

# AFGHANISTAN

## Protection Analysis Update | February 2026

Update on protection risks following the eastern and northern earthquakes

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2025, two 6+ magnitude earthquakes hit eastern and northern Afghanistan, intensifying protection risks and resulting needs in communities already experiencing severe, interconnected crises. Over six months after the earthquake in eastern Afghanistan, and three months after the earthquake in northern Afghanistan, affected communities continue to live in tents, non-enclosed structures, or damaged homes with insufficient security and protection from winter weather. The earthquakes' destruction of farmland and assets has eroded livelihoods for communities already struggling to cope with prolonged drought, recurrent floods, an influx of returnees from Pakistan and Iran, escalating hostilities between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the Afghanistan-Pakistan border closure. Access to services and humanitarian assistance, already minimal in the remote affected areas, has further diminished because of earthquake-induced displacement and damage to infrastructure, particularly for women and girls who are already subject to discriminatory restrictions on their movement and participation in public life. These impacts have significantly increased the affected population's exposure to protection risks and reliance on potentially harmful coping strategies, posing significant concerns for their capacity to recover.

The protection risks in eastern and northern earthquake-affected areas requiring immediate attention in the period covered by this analysis are:

1. **Gender-based violence**
2. **Discrimination and stigmatization – impediments to access opportunities, services and/or humanitarian access**
3. **Psychological/emotional abuse or inflicted distress**
4. **Child labour in dangerous or hazardous conditions**
5. **Presence of mines and other explosive ordnance**

### URGENT ACTIONS NEEDED

Amidst Afghanistan's multifaceted, protracted crisis, compounded by the earthquakes, urgent actions are needed to prevent and mitigate harmful coping strategies and exacerbated protection risks. It is of utmost importance to:

- Remove discriminatory barriers restricting women's and girls' access to services and humanitarian assistance, enabling deployment of women humanitarian responders and healthcare workers, and restoring equitable access to assistance, education and psychosocial support.
- Sustain and expand mine action as a critical enabler of safe access, livelihoods and service delivery, preventing further casualties and reducing contamination risks in affected communities.
- Scale up integrated protection services (GBV, MHPSS, child protection, cash, education) through mobile modalities, backed by predictable, flexible, multi-year support to prevent irreversible harm and service collapse.

## CONTEXT

EASTERN EARTHQUAKE CASUALTIES	EASTERN EARTHQUAKE DAMAGED / DESTROYED HOMES	NORTHERN EARTHQUAKE CASUALTIES	NORTHERN EARTHQUAKE DAMAGED / DESTROYED HOMES
5,620+	8,200+	910+	4,000+

On the evening of 31 August 2025, a magnitude-6 earthquake struck eastern Afghanistan, with the worst impacts felt in Kunar, Laghman, and Nangarhar provinces. The earthquake and subsequent magnitude-4.0–5.6 aftershocks killed over 1,992 people (1,022 of whom were women) and injured 3,631 people (1,830 of whom were women).<sup>i</sup> On 3 November 2025, a second major earthquake (6.3 magnitude) hit Afghanistan in the north, near the border of Balkh and Samangan provinces. At least 1.53 million people were exposed to intense shaking, with at least 24 people killed and between 890-1,172 estimated injured.<sup>ii</sup>

The August earthquake damaged and destroyed over 8,200 homes across Kunar, Nangarhar, and Laghman provinces, with Kunar’s Chapa Dara, Chawkay, Dara-e-Pech, Nurgal, and Watapur districts worst affected.<sup>iii</sup> In Balkh and Samangan, more than 1,000 homes were destroyed and 3,000 damaged.<sup>iv</sup> The earthquakes also damaged and destroyed health facilities, WASH infrastructure, farmland, productive assets, and livelihoods, disrupting agricultural cycles.<sup>v</sup>

By February 2026, tens of thousands of people remained in tents, including around 25,000 children,<sup>vi</sup> or in damaged homes with minimal NFIs, access to infrastructure and services, and protection from winter weather, forcing many to adopt unsafe heating and cooking practices that increase fire risks, threatening their safety. This includes more than 6,000 households in temporary displacement sites in Kunar and Nangarhar provinces,<sup>vii</sup> with others remaining in remote, affected villages with minimal access to services and assistance.

