1,000,000 PKR (≈\$4,000 to ≈\$6,200) or 200,000 to 700,000 AFN (≈\$2,000 to \$9,000). For many families, this income was sufficient to cover essential needs, including food, clothing, healthcare, and social obligations such as weddings and other ceremonies. In some cases, households were able to accumulate savings or reinvest their earnings into small businesses, such as opening grocery shops, thereby diversifying their sources of income and improving economic stability.

"The land wasn't ours—we farmed on someone else's field, earning around 400,000–500,000 PKR (≈\$2,300–\$3,100) annually from poppy, shared with the landlord, while my father managed the income and gave my mother about 50,000 AFN (≈\$500) each year for household expenses." — 28, Nangarhar

"We cultivated a small amount of poppy on a quarter jerib, earning around 200,000 AFN (≈\$2,000–\$2,600) annually alongside other farming and livestock, while my father also worked as a teacher." — 28, Kunar

In addition to direct financial benefits, households also utilized various by-products of poppy cultivation. Poppy seeds were commonly used in cooking and baking, while oil extraction, and leaves provided an additional source of household use and, in some cases, supplementary value.

"The profit from selling poppy and its by-products—such as oil, seeds, and leaves—covered all our expenses, allowing us to live comfortably." — 45, Nangarhar

Despite its profitability, income from poppy cultivation was highly variable and uncertain. Yields were strongly influenced by environmental factors, particularly rainfall, with poor weather conditions significantly reducing production.

"Our income depended on the weather—during bad years we earned around 70,000 AFN (≈\$1,100), but in good seasons it could reach up to 250,000 AFN (≈\$3,900), as rain and strong winds often reduced our harvest." — 27, Nangarhar

Note: It is important to note that the currency used varied by region. In Nangarhar, Helmand, and Kunar, transactions were predominantly conducted in Pakistani rupees (PKR), whereas in Badakhshan, payments—including wages for laborers—were primarily made in afghanis (AFN).

Market dynamics also played a critical role, with opium prices often fluctuating significantly. In response, some farmers chose to store their harvest and delay sales until prices improved. However, external pressures—including crop eradication campaigns

during the republic period, government bans, and ongoing conflict—created considerable uncertainty, frequently leading to sudden and substantial financial losses.

Poppy was typically cultivated once or twice a year, depending on regional conditions. Sales were usually conducted at the farm or household level, with traders visiting directly to purchase opium, reducing the need for farmers to transport their products to distant markets. However, control over income was largely concentrated in the hands of men. While women contributed significantly to cultivation and processing, they generally had limited visibility into financial matters and little decision-making power. In some instances, women received small portions of the income for household expenses, but overall financial management and control remained predominantly male-dominated when the husband was present and able to lead.

Impact of the Poppy Ban on Household Income and Livelihoods

Following the ban on poppy cultivation, households reported a sharp and often devastating decline in income. Where earnings had previously been substantial, many families now survive on as little as 5,000 to 50,000 AFN (≈\$80 to \$500) annually, or modest monthly incomes ranging between 5,000 and 7,000 AFN (≈\$80 to \$110). In some cases, households reported having virtually no stable source of income at all, relying instead on irregular daily wage labor that typically yields only 150 to 200 AFN (≈\$2.4 to 3.2) per day. While a small number of respondents noted improved financial conditions due to formal employment opportunities—such as jobs with NGOs or in construction—these cases were rare and not representative of the broader experience.

"I now earn 7,000 AFN (≈\$110) a month as a teacher but haven't been paid for three months, forcing us to borrow money, while our vegetable farming produces so little due to lack of inputs and rain that it barely feeds us." — 45, Nangarhar

In response to the loss of poppy-related income, households have shifted to alternative livelihoods, though these tend to generate significantly lower and less reliable returns. Common activities include small-scale vegetable farming, daily wage labor, domestic cleaning work, operating small shops, or home-based food production such as bakeries. However, profits from these activities remain minimal and, in many cases, continue to decline due to weak market demand. Agricultural production has largely become subsistence-oriented, with little or no surplus available for sale. This is further compounded by limited access to essential farming inputs such as fertilizer, improved seeds, irrigation water, and greenhouse facilities. In many areas, dependence on rain-fed (lulma) agriculture makes farming highly unpredictable and vulnerable to environmental conditions.

"Now all the men in our family are unemployed and depend on sharecropping vegetables, but low prices and high supply mean we earn very little and sometimes even face losses." — 28, Nangarhar

"I work cleaning people's homes—washing dishes, clothes, and floors—but earning around 5,000 AFN (≈\$80) a month is barely enough for us to survive." — 48, Nangarhar

The broader economic impact has resulted in widespread unemployment affecting entire households. To cope, families increasingly rely on borrowing money from relatives or purchasing goods on credit from local shops. Some households depend on humanitarian assistance, including food aid, to meet their most basic needs. Despite these efforts, many families struggle to afford essential items such as food, healthcare, and daily necessities, with some unable to provide even three meals a day.

The severity of income loss has also driven households to adopt negative coping strategies. These include sending children to work, arranging early marriages, and in extreme cases, resorting to the sale of children.

"Widespread poverty has pushed families into desperate choices—selling children, marrying off underage daughters to older men, or arranging exchange marriages just to survive." — 45, Helmand

Economic pressures have forced entire families—including women and children—into labor-intensive survival activities such as collecting firewood, engaging in informal labor, or undertaking low-paid cleaning work. Overall, the instability and insufficiency of income following the ban have deepened poverty, increased household debt, and heightened long-term vulnerability across affected communities.

Alternative Income-Generating Activities and Barriers to Implementation

Participants identified a range of alternative livelihood opportunities for women, particularly those that can be carried out from home and within existing social constraints. Commonly mentioned activities included tailoring, dressmaking, embroidery (khamak-dozi), lace work, as well as carpet, kilim, and straw weaving.

"Women earn through activities like tailoring, embroidery, and food processing, selling their products to meet household needs, with strong demand for clothing sustaining women's markets like those in Jalalabad." —50, Nangarhar

These skills are often already present among women, making them practical options for income generation. Similarly, food processing activities such as pickle-making, baking, and dairy production were highlighted as accessible and culturally acceptable ways for women to contribute economically from within the household.

