



上海大学
SHANGHAI UNIVERSITY



Embracing Knowledge and Expertise:

Women's Leadership and Participation in Addressing Climate-Driven Humanitarian Emergencies Across Asia and the Pacific.

Photo credits: Rashad Kabir, Samuel Hall 2024

Case Studies from

AFGHANISTAN



Photo credits: Oriane Zerah

This brief was produced through the collaborative efforts of [Samuel Hall](#) – a social enterprise that conducts research, evaluates programmes, and analyses data in and on contexts of migration and displacement and Islamic Relief Worldwide - a faith-inspired relief and development agency working to save and transform the lives of the world's most vulnerable people, with insights from the [STRIDE](#) project, which focuses on strengthening local capacities in disaster response and resilience.

1. Introduction

The objective of this country paper has been to analyse and illuminate the role of Afghan women in climate leadership. Due to the complex nature of the humanitarian crises in Afghanistan, where women’s engagement is severely restricted outside of home, this paper adopts a distinct approach to capture contributions Afghan women have made in climate action to highlight their achievements and their potential in advancing sustainable solutions to climate change.

In Afghanistan, where vulnerability to climate change is exceptionally high, women play a crucial role in addressing and adapting to the environmental challenges exacerbated by climate change. Despite being one of the lowest greenhouse gas emitters globally, Afghanistan ranks eighth out of 170 countries in terms of climate vulnerability, facing frequent and severe natural disasters such as floods, flash floods, and droughts.¹ The intersection of climate change, gender dynamics, and mobility creates a unique set of challenges that disproportionately affect Afghan women and girls due to the current socio-political context, gender norms, limited income, lack of access to higher education, and exclusion from decision-making processes.

This paper highlights stories of two Afghan women to underscore two crucial points: first, on how the climate response has been deeply enriched by the leadership and contributions of women. Second, it underscores that the humanitarian sector’s localisation agenda, and the development sector’s Basic Human Needs (BHN) approach, cannot be fully realised without the meaningful inclusion of women and faith actors.



Photo credits: Oriane Zerah

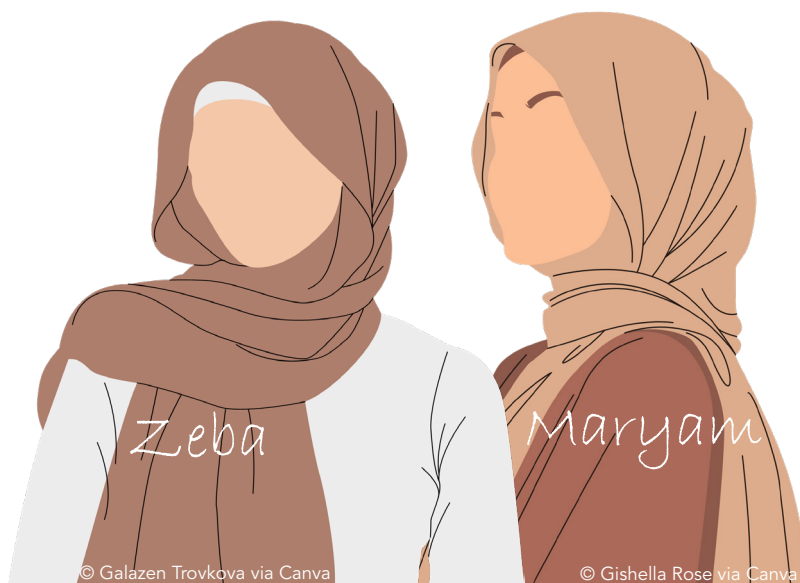
¹ ICMPD/ActionAid/Tadbeer Consulting/CANSA, ‘Climate Change Drives Migration in Conflict-ridden Afghanistan’, 2020

In the current socio-political-humanitarian context in Afghanistan, we define localisation as the process of strengthening the capacity, delivery, and leadership of local practitioners to take the lead in addressing their own Basic Human Needs (BHN) food, water, shelter, healthcare, and education. Localisation would mean investing in Afghan-led initiatives that are contextually relevant and developed in partnership with local institutions.² This aligns with the global NGO network, International Council of Voluntary Agencies' (ICVA) definition of localisation as the process through which humanitarian actors strive to ensure that local and national actors are more effectively engaged in the planning, delivery, and accountability of humanitarian action and development initiatives. In Afghanistan, this would involve ensuring that aid delivery and practice "are as local as possible" by empowering both men and women in the community, while also recognising the necessary role of international actors in supporting swift, effective, and principled humanitarian responses. The goal is for international partnerships to enhance rather than overshadow local efforts, fostering a more inclusive, culturally attuned, and effective response.³

Through the case studies of Maryam and Zeba, the paper illustrates how localised approaches, driven by women's unique insights and leadership, have led to environmental awareness and impactful outcomes that address community specific needs. Their stories are a powerful reminder that women are not just participants in these movements - they are often at the forefront, driving change and innovation. The paper also emphasises the role of the international humanitarian and development community in supporting and advocating for women's inclusion in both climate action and localisation.