The earthquakes have aggravated protection risks and humanitarian needs in communities already experiencing severe, interconnected crises, driven by frequent climate shocks and natural hazards, an influx of returnees from Pakistan and Iran, economic stress, and increasing restrictions imposed by the Taliban de facto authorities (DFA) throughout 2024-2025, especially on women and girls. Eastern provinces in particular have also been affected by escalating hostilities between Afghanistan and Pakistan, including airstrikes and armed clashes, which have heightened protection risks, such as attacks on civilians, and driven localised displacement. In response to intensifying clashes between 26 February–5 March 2026, around 25,480 earthquake IDPs in Nurgal, Chawkay and Khas Kunar districts, Kunar province, were evacuated or received evacuation orders issued by the DFA. 14,250 other earthquake IDPs face the risk of secondary displacement, and many have nowhere safe to relocate.<sup>viii</sup>

Restrictions on women and girls imposed by the Taliban de facto authorities (DFA), including the ban on women working with NGOs and gendered movement restrictions (such as the Mahram requirement), are having a significant, detrimental impact on women’s and girl’s wellbeing in earthquake-affected communities. These restrictions have led to limited availability of women humanitarian staff, the confinement of women and girls to unsafe, overcrowded shelters that lack sufficient privacy, and significant barriers to women’s and girls’ access to services and assistance.<sup>ix</sup> The impact of gendered movement restrictions, including the Mahram requirement, is discussed throughout the risks covered by this PAU.

## OTHER NATURAL HAZARDS AND CLIMATE SHOCKS

2025 saw Afghanistan's fifth consecutive year of meteorological and hydrological drought, which was particularly severe in northern provinces, including earthquake-affected Balkh and Samangan.<sup>x</sup> The drought has fueled food insecurity, loss of livelihoods, and constrained access to water, contributing to projected IPC Phase 4 (Emergency) conditions in Samangan until March 2026.<sup>xi</sup> Heavy rainfall, flooding, snowfall, and associated landslides also pose a safety risk to communities in earthquake-affected provinces, compounding the eastern earthquake's impact.<sup>xii</sup> The humanitarian impact of these climate hazards has forced communities to adopt harmful coping mechanisms, including withdrawing children from school, spending savings, and reducing healthcare spending.<sup>xiii</sup> This decreases communities' capacities to cope with shocks such as the 2025 earthquakes. Frequent climate hazards are also increasing protection risks and driving internal displacement in provinces including Balkh, Kunar, Nangarhar, and Samangan.<sup>xiv</sup> In Balkh province, for instance, ACAPS found that crime, insecurity, and community tensions are increasing in some climate-affected communities, while climate-induced displacement exposes people to protection risks including family violence and separation, lost documentation, and forced eviction.<sup>xv</sup>

## CROSS-BORDER RETURNS FROM PAKISTAN AND IRAN

In 2025, over 2.61 million Afghans returned to Afghanistan from Iran and Pakistan in response to return orders and deportation policies, deteriorating livelihood and security conditions, and protection risks. Earthquake-affected Balkh and Nangarhar were among the most common destination provinces in 2025.<sup>xvi</sup> There were an estimated 9,129 IDPs, 12,032 IDP returnees, and over 16,404 returnees from abroad in earthquake-affected districts of Samangan and Balkh provinces, while earthquake-affected parts of eastern provinces had received 370,000 returnees since January 2025.<sup>xvii</sup> The existing vulnerabilities of these returnees to unmet needs and protection risks has likely amplified the earthquakes' impact on returnees. IOM data indicates that returnees from abroad are particularly likely to live in transitional mud or earthen housing,<sup>xviii</sup> which is highly vulnerable to earthquake damage. They also may not have secure tenure of properties or are hosted for free, making it difficult to reclaim or rebuild and increasing their risk of forced eviction. High levels of unemployment among returnees and reliance on potentially harmful coping mechanisms, including debt and asset sales, undermine their ability to rebuild homes and lives following shocks such as the earthquakes. In 2025, UNHCR's phone-based monitoring interviews with 1,658 returnee households indicate that debt is widespread in earthquake-affected Nangarhar, where 96% of returnees reported financial distress.<sup>xix</sup> Further, returnees from Iran and Pakistan are more likely to lack access to tazkira and other civil documentation and have limited social capital and community connections, constraining their access to services, assistance, and community support following shocks.<sup>xx</sup>