"We have many skills—tailoring, embroidery, pickles, and cheese—but without money for tools and materials we cannot grow our work, and even when we earn, it is very little and barely covers daily needs." —28, Nangarhar

"I have skills in clothing design, weaving kilims, tablecloths, and straw mats, and I am ready to do any work if given the opportunity." — 50, Badakhshan

Despite this existing skill base, participants emphasized that women lack the financial resources, tools, and materials needed to expand these activities into sustainable sources

of income. Livestock ownership—particularly cows, goats, and poultry—was frequently identified as some of the most viable and sustainable livelihood options. Livestock not only provides food for household consumption but also generates income through the sale of milk and dairy products. In addition, some respondents suggested alternative agricultural activities such as fruit orchards, beekeeping, and low-water crops, particularly in areas where land is available and water resources are limited.

Small, home-based businesses were also seen as promising opportunities. These include operating small-scaled home-based shops, offering tailoring services, and producing handicrafts for local markets. Respondents noted that strengthening linkages with markets—such as supplying clothing or handmade goods to local shopkeepers—could significantly enhance income potential. However, without reliable market access and support systems, these activities remain limited in scale and profitability.

“Tailoring is a viable and in-demand livelihood in Badakhshan, and it is an activity that women can conveniently carry out from home.” — 35, Badakhshan

A strong emphasis was placed on the need for vocational training, skills development programs, and literacy courses tailored for women. Expanding educational opportunities—such as home-based teaching or informal classes—was also seen as a dual-benefit approach, providing income for women while supporting girls’ access to education. Many participants highlighted that a significant number of educated women in their communities remain unemployed due to restrictions imposed by the Taliban and the limited job opportunities, but also to favoritism and a lack of transparency in aid distribution, with community elders often and Taliban officials often prioritizing their own relatives and acquaintances when selecting beneficiaries or recommending candidates for available opportunities.

At the same time, several structural barriers continue to limit the success of alternative livelihoods. These include a lack of start-up capital, limited market access, a reduced presence of NGOs and support organizations, restrictions on women’s mobility, and interventions that are not based on actual needs or designed in consultation with women or aligned with their skills.

“No other crop can match the level of profit we once earned from opium cultivation. By growing poppy, we also created employment opportunities for others.” — 40, Helmand

This highlights not only the significant income gap created by the ban, but also the broader economic role that poppy cultivation played in sustaining rural livelihoods. Beyond individual earnings, it generated employment and supported local economies. As a result, identifying alternative livelihoods that are both sustainable and capable of providing comparable returns remains a major challenge for affected households.

Challenges Facing Women's Access to Livelihood Opportunities

Women face many serious challenges that limit their ability to work and earn income. One of the main problems is the strong restriction on their movement and employment. In many areas, women cannot leave their homes freely or work outside the house. These restrictions are imposed through Taliban decrees and are enforced by officials from the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, intelligence personnel, and other local Taliban authorities.

As a result, most women are confined to a narrow range of home-based or informal activities that generate low and unstable incomes. Employment opportunities have also diminished significantly, with many sectors closed to women and even previously accessible work—such as teaching or running home-based classes—greatly reduced or eliminated. Those seeking to establish small businesses, such as tailoring, handicrafts, or food production, also face financial barriers, particularly a lack of start-up capital.

Even work that was previously available—such as teaching or running home-based classes—has decreased significantly or stopped altogether. Economic barriers also add to these challenges as one of the main problems is the lack of start-up capital needed to begin small businesses, such as tailoring, handicrafts, or food production.

"Lack of jobs for men and social pressure often prevent women from working, while the absence of capital means even skilled women—like my sister who makes beaded baby clothes—cannot start small businesses despite demand for their work." — 50, Nangarhar

Without access to financial resources, many women are unable to turn existing skills into viable income streams. Additionally, rising prices of raw materials and basic goods have made small-scale enterprises increasingly unprofitable, further discouraging women from pursuing these activities. Limited access to vocational training and capacity-building programs compounds the problem, as women have fewer opportunities to develop new skills or adapt to changing economic conditions.

"The range of work opportunities available to women is extremely limited. Even the few options that do exist require financial resources we do not have, and the support provided by the international community lacks transparency." — 35, Badakhshan

These challenges are closely interconnected and are especially severe for women without male support, such as widows or female-headed households. For these women, restrictions on movement, poverty, limited access to assistance, and social exclusion overlap and reinforce one another, creating multiple and compounding layers of vulnerability. Without a male intermediary, they often face greater difficulty accessing aid, employment opportunities, or community support, which further deepens their marginalization.

Overall, the combined effect of legal restrictions, social norms, and economic constraints has significantly reduced women's ability to engage in livelihoods. This not only limits their income but also weakens their agency and decision-making power within households and communities.

Perspectives on Livelihoods, Education, and International Engagement

Participants emphasized the importance of direct consultation and meaningful inclusion of women in decision-making processes. They expressed frustration that their perspectives are often overlooked or filtered through intermediaries, resulting in limited representation of their actual needs and priorities. Many noted that their voices remain largely unheard, with little to no direct interaction with international actors or organizations. This lack of engagement contributes to a disconnect between program design and the lived realities of women on the ground.

"Meaningful participation means talking with women directly so we can share our realities and solutions." — 50, Nangarhar

A central theme across responses was the urgent need for sustainable and income-generating opportunities for women as a pathway to reducing dependency on illicit crops such as poppy. Participants highlighted the importance of expanding practical livelihood programs, including horticulture, livestock rearing, tailoring, and handicrafts. They pointed to previous initiatives—such as seed distribution and home-based nurseries—as effective models that demonstrated tangible benefits and should be scaled up and replicated in other areas. These types of programs were seen as both feasible and culturally acceptable, particularly when designed to accommodate women's mobility constraints.

Education was consistently identified as a critical foundation for long-term independence and economic well-being. Participants stressed that improving access to education for women and girls would not only enhance livelihood opportunities but also strengthen their ability to make informed decisions and participate more actively in society.