The case study of Maryam focuses on the significant contributions of a former University professor and former staff at the National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA), who has been instrumental in advancing climate action and women's empowerment through education and training initiatives. Her work highlights the importance of including women's voices in sustainable agricultural practices, disaster risk reduction (DRR) and humanitarian response, demonstrating that improving women's rights has important dividends for the effectiveness of humanitarian and environmental efforts in Afghanistan.

The case study of Zeba highlights the important and missing role of faith actors⁴, especially women faith scholars, whose involvement can foster culturally sensitive humanitarian and development efforts - including by helping international organisations adapt their narrative and approaches. Faith actors are often overlooked yet are an essential component of successful localisation. Where certain cultural or societal norms may pose barriers to direct engagement, particularly in conservative or traditional communities, faith leaders have the potential to significantly enhance humanitarian and development interventions by leveraging their local knowledge, networks, resources, and the trust they hold within communities.⁵



² IFRC: What is Localisation?, 2021

³ ibid

⁴ Faith "actor" encompasses faith organisations, faith leaders, scholars and individuals.

⁵ Samuel Hall & Islamic Relief: The Added Value of Faith Actors in Localisation: Opportunities and Barriers in Humanitarian Action. Lessons from Afghanistan-Pakistan, Ethiopia-Kenya, Palestine and Mozambique

2. Context

“The disproportionately high number of female victims of disasters in Afghanistan, in comparison to the number of male victims, could be indicators of this dynamic. [...] This highlights the “man-made” nature of so-called “natural” disasters and shows how **improving the rights of women has important dividends for the effectiveness of humanitarian response.**”⁶
– UNWOMEN

In Afghanistan, climate change impacts are not gender-neutral; men and women are affected differently due to their distinct roles at the household and community levels. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable to climate-related issues due to their low income, lack of education, and exclusion from decision-making processes.⁷

Women and girls often face increased protection threats compared to men and boys, acting as “shock absorbers”. Social norms often dictate that male education and livelihoods are prioritised, and thus boy’s education put before that of girls’. Socio-political contexts have restricted women’s participation in household and community decision-making, excluding their voices from discussions on resource allocation, disaster preparedness, and community planning. This reduces their ability to cope with climate-related challenges and influence adaptation strategies.

Typically, in Afghanistan, men are responsible for field agriculture, and women are in charge of small dairy animals or poultry, as these tasks do not require them to leave their homes or property. Whenever there are droughts, small livestock are often sold or eaten first, once people are no longer able to afford sufficient water and food supplies to raise them, thereby affecting women agricultural workers first.⁸ When climate shocks threaten traditional livelihoods, women’s access to economic opportunities can play a key role in household level resilience.⁹

Climate change and gender dynamics are also closely linked to mobility patterns. As climate-related risks and environmental degradation worsen, individuals and communities are forced to migrate or seek alternative livelihoods. This includes both short-term displacement caused by disasters and long-term migration due to slow-onset processes like sea-level rise or desertification. When households and communities are compelled to abandon their homes, they often move unprepared, lacking information, assets and skills.

The climate crisis in Afghanistan is first and foremost a gendered water crisis. For example, in rural areas women and children are often the ones responsible for fetching water. During water shortages this causes increased risk for them, as they often have to travel longer distances, in spite of mobility restrictions, to find it. In the current context where water is increasingly rare, climate change is displacing more people than ever in Afghanistan (even more than conflict following the change in government). Women and children are thus increasingly at risk often facing numerous protection threats during displacement, such as “lack of access to gender-segregated shelters, harassment by men (both border officials and others crossing the border), deplorable detention conditions, and no access to gender-segregated toilets.”¹⁰

⁶ UN Women, Afghanistan Gender Country Profile, 2024

⁷ UNDP & Samuel Hall: The Role Of Women In Shaping The Climate Mobility Agenda

⁸ IOM & Samuel Hall, ‘IOM Afghanistan Climate Change Research Brief Displacement Trends and Challenges in Afghanistan Since August 2021 Research Series on Return and Reintegration in Afghanistan’, 2022

⁹ UN- DPPA: Climate Change, Peace and Security in Afghanistan: A study on the interlinkages

¹⁰ Samuel Hall/ADSP, Forced to migrate: Afghan women waiting for protection in Iran and Pakistan, 2023

Localisation, Basic Human Needs, and Gender Equity in Afghanistan's Humanitarian Landscape