## PROTECTION RISKS

### RISK 1 Gender-based violence

In earthquake-affected areas, women's and girls' exposure to various forms of gender-based violence (GBV) is vastly heightened, threatening their safety and dignity. GBV has already reached catastrophic levels across Afghanistan, with particularly severe GBV needs reported in the northern region, including Balkh and Samangan, in the first half of 2025.<sup>xxi</sup> The earthquake and associated displacement and destruction of shelter, infrastructure, and livelihoods have heightened these already significant GBV threats to women and girls. While all women and girls affected by the earthquake faced increased GBV risks, responders report that risks are particularly severe for women-headed households and women with disabilities.<sup>xxii</sup>

Although stigma, fear, and low GBV awareness and access to services in earthquake-affected communities make it extremely difficult to determine the scale of GBV needs, responders have reported significant threats to women and girls. They emphasise the increased risk of men perpetrating intimate partner violence (IPV), including physical

violence, marital rape and psychological and emotional abuse. In a September 2025 IOM assessment, 23% (32) of 138 female respondents reported violence or abuse within their household following the earthquake, also indicating threats of IPV and family violence.<sup>xxiii</sup> As noted above, this statistic likely reflects significant underreporting. Responders also report women and girls experiencing harassment, including sexual harassment, in communal areas of temporary displacement sites in eastern provinces. Earthquake-affected women and girls living outside these displacement sites, in affected villages where WASH facilities remain unrepaired, face significant threats to their safety, including exposure to explosive ordnance (see Risk 5), when forced to travel into remote mountain areas to access clean water and sanitation.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Earthquake-induced displacement, damage to homes, and affected communities' subsequent reliance on temporary shelters are driving GBV risks. Many earthquake-affected families who are not in temporary displacement sites are still living in partially destroyed homes with other, sometimes unrelated, families. Others are sleeping in their gardens in the open air or in tents that afford women and girls minimal privacy and lack basic safety measures, such as locks and lighting. In Kunar and Nangarhar, several displacement sites remain overcrowded despite recent shelter upgrades, with minimal space between tents and multiple families sharing a tent. Responders have reported families arranging the early marriage of girls to mitigate overcrowding in their shelters or to obtain new tents. Further, there remain damaged latrines and bathing facilities in all earthquake-affected areas, forcing some women and girls to share WASH facilities with other families, use makeshift facilities that lack sufficient privacy, or travel long distances to access water and sanitation. Responders also indicate that several eastern displacement sites still lack lighting in communal areas and in WASH facilities, some of which are located far from shelters, exposing women and girls to the risk of harassment and assault when they move through sites to use WASH facilities. In December 2025 Focus Group Discussions conducted by the Gender in Humanitarian Action (GiHA) Working Group, women in several earthquake-affected communities in Kunar, Nangarhar, and Samangan provinces reported having to use WASH facilities in the open that felt unsafe, or having no access to WASH facilities at all. This forced some women to practice open defecation and bathe in their tents, compromising their privacy, safety, and dignity.<sup>xxv</sup> Overall, the challenging living conditions in many displacement sites, combined with the loss of homes, livelihoods, assets, and savings, are driving significant stress in earthquake-affected families (see Risk 3), which responders report also contributes to the increased risk of men perpetrating IPV.

These GBV threats have a significant impact on women's and girls' feelings of safety and wellbeing. Women and girls in some earthquake-affected communities are experiencing significant mental health and psychosocial problems (see Risk 3).<sup>xxvi</sup> These are likely exacerbated by the impacts of on-going GBV threats, such as harassment and IPV. Earthquake-affected girls subjected to early, child, and forced marriage face increased risks of IPV, along with the health risks associated with early childbirth.