"International organizations should listen to our voices and push for girls' education—our daughters could stand on their own if given the chance? We are in deep desperation and need to be heard." —, Badakhshan

Alongside this, participants called for greater public awareness and stronger advocacy to highlight the challenges women face in the community, at the national, and international levels. They urged international organizations to engage more actively by listening directly to women and responding to their needs. Participants also stressed the importance of designing programs that reflect local realities and are informed by women's lived experiences.

"There is a strong need to create alternative livelihoods for women to replace the income lost from poppy cultivation. In the past, projects like those supported by USAID trained

women in horticulture, providing seeds, materials, and organizing them into groups to run home-based nurseries, which allowed them to earn both income and resources. This was a successful model that should be replicated..." —39, Kunar

Additionally, some participants suggested that current approaches to poppy cultivation should be reconsidered. They proposed that regulated production—especially for medical purposes—could be a more practical and economically viable option than complete bans. This could allow farmers to earn income in a controlled and legal way, while also reducing illegal activities. This view reflects a broader concern that, without realistic alternatives, strict bans may continue to increase poverty and reduce livelihood options. Many participants felt that policies should consider local economic realities and provide solutions that people can actually rely on for long-term income.

Household Vulnerability and Social Outcomes of Economic Loss

The ban on poppy cultivation resulted in a sudden and severe loss of the primary source of income for many households, pushing large segments of the population into unemployment or dependence on low-paying and irregular daily labor. In the absence of viable alternatives, families have been forced to rely on activities that generate significantly lower and often unreliable income. These include daily wage labor, firewood collection, sand extraction, and small-scale home-based businesses, none of which provide sufficient earnings to meet basic household needs.

Living standards have deteriorated significantly, with many households unable to maintain or repair their homes or meet even minimal daily requirements. Dependence on humanitarian assistance has increased, but access remains inconsistent and insufficient to fully address the scale of need. The economic impact has also had far-reaching social consequences. Reduced household income has limited access to education and healthcare, further entrenching long-term vulnerability.

"The ban caused a sharp drop in household income—families lost their main source of cash, and now struggle to afford food, medicine, and basic needs, while poverty, debt, and uncertainty continue to rise." — 44, Badakhshan

Financial strain has contributed to rising levels of conflict and tension between siblings and family members, and, in some cases, violence within families. This is in addition to an increase in domestic violence against women and children. Participants also reported growing levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion due to economic hardship and difficulty accessing health services.

"Since the ban, poverty has increased a lot, and this has led to more domestic violence and physical abuse against women. Many people are also facing depression and mental stress. Problems inside families have become worse, with frequent arguments between sisters-in-law, brothers, and other relatives." — 45, Helmand

"We are struggling to survive, and as a mother it is very painful to see my children in such a vulnerable situation. I am also facing mental health problems and taking medication,

and sometimes I feel like I have become a burden on my family because there are no jobs or work available.” — 55, Kunar

“This situation has brought many changes to my life. For example, family relationships, the way people treat women, and the overall status of women have declined.” — 30, Badakhshan

In more severe cases, the crisis has led to harmful coping strategies, including increased rates of child labor, early and forced marriages, family breakdown, and, in extreme situations, suicide, and the sale of children. These outcomes highlight the depth of the socio-economic challenges faced by affected communities and underscore the urgent need for sustainable livelihood solutions that can restore stability and dignity to household economies.

“The ban has pushed families into deep poverty, and their income has dropped very badly. Daily life has become a struggle just to survive, some families have even thought about selling their children because they have no other options.” —47, Helmand

Women’s Expanded Roles, Work Burden, and Household Decision-Making Dynamics

Following the loss of income from poppy cultivation, women have taken on significantly expanded roles within the household. In addition to their traditional responsibilities, many now contribute directly to household survival by engaging in income-generating activities, caring for children, and supporting sick or opium-dependent family members.

“In the past, we as women were primarily responsible for household chores. Now, due to economic hardship, we are forced to work in other people’s homes, doing laundry to earn an income.” — 47, Helmand

This shift has created a heavy dual burden, increasing both the physical and emotional demands placed on women. In many cases, women and even children are pushed into labor-intensive, physically demanding labor. They carry water over long distances, transport heavy goods, and engage in agricultural labor such as farming, harvesting, and lifting heavy loads, often under harsh and unsafe conditions. Tasks once done by hired workers have shifted to women due to lack of resources. Survival strategies also include collecting and carrying firewood from remote areas, adding to their physical burden. At the same time, even low-paid work like domestic labor is limited and highly competitive, leaving women with few viable income opportunities despite their willingness to work. These activities are not only exhausting but also highlight the limited livelihood options available to households under economic pressure.

“Now, I have to do more physically demanding work in the field alongside my young daughters—something I did not have to do before.” — 35, Badakhshan

“I do very hard work in people’s houses—washing clothes, cleaning, carrying water and heavy items—and even carry sacks of wheat and rice for transport. At home, I also grow

small plants and send my children to the market to sell them to earn a little income.” — 48, Nangarhar

“In Helmand, the culture is different. The responsibility for taking care of livestock mostly falls on women, and women rarely leave the home.” — 28, Helmand

“Sometimes I go to the mountains with my children to collect firewood. At times, my son also goes with us. We carry the wood back on our heads—some of it we keep for use at home, and the rest the children sell in the market. Both I and my children do heavy labor.” — 39, Kunar

However, experiences are not uniform across all households. Some women remain confined to their homes due to mobility restrictions, social norms, or lack of access to opportunities, preventing them from participating in any form of income-generating activity. A small number of women continue to engage in less physically demanding work, such as teaching or home-based baking, but these opportunities are limited and not widely accessible.

“We are not allowed to leave the house, which is why we have not been able to take on outside work. I was forced to apply for a teaching position; I took the exam and passed. However, someone else with connections was appointed in my place. Currently, I bake bolani in a small home bakery.” — 23, Badakhshan

Overall, while women’s labor contributions have intensified, the nature of available work is often harsh, insecure, and insufficient to meet household needs. The increase in responsibilities has also affected women’s well-being, leaving many with little time for rest and adding stress and fatigue to their daily lives. At the same time, their growing contribution to household survival is not always matched by greater recognition or support.