The humanitarian and development sectors have been heavily focusing on local actor empowerment and locally-led responses. 'Localisation' which is a principal central to the Grand Bargain, was launched at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, representing a unique agreement between donors and humanitarian organisations "to get more means into the hands of people" and advocates respect for local expertise and empowerment of local actors in humanitarian response and decision making.¹¹

Localisation ensures that responses to needs are not only more efficient but also more culturally sensitive and sustainable - especially in the context in Afghanistan where addressing the basic needs is complicated by ongoing conflict, economic instability, and environmental challenges, including the impacts of climate change. It ensures that local actors, who have a deep understanding of the cultural, social, and environmental dynamics at play, are better equipped to assess and prioritise these needs within their communities. Local actors can navigate the complexities of Afghan society, including its tribal structures, religious norms, and gender dynamics, to deliver aid in ways that respect local customs and practices. This localised approach builds trust within communities, ensures that assistance is accepted and that local populations are active participants in decisions that impact their lives.

The Regulations have challenged localisation efforts, from changes to community governance alongside bans on women's mobility and their employment in NGOs. In addition to the suspension of most climate and environment financing, Afghanistan faces severe shortfalls in funding for response and resilience.¹² However, there is still room for women to be part of the process, under the climate action agenda, and in alignment with the government's priorities. Effective localisation requires women's participation.¹³

Localisation and locally led climate adaptation share the same goal of addressing the impacts of climate change induced crises. Both concepts require local actors to have the resources, capacity, and opportunity to make decisions that affect them across the humanitarian development continuum.¹⁴ For projects to be sustainable, they must be owned by the people they are designed for. Working alongside communities, including women can help resolve conflicts productively where disagreements serve as opportunities to bring in new perspectives and approaches. Co-creation, therefore, is essential to achieve their desired outcomes and can catalyse a project.¹⁵



Photo credits: Samuel Hall, 2024.

11 The Grand Bargain - A Shared Commitment to Better Serve People in Need, 2016

12 UN- DPPA: Climate Change, Peace and Security in Afghanistan: A study on the interlinkages

13 ACAPS Afghanistan Thematic Report: Different understandings of localisation, August 2024

14 Humanitarian Advisory Group & Islamic Relief: Bridging Localisation and Climate Adaptation Pathways: Case studies from Asia, the Middle East, and Africa

15 World Economic Forum: Why local action is crucial to addressing global climate change, 2024

However, in the context of Afghanistan, these goals face significant challenges. The restrictive environment, including bans on women's mobility and their participation in NGOs, severely limits the ability of civil society and other local actors to operate effectively. This exclusion not only hinders women's leadership but also impedes gender-equitable outcomes in humanitarian responses, as the lack of women's voices in political and donor processes leads to the specific needs of crisis-affected women and girls being overlooked, further exacerbating their vulnerabilities. Despite these challenges, the inclusion of women and their organisations remains crucial for effective localisation and addressing the unique needs of Afghan women and girls in crisis situations.¹⁶

Beyond Erasure

A Case Study of an Afghan Woman's Enduring Contributions

Understanding the intersection of climate change, gender dynamics, and mobility is critical for developing comprehensive and effective responses to environmental challenges. As primary caregivers within the home, Afghan women possess a deep understanding of their communities' and their households' needs, making their input in DRR and humanitarian response a critical asset.¹⁷

Maryam's story exemplifies the importance of including women in these discussions. Born and raised in Kabul, Afghanistan, Maryam aimed to join the Faculty of Economics but faced difficulties with the subject, leading her to pursue environmental protection instead. Over time, her interest in this field deepened which fuelled her desire to become a teacher and actively contribute to environmental issues. After a year of teaching, she pursued a Master's degree in Leadership and Management. In 2020, she led a project funded by the Canadian embassy focused on reducing greenhouse gas emissions in Kabul and surrounding districts. The project included creating compost packages in over seven districts, implementing Biogas systems in Kabul city, and raising awareness and providing training to female farmers. Through these efforts, she and her team developed systems that utilised organic waste to produce Methane Gas, which was then provided to hotels for free use. This initiative marked a significant step towards Maryam's work on climate change in Afghanistan.

¹⁶ ibid

¹⁷ UN Women, Afghanistan Gender Country Profile, 2024

"I am a supporter of gender-sensitive environmental policies, as I believe nature and women are intrinsically linked. If women are given the chance, **they can transform both their homes and society into better, more sustainable places.**"

Maryam



The Missing Key

A Case study of a Religious Scholar Enhancing Engagement of Women in Climate Action and Education Through Faith-Based Learning

Islamic Relief Worldwide and Samuel Hall's 2024 research¹⁸ on the added value of faith leaders in responding to crises and fostering community resilience focused in part on Afghanistan. Zeba's story as a woman religious scholar from Afghanistan embodies how leadership based on faith can address challenges that are of urgent concern.