By December 2025, there had been improvements in safety for women and girls in some displacement sites. For example, the Focus Group Discussions conducted by the GiHA Working Group found that women in Kunar's Zeri Baba displacement site felt safe moving within their communities, including to use health services and WASH facilities, likely because this large camp setting has more available services that are easily accessible to communities.<sup>xxvii</sup> In other earthquake-affected areas with less access to services and assistance, responders report that women and girls are developing varied coping mechanisms in response to GBV risks, such as travelling in groups to access WASH facilities in temporary displacement sites, which (as noted above) may be located far from shelters, or using WASH facilities at night for privacy, although the latter gives rise to additional safety risks. These mitigation measures also serve to further restrict their freedom of movement, which is already limited (see Risk 2).

The GBV response in earthquake-affected areas is constrained by a lack of women staff to provide specialised services, coordination challenges related to site management,<sup>xxviii</sup> and ongoing DFA restrictions on GBV service provision.

**RISK 2****Discrimination and stigmatization – denial of resources, opportunities, services, and/or humanitarian access**

Systemic discrimination against women and girls threatens their access to vital services and humanitarian assistance following the earthquakes. The DFA's ban on women working with NGOs has left gaps in the availability of women humanitarian and healthcare workers in earthquake-affected areas, which limits direct assistance provision to women and girls.<sup>xxxix</sup> Responders indicate that many women responders who travelled from other parts of Afghanistan as part of the emergency response have now returned home. Gendered movement restrictions (e.g. the Mahram requirement) make it harder for women and girls to leave their shelters to access services and assistance, particularly affecting women-headed households and women and girls still living in remote, earthquake-affected villages, several hours away from distribution points.<sup>xxx</sup> Restrictive gender norms and movement restrictions on women and girls also mean that men and boys typically collect most assistance, including cash, and distribute it to family members. Several responders observed that this appears to have reduced some women's control over household assistance, exposing them to the risk of economic abuse, although the GiHA Working Group's Focus Group Discussions in December 2025 also found that cash assistance has increased some women's involvement in household decision-making.<sup>xxxi</sup> A lack of resources in earthquake-affected communities compounds gendered barriers to services and assistance, as many distribution sites are not sufficiently gender segregated and sensitive services such as PSS and healthcare have been delivered in makeshift facilities without sufficient privacy.<sup>xxxii</sup> Responders report that limited private counselling spaces were available in some earthquake displacement sites by February 2026.

Along with women heads of households, responders observe that many women with disabilities are particularly affected by these barriers to accessing services and assistance, as the physical inaccessibility of displacement sites and mountainous villages compounds their isolation and reliance on male relatives.

Women's and girls' exclusion from access to resources, services, and assistance following the earthquakes has potentially devastating consequences for their safety and well-being, as evidenced by reports of women, including pregnant women, dying because they could not access a female healthcare provider.<sup>xxxiii</sup> The lack of women staff also compromises women's privacy and dignity, for example when they are required to remove face coverings in front of male staff and community members to have their identities verified.

The earthquake has provided some women with the opportunity to participate in community discussions on improving the response,<sup>xxxiv</sup> or to volunteer with community-based initiatives. That said, Focus Group Discussions in eastern Afghanistan in December 2025 identified minimal inclusion of women in community safety mechanisms and recovery and reconstruction decision-making.<sup>xxxv</sup> There also remain gaps in inclusion of and consultation with people with disabilities in the response, which means their voices risk being overlooked.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

**RISK 3****Psychological/emotional abuse and inflicted distress**

Trauma and mental distress were the most frequently cited protection risks in the Protection Cluster's post-earthquake RNAs in both the east (mentioned by 32% of respondents) and north (mentioned by 26%).<sup>xxxvii</sup> Focus Group Discussions conducted by the GiHA Working Group with earthquake-affected women in December 2025 indicate that MHPSS needs remain significant following the emergency phase of the response.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Responders observe that communities are grieving multiple losses, including their homes, loved ones, land, businesses, and livestock. Those in displacement sites are distressed by having to rely heavily on humanitarian assistance. Men are experiencing heightened stress at their inability to support their families and – in many cases – loss of livelihoods, while women are experiencing stress from their confinement to damaged or overcrowded shelters with insufficient privacy and supplies, which increases their caring responsibilities. Many affected people,

particularly children, feel significant fear at the prospect of another earthquake. Children are also reporting distress at losing homes, belongings, and in some cases access to education.