Women’s authority within the household remains uneven and varies widely depending on family circumstances. In some cases, particularly where male members are absent, ill, or unable to work, women take on key decision-making roles and manage both daily and financial matters. A key factor influencing women’s decision-making power is their level of economic participation. Women who contribute to household income—whether through small businesses, agricultural work, or other activities—tend to have greater recognition and a stronger voice in household decisions. Conversely, the loss of income following the ban on poppy cultivation has, in many cases, reduced women’s influence, respect, and social standing both within the family and the broader community.

“I am the decision maker as my husband is sick and my children are young, so they rely on me for making decisions.” — 45, Nangarhar

However, in many households, decision-making continues to be male-dominated. Women may be consulted, but their opinions are not always valued or acted upon, and in some cases, they are excluded entirely. Women’s influence is often closely linked to their

economic contribution—those who are able to earn income tend to have a stronger voice, while those who cannot face reduced recognition and respect.

“In my household, I have no role in decision-making, and men do not consult women.” — 45, Helmand

“In my household, I have no role in decision-making, and men do not consult women. As long as my husband does not take another wife, I consider myself fortunate. We are not even permitted to leave the house. Within the family, my mother-in-law controls all matters, including determining how much cooking oil I am allowed to use or how much beans I cook.” — 45, Helmand

Women’s role in household decision-making is shaped by multiple, overlapping factors. While some gain greater recognition and influence when they contribute to household income or come from educated households, these factors alone do not guarantee autonomy. Education levels within the family, economic contribution, household structure, and prevailing social norms all interact to shape women’s agency. As reflected in participants’ experiences, many women continue to have little or no say in key decisions, despite carrying a growing share of economic and caregiving responsibilities. This highlights that increased workload does not automatically translate into empowerment. Rather, women’s decision-making power is influenced by a complex set of social, economic, and cultural dynamics, and no single factor can fully explain or determine their level of autonomy within the household.

Structural Barriers and Programmatic Gap Affecting Women’s Livelihoods

Participants consistently highlighted that decision-making power over issues affecting women—including employment, rights, and economic opportunities—largely lies outside the community, leaving local actors with limited influence. While community elders can facilitate connections with NGOs and help resolve disputes, their role in aid distribution is often undermined by favoritism, bias, and weak accountability mechanisms. Assistance is frequently perceived as unevenly distributed, with priority given to relatives or personal networks rather than the most vulnerable households, reinforcing perceptions of corruption and exclusion.

At the same time, participants noted that local leaders could play a more constructive role if they act transparently and responsibly. Elders and other influential figures have the potential to support women’s access to livelihoods, advocate for community needs, and facilitate engagement with external actors. However, their ability and willingness to do so remain inconsistent. In many cases, leaders—including mullahs and other community-based authority figures—are reluctant to openly advocate for women’s issues due to fear of retaliation or social pressure.

“What needs to be done is for our daughters to continue their education and for women to have the opportunity to earn an income.” 50 years old, Badakhshan

“Girls’ schools should be reopened so that my daughters can gain an education, build their own livelihoods, and avoid the kind of vulnerability I have experienced.” — 35, Nangarhar

Social norms further constrain women’s participation in community-level decision-making. Direct interaction between women and local leaders is often discouraged, requiring women to communicate their needs through male family members. This indirect representation limits the accuracy and visibility of women’s concerns and contributes to their continued exclusion from decision-making processes. These structural barriers persist even as women’s economic responsibilities increase.

“When women work, it is often considered a matter of honor and subject to criticism, but they are ok with women begging on the streets...” — 45, Nangarhar

Beyond the community level, respondents identified national actors—such as traders, investors, and business owners—as having greater potential to generate economic opportunities.

“National traders, investors, and business owners can bring change by investing in local economies and creating livelihood opportunities for women and men.” — 28, Nangarhar

However, access to such opportunities remains highly constrained, particularly for women. Limited mobility, lack of capital, and weak market linkages prevent most households from benefiting. In many cases, available opportunities are captured by better-connected individuals or mediated through local power structures.

Participants emphasized that women face multiple, overlapping barriers to earning an income. Restrictions on mobility and employment continue to limit their participation in public economic activities, even amid severe economic hardship. This is particularly striking given that more harmful coping strategies—such as begging—are increasingly tolerated, reflecting a contradiction between social acceptance and restrictions on dignified work.

Participant described the limited existing programs as small in scale, short-term, and insufficient to meet widespread needs. The closure of schools and vocational training centers has further reduced access to education and skills development for women and girls.

“What needs to be done is for our daughters to continue their education and for women to have the opportunity to earn an income.” — 50, Badakhshan

“Girls’ schools should be reopened so that my daughters can gain an education, build their own livelihoods, and avoid the kind of vulnerability I have experienced.” — 35, Nangarhar

In addition to training, which alone is not enough, participants referred to the importance of granting access to tools, materials, capital, and markets, in order to translate skills into sustainable income.

"The biggest gaps are unfair targeting of beneficiaries, lack of follow-up, and no market access—training alone is not enough. Women need tools, materials, and support to sell their products, along with long-term programs so they can become economically independent." — 44, Badakhshan

There is strong demand for locally accessible and culturally acceptable livelihood opportunities, particularly those that allow women to work close to home.

"Opportunities should be created for women so they can earn without doing heavy labor—before, tailoring centers in our village trained hundreds of women, but now they are closed. If such centers were reopened locally, women could attend freely, gain skills, and improve their livelihoods." — 28, Nangarhar

Participants identified livestock ownership, small business development, and vocational skills training as practical and sustainable pathways for income generation. However, these must be supported by stronger market linkages, access to finance, and investment in local value chains, including processing and trade infrastructure. They called for needs-based targeting, direct verification of beneficiaries, and improved monitoring to ensure that assistance reaches the most vulnerable households rather than being diverted through local power structures.

Overall, they stressed that meaningful and lasting solutions require a shift from short-term, fragmented assistance toward integrated, long-term strategies that promote self-sufficiency, equitable access to opportunities, and sustainable livelihoods. Without such approaches, women and their households are likely to remain trapped in cycles of poverty, exclusion, and limited economic opportunity.

Coping Mechanisms, Family Stress, and Trends in Child Labor and Early Marriage

Households affected by the poppy cultivation ban are increasingly relying on a range of coping mechanisms centered on immediate survival, with very limited capacity for long-term planning. While some families attempt to seek support through community elders or external actors, these efforts are often unsuccessful due to weak support systems, unequal aid distribution, and limited influence within local structures. As a result, many households remain trapped in persistent economic hardship, relying on strategies that undermine long-term wellbeing.

Coping strategies broadly fall into two categories—negative and positive—but both reflect the severity of the crisis and the lack of viable alternatives. Negative coping mechanisms are widespread and carry serious human rights implications and long-term consequences. Early and forced marriage of girls has become increasingly common as families attempt to reduce financial burdens or secure resources. In some cases, marriages are used to access cash, repay debts, or enable other family members to marry through exchange arrangements.

"I had no choice but to marry off my young daughter in exchange for money so we could start a small bakery and survive." — 50, Badakhshan

"Because of economic hardship, we arranged an exchange marriage (badal)—I gave my 17-year-old daughter in marriage so my son could marry, as it reduced costs for both families." — 48, Nangarhar

"Because of economic hardship, I married off one daughter in 9th grade and another at just 12 years old." — 50, Badakhshan

Participants consistently reported that early and underage marriage is becoming normalized across many communities, often involving young girls being married to older men or entering households as second or third wives.

"Early marriage has become very common, as families see no other option for their daughters without education or jobs..." — 45, Nangarhar

Alongside early marriage, child labor is increasing significantly as households struggle to meet basic needs. Many families withdraw children—especially boys—from school or madrasa to engage in income-generating activities, including agricultural labor, street work, or small-scale trading. Others are involved in physically demanding and hazardous work, such as collecting firewood or working in brick kilns.

"We have had to put pressure on our children to earn money just to survive—what other choice do we have?" — 55, Kunar

"We avoid spending money on medical treatment unless it is very serious. We have withdrawn our sons and brothers from school..." — 28, Helmand

"Our children now go to the mountains to collect grass and firewood to help us survive, instead of going to school." — 35, Kunar

These coping strategies reflect a shift away from education toward immediate income generation, with serious implications for children's long-term prospects and the intergenerational cycle of poverty.

Households are also resorting to additional distress strategies, including selling assets such as livestock, taking on debt, reducing food consumption, and delaying or avoiding medical care. In some cases, families attempt migration as a livelihood strategy, sending male members abroad through irregular and often dangerous routes. However, this option remains inaccessible to many due to high costs and significant risks, including injury, death, or failed migration attempts.

In the most extreme cases, participants reported instances of families attempting to sell children or newborns due to their inability to meet basic needs. These accounts underscore the depth of economic desperation and the absence of adequate support systems for the most vulnerable households.

At the same time, households are attempting to adopt more positive coping strategies where possible, although these typically generate low and unstable income. These include home-based and small-scale livelihood activities such as tailoring, handicrafts, food production, and kitchen gardening, as well as working on other people's farms or engaging in casual labor.

“We are now cultivating wheat and, out of necessity, working on other people’s farms. In the past, we employed laborers; now, we are the ones seeking work.” — 47, Helmand

While these strategies provide some level of support, their returns are generally insufficient to meet overall household needs, particularly in the absence of access to markets, capital, and stable employment opportunities.

Beyond economic hardship, participants highlighted significant increases in family stress and social tensions. Rising unemployment, particularly among men holding advanced educational degrees, has altered household dynamics, often leading to frustration, conflict, and increased domestic violence.

“Domestic violence has increased a lot—poverty has created tension between couples and within families...” — 38, Helmand

“Unemployment among men has led to increased time spent at home, often resulting in heightened tensions... which can escalate into domestic violence, including physical abuse of women and children.” — 47, Helmand

In some cases, economic pressure has led to family breakdown, separation, or divorce. Participants also reported instances of severe psychological distress, including cases where individuals took their own lives due to their inability to provide for their families. These patterns highlight the broader social and emotional toll of economic collapse, extending beyond material deprivation to affect family cohesion and well-being.

Overall, the combination of harmful coping strategies—such as early marriage, child labor, and asset depletion—alongside low-return livelihood activities underscore the severity of the crisis and the absence of viable, sustainable alternatives. Households are compelled to prioritize immediate survival at the expense of education, protection, and long-term stability, reinforcing cycles of poverty across generations. At the same time, prolonged economic strain has triggered profound psychosocial consequences. Women, in particular, report heightened stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion as they navigate restricted livelihood opportunities and increasing household pressures. Feelings of hopelessness, social isolation, and constant concern for their children’s future are widespread, contributing to rising household tensions, increased domestic violence, and, in some cases, family breakdown.

In extreme instances, communities have reported severe mental distress, including suicide and, alarmingly, attempts to sell children. Together, these trends reflect the deeply interconnected economic, social, and psychological impacts of the crisis, highlighting the urgent need for sustainable livelihoods, social protection, and inclusive support systems to prevent further deterioration.

Aid Effectiveness, Gaps, and Perception of International Support for Livelihood Development

Participants highlighted significant gaps in the effectiveness, equity, and delivery of aid and livelihood support programs. A central concern was the lack of transparency, accountability, and robust monitoring mechanisms in project implementation. Many respondents reported that aid distribution systems—often mediated through community elders or local intermediaries—are vulnerable to favoritism, corruption, and diversion of resources. As a result, assistance frequently fails to reach the most vulnerable households, particularly poor women.

"There must be stronger monitoring of projects, as corruption is widespread—for example, in our district an NGO training program required trainees receiving 12,000 AFN to return half to the project officer..." — 50, Nangarhar

"The UN and international organizations should assess needs directly, not rely on community leaders, because corruption is common—sometimes most of the aid is taken along the way..." — 39, Kunar

In response, participants strongly advocated for more transparent and equitable approaches to aid delivery. They emphasized the importance of direct, needs-based assessments, independent verification of beneficiaries, and stronger oversight systems to ensure that support reaches those most in need. Reducing reliance on local power structures was seen as essential to addressing bias and improving fairness in distribution.