Highlighting the profound impact of the distress triggered by the earthquakes on communities' longer-term psychological well-being, adults are reporting feelings of stress, depression, and anxiety, and resultant effects, including social withdrawal and physical ailments, particularly headaches. Responders note that the increased stress experienced by men not only affects their own well-being but also could also aggravate the severity and frequency of them perpetrating IPV and family violence, which can have a significant psychological impact on women and children. Children affected by the earthquakes are exhibiting a range of symptoms of impeded psychological well-being, including lack of concentration, frequent crying, unwillingness to play or socialise, and aggression.<sup>xxxix</sup>

In addition to the psychological impacts of the earthquakes, affected women and girls are at risk of greater isolation, depleting their capacities to handle increased psychosocial stressors. Prior to the earthquakes, many played a significant role in agriculture, including livestock care, and were able to attend madrassas.<sup>xl</sup> Many earthquake-displaced women and girls have now lost access to spaces where they could pursue these activities and socialise safely, reducing their access to potential support networks. That said, some women have been positively impacted by the chance to connect with women from outside their community in displacement sites and, in some cases, contribute to consultations on the response and volunteer for community-based initiatives.<sup>xli</sup> Women in several of Kunar's displacement sites have reported that women's safe spaces established since the earthquake have enabled them to increasingly leave their tents and socialize.<sup>xlii</sup>

Some MHPSS services, including counselling and medication support, have been provided in several earthquake displacement sites in eastern provinces. Minimal or no MHPSS services are available in other sites and earthquake-affected villages, particularly in Nangarhar, Balkh, and Samangan provinces.<sup>xliii</sup> Overall, by February 2026, responders reported significant remaining gaps across affected provinces in the availability of long-term MHPSS services, specialised MHPSS services, including those for children and youth, and female MHPSS providers.

#### **RISK 4** Child labour in often dangerous or hazardous conditions

There have been frequent reports of child labour since the earthquake, affecting both boys and girls. Responders observe that earthquake-displaced boys are collecting and selling rubbish, scrap metal, water and trinkets inside displacement sites or along surrounding roads. Some are operating shops in and around displacement sites, while others are offering services such as shoe polishing and car washing. Boys as young as 11 have left displacement sites to look for daily wage labour in district and province capitals in Balkh, Kabul, Kandahar, Nangarhar, and Samangan. In Balkh and Samangan in particular, boys have been helping to rebuild and repair homes, which often involves tough physical labour. There have also been reports of girls collecting and selling rubbish and trinkets and being sent to undertake domestic work for other households. Children, particularly boys, who have lost access to school are at particularly high risk of child labour.<sup>xliv</sup>

Although child labour was already common in earthquake-affected provinces, particularly Kunar, Laghman, and Samangan,<sup>xlv</sup> earthquake destruction to livelihoods and homes has increased economic hardship for households whose economic resilience was already depleted, increasing the risk of these families forcing their children to work. There is no information on the extent to which earthquake-affected children are being exploited by third parties who benefit from their labour, such as intermediaries.

Engaging in child labour increases children's exposure to exploitation and violence, with severe consequences for their safety and wellbeing. Responders report that children are subject to labour exploitation, harassment, and physical abuse when working in and around displacement sites in Kunar and Nangarhar. Working outdoors in winter weather and conducting heavy work, such as rebuilding homes, also poses significant health risks for

children. Aside from working, responders observe small numbers of earthquake-affected boys and girls begging and stealing food and NFIs to meet their basic needs, exposing them to the risk of arrest, detention, and physical abuse.

In collective displacement sites, where children do not have access to formal education and temporary learning spaces are overstretched, many children have lost the protective element provided by education, increasing their risk of engaging in child labour. By February 2026, construction work had not started on around 650 classrooms completely or partially destroyed by the August earthquake.<sup>xlvi</sup> In affected communities where schools are available and remain functional, working children nonetheless miss full or half days of school, depending on their workload.

There are no community-based child protection networks with the capacity to recognise and safely refer child labour, including the worst forms of child labour, to specialised child protection actors. National social protection systems and child protection institutions remain under-resourced and unable to deliver long-term protective services at scale.

## **RISK 5** Presence of mines and other explosive ordnance

Kunar and Nangarhar were among the provinces with the highest reported casualties from EO in 2024 and 2025.<sup>xlvii</sup> Following the earthquake, Mine Action teams analysed two of the eastern displacement sites, in Khas Kunar and Nurgal districts, and found that these were not contaminated with known EO. However, confirmed hazardous areas and cleared areas were recorded within 5 km of the temporary IDP sites. Reports indicate at least two EO incidents in Nangarhar province since the earthquake, injuring two earthquake IDPs. 20 hazardous areas were identified in earthquake-affected parts of Balkh and Samangan, including 15 areas awaiting clearance, and five areas being cleared. Heavy rainfall and floods may also have moved EO from known contaminated areas since the earthquake. Overall, both earthquakes have increased displacement of people to uncleared areas, threatening the safety of affected communities and increasing their exposure to protection risks related to explosive ordnance (EO) in affected areas.

The presence of mines and other EO in earthquake-affected communities endangers community members who attempt to clear rubble, source the wood, stones, and earth necessary to rebuild their homes, find clean water, and regain access to farmland, with a potentially significant impact on their capacity to recover from the earthquake. Children are at particularly high risk of mine accidents because they play or collect rubbish or scrap metal in contaminated mountainous areas, but are not always educated about the risks. EO also pose a significant risk to women and girls, particularly those that move away from their shelters to access clean water and sanitation and may have not received sufficient mine awareness because of their restricted access to explosive ordnance risk education (EORE) and the mine action sector's reduced capacity to provide EORE due to insufficient funding.

Extremely low levels of EO awareness have been reported in affected communities; in the Protection Cluster's eastern RNA, over 70% of respondents had knowledge of previous mine and EO casualties yet only 33% had knowledge of relevant reporting channels.<sup>xlviii</sup> Between November–December 2025, two EORE teams delivered sessions in Kunar's displacement camps, surrounding communities, and affected districts of Nangarhar. During the same period, EORE sessions were provided in 3 of 8 affected districts in Balkh and Samangan, but not in Nahri Shahi, Hazrat Sultan, Feroz Nakhchir, Dar-e-Sufi Payin, or Aybak because of insufficient resources. Mine action resources remain constrained across Afghanistan, with a one-third decrease in the number of mine action teams nationwide between Jan 2025 –Jan 2026, from 254 to 155, because of funding gaps.<sup>xlix</sup>

## RESPONSE

### PROGRESS MADE ON PROTECTION

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Following the earthquake, protection partners mobilized essential potentially life-saving resources to deliver protection services, with some partners relocating services closer to the earthquake and displacement sites. In Kunar, Nangarhar, and Laghman, protection partners had reached nearly 190,000 affected women, men, boys, and girls by December 2025, including older people, people with disabilities, and women heads of household. Services provided in both eastern and northern regions included:

- Rapid assessments were conducted immediately following the earthquakes in both locations and guided the response design, prioritisation and resource mobilisation.
- Partners established community-based initiatives to support rapid, locally-led response. 280 community volunteers, including women, were supported to facilitate timely referral of affected people to emergency services and raise awareness of mine risks, especially in Kunar, which is heavily contaminated. Community-based initiatives continue to operate, supported by cash grants to identify protection needs and implement ad hoc protection initiatives. Longer-term community-led initiatives continue to operate in eastern provinces.
- Partners delivered services tailored to the needs of earthquake-affected communities, including specialised CP and GBV programming (see below), training of frontline staff and community volunteers on earthquake response, protection case management, cash for protection, and strengthening of critical referral pathways.
- Child protection partners mobilized community volunteers and provided specialised services, including case management, enhanced family tracing and reunification, and provision of alternative care for separated and unaccompanied children. By December 2025, child protection partners reached around 44,500 affected people in Kunar, Nangarhar, and Laghman provinces specifically. Child-friendly spaces were also established.
- GBV partners provided specialised response services, established safe spaces for women and girls, and delivered dignity kits. They also engaged other sectors on GBV risk mitigation. By December 2025, GBV partners reached over 110,100 affected people in Kunar, Nangarhar, and Laghman provinces specifically.
- MHPSS services were expanded to respond to the growing psychosocial needs of communities
- Since the affected areas are potentially highly contaminated, protection partners conducted explosive hazard assessments and delivered EORE, as well as sharing contamination maps. Guidance was provided to all responding agencies on integrating mine risk education in programming.
- People who lost their civil documents including Tazkiras were supported to replace these documents, including cash to cover costs involved in obtaining new civil documents and legal counselling and support.

### ACCESS RELATED CHALLENGES AND ACTIONS

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Access incidents, primarily bureaucratic barriers impeding the implementation of humanitarian activities, remained high across Afghanistan from August–December 2025.<sup>i</sup> This includes the enforcement, from September, of a ban on Afghan women employees and contractors from entering UN compounds in Kabul and field offices. There have also been reports of the DFA preventing Afghan women staff from travelling to field locations, including eastern earthquake-affected areas.<sup>ii</sup> These and other restrictions on women’s employment, freedom of movement, and participation in public life continue to limit women’s and girl’s access to assistance following the earthquake. In addition, from 29 September–1 October, a 48-hour, nationwide telecommunications shutdown compromised access to life-saving healthcare, other emergency and basic services, livelihoods, and humanitarian assistance, including in earthquake-affected communities in the east, where the shutdown coincided with significant flooding.<sup>iii</sup> Escalating hostilities between Afghanistan and Pakistan since the end of February 2026 have further restricted humanitarian access and forced partners to suspend their operations due to security concerns.<sup>iiii</sup> The remoteness of many earthquake-affected villages in the east continues to prevent consistent humanitarian access to families that have remained in these villages.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following measures should be taken by all humanitarian agencies in Afghanistan and donors to reduce the exposure to and mitigate the impact associated with the protection risks identified in this analysis:

### RISK 1 Gender-based violence

#### HC and HUMANITARIAN COMMUNITY

- Scale up safe, confidential, and survivor-centered GBV services, including mobile outreach, case management, and women's and girls' safe spaces, in earthquake-affected communities.
- Expand the delivery of protection services for women and girls through integrated approaches to ensure maximum access and reach.
- Prioritise contingency planning and preparedness for future hazards and shocks that takes into account mitigation of protection risks, and specifically GBV risks.

#### DONORS

- Continue to support the expansion of safe, confidential, survivor-centred, and multi-sectoral GBV services and support actions needed to address critical gaps in such services.
- Resource and support partners to develop and implement contingency planning and preparedness for future shocks and hazards that takes into account mitigation of protection risks, and specifically GBV risks.

### RISK 2 Discrimination and stigmatization – denial of resources, opportunities, services, and/or humanitarian access

#### HC and HUMANITARIAN COMMUNITY

- Prioritise the safe and dignified delivery of aid in earthquake-affected communities by addressing gendered barriers that prevent women and girls from directly accessing critical assistance, such as ensuring sufficient privacy for women and girls in distribution sites.
- Advocate with the DFA to reverse all discriminatory laws and other restrictions, including those limiting women's and girls' access to services, employment, and assistance, and those restricting women humanitarian staff responders from providing assistance and services to women and girls.

#### DONORS

- Advocate with the DFA to reverse all discriminatory laws and other restrictions, including those limiting women's and girls' access to services, employment, and assistance, and those restricting women humanitarian staff responders from providing assistance and services to women and girls.

### RISK 3 Psychological/emotional abuse and inflicted distress

#### DFA

- Reverse bans on the education and employment of women NGO and healthcare workers to ensure availability of female PSS providers.