"Support should be based on direct needs assessments rather than favoritism through community elders..." — 27, Nangarhar

Despite some positive experiences with specific programs, respondents widely perceived the overall scale and impact of international support to be insufficient relative to the magnitude of the crisis. Assistance was often described as limited, short-term, and unable to address the structural drivers of economic vulnerability.

"Some support has helped—like the tailoring training I received—but overall it is too limited for the scale of the problem..." — 44, Badakhshan

Participants stressed that expanding the reach and coverage of programs is critical, as many households—especially those most affected by the poppy cultivation ban—receive little or no support.

A key gap identified was the limited availability of sustainable livelihood opportunities. Respondents emphasized that training alone is insufficient without complementary support such as access to capital, tools, raw materials, and markets. There was strong demand for scaling up small business support and creating pathways for income generation that are both locally viable and culturally acceptable.

"Women who once relied on poppy need viable alternatives—such as fruit orchards with improved saplings, beekeeping for honey production, and livestock farming..." — 30, Badakhshan

Participants highlighted a range of practical livelihood interventions, including livestock provision, small business support, and agricultural inputs such as seeds, improved saplings, and irrigation infrastructure. Direct asset transfers—such as livestock, small shops, or transport tools—were viewed as particularly effective in enabling households to generate income quickly and sustainably.

“Assistance should be provided to those who are truly in need... People should be given livestock so they can sell yogurt and milk.” — 35, Helmand

There was also strong demand for locally accessible women’s economic empowerment centers that could provide vocational training, basic literacy, and market-relevant skills. Suggested areas included tailoring, embroidery, handicrafts, and food processing—activities that can be carried out from home and align with local norms and constraints. However, participants emphasized that such initiatives must be linked to markets and supported by ongoing inputs to ensure sustainability.

In addition to economic support, participants pointed to significant gaps in essential services, particularly healthcare and education. The closure of schools and limited access to health services were identified as critical challenges that further undermine household resilience and long-term development outcomes.

Participants also expressed concern that many development projects are announced but not fully implemented, or lack continuity over time. This has contributed to low levels of trust and skepticism toward aid providers. Ensuring consistency, follow-through, and long-term engagement was therefore seen as essential for building credibility and achieving meaningful impact.

Beyond program design and delivery, participants highlighted a broader disconnect between international actors and the realities faced by communities—particularly women. Many felt that their voices are not adequately represented in decision-making processes, and that there are limited channels for them to communicate their needs, priorities, and feedback. This lack of inclusion contributes to programs that are not fully aligned with local contexts and lived experiences.

At the same time, participants emphasized the need for the international community to take a more active role in advocating for women’s rights, particularly access to education and employment opportunities.

Participants called for a shift toward more inclusive, transparent, and accountable approaches to aid delivery—ones that prioritize equity, strengthen local livelihoods, and address both immediate needs and long-term recovery. This includes scaling up support, improving targeting and monitoring, investing in sustainable economic opportunities, and ensuring that women’s voices are meaningfully included in program design and implementation. Without these changes, aid efforts are unlikely to achieve lasting impact or effectively address the deepening economic and social challenges faced by affected communities.

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the profound and multi-dimensional impacts of the poppy cultivation ban on rural households, revealing a complex interplay between economic collapse, social disruption, and deepening gender inequalities. Prior to the ban, poppy cultivation functioned as a central pillar of household economies, supporting not only income generation but also food security, social obligations, and informal safety nets. It operated as a cooperative, household-based system in which women played essential—yet often unrecognized—roles across production, processing, and, in some cases, market engagement.

The abrupt loss of this income source has triggered a severe economic shock, pushing many households into precarious and unsustainable livelihood conditions. While families have attempted to transition to alternative income-generating activities, these options remain largely insufficient, characterized by low and unstable returns, limited access to inputs, and weak market demand. As a result, unemployment has increased, household debt has deepened, and reliance on humanitarian assistance has grown, without adequately meeting basic needs. The inability of alternative livelihoods to replace poppy income underscores the structural nature of the crisis and the absence of viable economic substitutes.

The consequences of this economic decline extend far beyond income loss, shaping household dynamics and social outcomes in deeply concerning ways. Families are increasingly relying on harmful coping mechanisms, including child and forced marriage, child labor, and the withdrawal of children from education. At the same time, households are reducing essential expenditures such as food and healthcare, selling productive assets, and, in extreme cases, resorting to distress measures such as attempting to sell children. These patterns reflect not only immediate survival pressures but also long-term risks, including intergenerational poverty, reduced human capital, and weakened social cohesion.

Women have been disproportionately affected by these changes. While they have taken on expanded roles in both income generation and caregiving, this increased burden has not translated into greater empowerment or decision-making authority. Instead, women continue to face significant structural barriers, including restrictions on mobility, limited access to education and employment, and exclusion from community and institutional decision-making processes. Their economic contributions remain undervalued, and their ability to access and control resources is constrained by both social norms and institutional limitations. This disconnect between responsibility and authority highlights a persistent gender inequality that is further exacerbated in times of crisis.

At the same time, structural and programmatic gaps continue to limit the effectiveness of responses to this crisis. Existing support systems are widely perceived as insufficient, short-term, and inequitably distributed. Issues such as corruption, favoritism, and reliance on local intermediaries undermine trust and prevent assistance from reaching the most vulnerable households. Moreover, livelihood programs often fail to provide the

comprehensive support needed to translate skills into sustainable income, lacking critical components such as access to capital, tools, and markets.

Participants' perspectives point to the need for a fundamental shift in both policy and programming approaches. Short-term, fragmented interventions are inadequate in addressing the scale and complexity of the crisis. Instead, there is a clear demand for integrated, long-term strategies that combine livelihood development with broader investments in education, healthcare, and local economic systems. Expanding access to sustainable income opportunities—such as livestock, small businesses, and market-oriented agricultural activities—must be accompanied by strengthened market linkages, infrastructure development, and financial support mechanisms.