#### HC and HUMANITARIAN COMMUNITY

- Expand integration of MHPSS services into other relevant sectoral programming that is chosen in consultation with earthquake-affected communities.
- Strengthen coordination and referral pathways in the earthquake response.

- Prioritise the safe and dignified delivery of MHPSS for women, men, boys, girls, and people with disabilities, including by ensuring the privacy, accessibility, and gender separation of facilities.

#### DONORS

- Resource and support the integration of MHPSS services into other relevant sectoral programming.
- Invest in capacity-building for child and adolescent MHPSS providers.
- Invest in long-term, specialised MHPSS services in earthquake-affected communities and across Afghanistan.
- Support the ongoing National Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Assessment.

### RISK 4 Child labour in dangerous or hazardous conditions

#### DfA

- Prioritize sensitization and advocacy efforts to discourage reliance on harmful coping mechanisms such as hazardous forms of child labor.
- Ensure provision of formal education, including to earthquake-displaced children.

#### HC and HUMANITARIAN COMMUNITY

- Expand targeted cash and livelihoods support in earthquake-affected communities to reduce economic strain on families and incentive for children to work.
- Scale up accelerated learning and vocational training programs for adolescents in earthquake-affected communities.

#### DONORS

- Finance predictable, multi-year child protection and EiE programs, including cash for protection interventions, which are developed and implemented in close collaboration with affected communities, including child survivors, to not only respond to child labour but also to address social norms driving child labour.
- Invest in community-based child protection networks to build their capacity to recognise and safely refer cases of child labour, including worst forms of child labour, to specialised child protection actors.

### RISK 5 Presence of mines and other EO

#### DfA

- Endorse and enable EORE, particularly for women and children who face restricted mobility and limited awareness.
- Ease restrictions on female staff participation in mine action and risk education activities to ensure inclusive outreach.

#### HC and HUMANITARIAN COMMUNITY

- Integrate mine action into the nexus response, ensuring EO risk mitigation is mainstreamed across shelter, WASH, education, and livelihoods programming in earthquake-affected provinces.
- Expand EORE coverage, prioritizing outreach in displacement sites and remote villages, with tailored approaches for women, girls, and boys, who are disproportionately exposed.

#### DONORS

- Bridge funding gaps, addressing the one-third reduction in mine action teams nationwide (from 254 to 155 between Jan 2025 –Jan 2026) by providing sustained, flexible funding for clearance, survey, and EORE.
- Enable multi-sectoral impact by providing resources for integrating mine action into broader humanitarian and recovery programming, ensuring that clearance and risk education directly support safe shelter, livelihoods, and access to services.

### Methodology

This publication was done in collaboration with ACAPS and thanks to the contribution of all Protection Cluster partners. The analysis is based on both quantitative and qualitative data from existing secondary data sources, protection assessments and reports following the August and November earthquakes, consultations with Protection Cluster partners involved in the earthquakes response in December 2025 and January 2026, and in consultation with Areas of Responsibility, Protection Cluster Strategic Advisory Group (SAG) members and sub-national coordinators. This product has been made possible by the generous support of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

### Limitations

Data collection and case management have proven to be challenging for humanitarian protection services due to ongoing interference and restrictions from the DfA, particularly regarding the hiring of women staff, the mahram requirement, and access to women community members. These operational constraints and challenges affect the level of protection data that can be collected and used in understanding protection risks. In addition, some issues are perceived highly sensitive, therefore the data gathered may not offer a definitive assessment of the extent of the protection risks.

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## Endnotes

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- <sup>i</sup> UN Afghanistan et al., Joint Rapid Recovery Needs Assessment (JRRNA), November 2025
- <sup>ii</sup> IFRC, Operation Update, 14 January 2026; IOM, Flash Update - Earthquakes in Eastern and Northern Afghanistan, 8 December 2025.
- <sup>iii</sup> OCHA, Eastern Region Earthquake Response Plan (Sep 2025 — Dec 2025), revised October 2025, 14 October 2025; UN Afghanistan et al., JRRNA, November 2025
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