Equally important is the need to improve the governance and delivery of aid. Transparent, accountable, and needs-based targeting systems are essential to ensure that assistance reaches those most in need, particularly marginalized women. Reducing reliance on local power structures and incorporating independent monitoring mechanisms can help address issues of bias and misallocation. At the same time, meaningful inclusion of women's voices in program design and decision-making processes is critical to ensuring that interventions are responsive to local realities and priorities.

Finally, the findings underscore the importance of addressing the broader policy environment shaping livelihoods in Afghanistan. While some respondents suggested exploring regulated poppy cultivation for medical purposes as a potential alternative, there is broader recognition that any sustainable solution must balance economic realities with social and political considerations. Without viable economic alternatives and inclusive policies that support both women and men, the current trajectory is likely to perpetuate cycles of poverty, vulnerability, and exclusion.

In conclusion, the impacts of the poppy cultivation ban extend well beyond the loss of a single livelihood, reflecting deeper structural challenges in rural economies and social systems. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic and sustained response that prioritizes economic inclusion, gender equity, and long-term resilience. Without such efforts, households—particularly women and children—will continue to bear the disproportionate burden of a crisis that threatens both present survival and future opportunities.

Recommendations

The findings of this study underscore the urgent need for coordinated multi-level interventions that address both the immediate humanitarian needs and the longer-term structural drivers of poverty, vulnerability, and gender inequality. Effective responses must go beyond short-term assistance to support sustainable livelihoods, strengthen local systems, and ensure inclusive and equitable access to opportunities—particularly for women.

For NGOs, the United Nations, and Donor Countries

Addressing the socioeconomic impacts of the poppy ban requires a shift from short-term, fragmented assistance toward more inclusive, accountable, and sustainable approaches that reflect the lived realities of affected communities. Current gaps in targeting, transparency, and gender responsiveness have limited the effectiveness of aid and, in some cases, deepened existing vulnerabilities—particularly for women, who face compounded barriers to participation and access. The following recommendations outline a set of practical, context-sensitive actions to strengthen needs-based programming, improve accountability, expand livelihood opportunities, and support market-oriented economic integration.

A. Strengthen Needs-Based and Inclusive Programming

- Conduct regular, localized needs assessments at the district and village levels to ensure that interventions are grounded in current realities.
- Ensure the meaningful inclusion of women in these assessments through safe and culturally appropriate channels to enable programs to reflect women's priorities, constraints, and lived experiences.
- Establish feedback mechanisms that allow communities—especially women—to evaluate and shape ongoing programs.

B. Improve Targeting, Transparency, and Accountability

- Reduce reliance on local intermediaries where possible and introduce direct beneficiary verification systems to minimize favoritism and diversion of aid.
- Strengthen monitoring and evaluation frameworks, including independent oversight and community-based accountability mechanisms.
- Ensure transparent selection criteria and clearly communicate program eligibility to communities to build trust and reduce perceptions of bias.

C. Expand Sustainable Livelihood Support

- Scale up livelihood programs that provide seed funding, start-up capital, and direct asset transfers such as livestock, agricultural tools and inputs and equipment essential for home-based income generation activities, to households affected by the poppy ban.
- Prioritize interventions that offer quick income generation while also building long-term resilience.
- Support both women and men within households to reduce economic pressure and promote shared resilience.

D. Invest in Market-Oriented Skills and Economic Integration

- Provide vocational training and literacy programs aligned with local market demand, including tailoring, food processing, handicrafts, agriculture, and service-based skills.
- Complement training with access to agricultural inputs, tools, and market linkages to ensure skills can translate into income.
- Support the development of local value chains, including small-scale processing, storage, and transportation systems, to improve profitability and sustainability.
- Engage in sustained, context-sensitive advocacy with current authorities to promote women's access to education, livelihoods, and public participation.
- Ensure that women's voices are represented in program design, policy dialogue, and international decision-making processes.

For Private Sector

Engaging the private sector is critical to expanding sustainable livelihood opportunities and revitalizing local economies in the wake of the poppy ban. With the right incentives and partnerships, private actors can play a transformative role in generating income, strengthening value chains, and fostering inclusive economic growth. However, this requires deliberate efforts to ensure that investments are accessible, context-sensitive, and responsive to the constraints faced by women. The following recommendations outline how the private sector can support women's economic participation, enhance financial inclusion, and contribute to resilient, market-driven development.

- Strengthen women's livelihoods by supporting the establishment of small businesses, agricultural activities, and local industries, coupled with targeted skills development in quality production, marketing, and job creation.
- Expand women's financial inclusion by facilitating access to microfinance and cooperative models that enable collective investment and risk-sharing.
- Invest in the development of local value chains—such as small-scale processing, storage, and transportation systems—to enhance productivity, profitability, and long-term sustainability.
- Create dignified and locally acceptable employment opportunities for women in sectors such as food processing, textiles, dairy production, and garment manufacturing, aligned with market demand and cultural context.

For Taliban De Facto Authorities in Afghanistan

The role of current authorities is central to shaping an enabling environment in which households can recover from the economic shock of the poppy ban without resorting to harmful coping strategies. Policy decisions and regulatory frameworks directly influence the feasibility of livelihood programs, the inclusivity of economic participation, and the effectiveness of external assistance. The following recommendations highlight practical steps to facilitate women's access to livelihoods, mitigate unintended social consequences, and strengthen transparent, accountable systems that support both economic stability and community trust.

A. Enable Women's Access to Livelihood Opportunities

- Ensure that policies and regulatory frameworks do not restrict the implementation of women-centered livelihood programs, including vocational training and home-based enterprises.
- Facilitate safe and acceptable pathways for women to participate in economic activities while respecting local contexts.

B. Mitigate Policy Impacts and Prevent Harmful Coping Mechanisms

- Develop policies that address the root causes of child labor, early marriage, and other harmful coping strategies, focusing on poverty reduction and economic support rather than punitive measures.
- Conduct assessments of existing policies—particularly those related to the poppy ban and economic restrictions—to understand their social and economic consequences.
- Support transparent and accountable systems that improve trust and maximize the impact of external support.

Cross-Cutting Priorities

Across all interventions, there is a strong need to move away from short-term and fragmented support toward long-term, well-coordinated strategies that help people become self-reliant, build resilience, and support inclusive economic recovery. This means addressing deep-rooted inequalities, strengthening local economies, and ensuring that women—who play a key role in household survival—are not only supported but also included in decision-making and solutions.

Without sustained and coordinated efforts, many households will continue to face ongoing poverty, and harmful coping strategies will persist, weakening long-term stability and development.

Annexes

About Strategizing a Seat at the Table Initiative (SSTI)

The SSTI seeks to address the notable absence of women in the peace processes of Afghanistan by developing a cohesive strategy and action plan for their inclusion both locally and internationally. Initiated in September 2023, the SSTI has brought together Afghan women politicians, academics and researchers, diplomats, civil servants, members of civil society groups, and experts in the private sector, human rights, economic development, and education. The SSTI Initiative links to the United Women for Peace Initiative, a network of women peacebuilders that Women for Peace and Participation has built to highlight the importance of women in peace negotiations.

Through this cross-sector collaboration, the SSTI has become a strategic space to address the meaningful and full participation of Afghan women in all policy dialogues, processes, and decisions relating to security, peace, economic, humanitarian, and socio-cultural issues. This work bridges the gap between advocacy and action to work towards achieving inclusive and long-lasting peace in Afghanistan around a shared vision for the future of the country.

Our ecosystem-based strategy leverages the complementarity of Afghan women's perspectives, capabilities, and approaches of Afghan women within our broader networks, both inside and outside of Afghanistan. This strategic alignment enables a cohesive, multidimensional approach to advocacy and capacity building. Rather than creating an additional network, our objective is to fortify existing networks of Afghan women, fostering strategic collaboration that is vital to sustaining their impact during this critical period for Afghanistan.

By building on established networks, we aim to cultivate a unified front that maximizes the collective impact of Afghan women's contributions to peace, resilience, and national development. SSTI is initiated and hosted by a diaspora organisation, Women for Peace and Participation (WPP), working on inclusive approaches to Peace and Security in Afghanistan and internationally.

During its recent convening in Rome in July 2025, SSTI's core members collectively identified a set of strategic priorities. At the top of this list was the need to provide targeted support to Afghan women participating in UN-led technical working groups. A key recommendation emerging from that meeting was to identify and convene groups of Afghan subject-matter experts—particularly women—who can contribute specialized knowledge and analysis to the two thematic working groups established under the UN-led Doha Process in 2024.

The objective of this approach is to ensure that Afghan women participating in these working groups are equipped to provide informed, rigorous, and evidence-based analysis that reflects lived realities inside Afghanistan, while also accounting for global trends, policy frameworks, and the constraints shaping international engagement with the country. By strengthening technical capacity and collective expertise, SSTI seeks to enhance the quality, credibility, and impact of Afghan women's participation in international policy discussions and decision-making concerning Afghanistan.

To advance this objective, SSTI is currently identifying a broader network of Afghan women subject-matter experts in private sector development, counter-narcotics, and livelihoods. In parallel, SSTI has tasked two of its members with conducting focused studies on private sector development, counter-narcotics, and livelihood. These research efforts are designed to support the formation of subject-matter expert networks to ensure that Afghan women engaged in the UN-led working groups have access to timely, high-quality analysis. Findings will be developed in close collaboration with the network of experts and shared with women members of the working groups, as well as with other relevant stakeholders, to support coherent and strategic engagement.

Participation in an advisory role as members of the subject-matter network is voluntary and involves providing insights and feedback on study questionnaires and draft reports. Where appropriate, network members may also meet with members of the UN-led working groups to share knowledge and technical expertise.

Research Collaboration

SSTI is an initiative of Women, Peace and Participation developed through consultations with diverse Afghan women leaders from inside and outside Afghanistan, including civil society activists, academics, entrepreneurs, diplomats, and former public officials.

WIIS Italy has supported the implementation of the activities within the framework of its project "Participation and Resilience: Women in Peace and Security Processes in Ukraine and Afghanistan," co-funded by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. First launched in 2021, the initiative focuses on the contribution of Afghan women to an inclusive and peaceful future for their country. WIIS Italy is a strategic collaborator of WPP supporting the SSTI initiative.'

Consultation Questionnaire

Section A: Household Background and Livelihoods

- Was your household the landowner or working as a tenant/sharecropper or hired laborer on poppy fields?
- What was your role (or your household's role) in poppy cultivation or processing activities?
- What was your household's approximate income before the poppy cultivation ban?
- What is your household's approximate income after the ban?

Section B: Alternative Livelihoods and Community Dynamics

- In your view, what types of work or income-generating activities could serve as viable alternatives for affected families—particularly for women?
- Who in your community has the influence to support positive change in women's lives? (e.g., community elders, religious leaders, women leaders, traders, local authorities)
- What key barriers or restrictions limit women's ability to work and earn an income?

Section D: Impacts of the Poppy Ban

- What changes has the poppy cultivation ban brought to your household's daily life, income, and food security?
- How have these changes affected your roles and responsibilities as a woman within the household? What impacts have you observed on other women in your community?

Section E: Coping Strategies and Household Decision-Making

- How has your household coped with the reduction or loss of income following the ban?
- What role do you play in household decision-making related to these coping strategies? Is your opinion considered?

Section F: Protection Risks and Social Consequences

- Since the poppy ban, have you observed an increase in issues such as early marriage, child labor, or forced migration in your community? Please explain.
- Have women been pushed into more physically demanding, informal, or risky forms of work? If yes, please describe.

Section G: External Support and Policy Response

- How do you assess the role of the United Nations and the broader international community in addressing both the short- and long-term impacts of the poppy ban on women, families, and communities?

What gaps remain, and what additional actions are needed?

- From your perspective, what would meaningful and sustainable participation of Afghan women in civil society and international efforts to address narcotics and poppy cultivation look like in practice?
- How can the civil society and international community design and implement livelihood programs to ensure that women in your community can effectively benefit?