Zeba is a dedicated student of Islamic Studies (Sharia) and focuses on religious education and environmental issues. Passionate about teaching, Zeba has taken it upon herself to educate women and mothers who have been deprived of formal education, gathering a group of 150 students. Her teachings extend beyond religious topics, to include climate change, which she recognises as a significant threat to humanity, particularly in urban areas.

From a young age, Zeba aspired to become an educator. Despite facing challenges in her path, she adapted and transformed her aspirations, focusing on Islamic Studies and Sharia. Believing firmly in the positive impact of Islam's teachings for both this life and the hereafter, Zeba channelled her passion into faith-based education. "As faith scholars, we are in a position to use our influence to enhance awareness about environmental issues, encouraging our communities to seek and implement eco-friendly solutions."

She understands the gravity of climate change and feels a great responsibility to play her part in the mitigation of its impacts. Through her network, which includes connections with other madrasas, Zeba actively collaborates to address both environmental and non-environmental issues, demonstrating her commitment to positive change in her community. In communities with imposed restrictions on women's engagement in society, faith and culture provide a framework within which women can assert their agency while navigating restrictive environments.

¹⁸ Samuel Hall & Islamic Relief: The Added Value of Faith Actors in Localisation: Opportunities and Barriers in Humanitarian Action. Lessons from Afghanistan-Pakistan, Ethiopia-Kenya, Palestine and Mozambique

"Our community is deeply rooted in religious beliefs, where the teachings of the Quran and the Hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) guide us through our daily lives. When we research these verses and hadiths concerning current issues, we underscore the significant challenges these changes pose, some of which threaten our very existence. It becomes imperative, then, to empower individuals to take responsibility, drawing upon their faith. As faith advocates within our faith, **it is our duty to encourage a collective recognition that transforms the fight against climate change into a wide endeavour**, one in which each person plays a crucial role."





3. The Five Climate-Related Challenges Facing Afghanistan: A Community and Gender Perspective

Maryam and Zeba work in challenging environments, engaging closely with communities, which has provided them with a deep understanding of the issues they aim to address. Recognising that communities are not just passive recipients but active participants with deep insights into their own issues is crucial. This perspective aligns with the concept of “experts by experience.” By focusing on existing positive solutions within these communities - including women, we can identify what is already working and seek to scale these initiatives.¹⁹

In Afghanistan, as in many regions, while men typically manage field agriculture, women are responsible for small dairy animals and poultry near their homes. During droughts, these small livestock, which women manage, are often the first to be affected, leading to immediate impacts on women as they are forced to sell or consume these animals when resources dwindle.²⁰

“Drought and floods in Parwan forced us to sell our livestock, reduce daily expenses, compromise our children’s nutrition, incur debt, and face unemployment for the men in our household. This caused men to become more violent. [When] my husband feels like he can’t cover the basic expenses and he borrows money from other people, he might strike his head against the wall at times. This has also impacted my mental health.”²¹

Moreover, as men migrate or leave in search of better opportunities, women are often left on the frontlines of climate change. Samuel Hall’s research in Afghanistan and East Africa shows that women possess a higher awareness of adaptive measures to climate risks and environmental degradation. They tend to favour long-term strategies, such as planting trees or cultivating drought-resistant crops. Moreover, women are the primary custodians of traditional knowledge related to biodiversity, medicinal plants, and sustainable resource management. Therefore, the narratives, experiences, and aspirations of women directly impacted by climate change should be central to our efforts.

The following sections highlight the importance of understanding women’s perceptions to grasp how they view climate change and its consequences, as well as the different types of challenges affecting sustained climate action as articulated by Maryam and Zeba based on their experiences.

1. Transboundary and Regional Climate Change Challenges: Afghanistan’s diverse geography gives rise to region-specific climate change challenges that are not confined within the nation’s borders but have broader regional implications. ‘Climate shocks stem from the two primary climate stressors noted above – rising temperature and changing precipitation patterns.’²² In the northern provinces, rapid snowmelt from high mountain peaks is leading to significant water shortages, impacting not just Afghanistan but also neighbouring countries that rely on shared water resources. In the western regions, intensified dry winds, locally known as “Haj,” are not only damaging agricultural lands within Afghanistan but are also contributing to regional desertification, reducing soil moisture and agricultural productivity across borders. The central provinces face earlier-than-usual summer rainfall, causing destructive floods that lead to the destruction of homes, internal displacement, and loss of life.

¹⁹ Samuel Hall & REHA: Harnessing Hope - Community Perceptions & Climate Adaptation in Afghanistan, 2024

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ IOM & Samuel Hall, ‘IOM Afghanistan Climate Change Research Brief Displacement Trends and Challenges in Afghanistan Since August 2021 Research Series on Return and Reintegration in Afghanistan’, 2022

²² UN- DPPA: Climate Change, Peace and Security in Afghanistan: A study on the interlinkages



Photo credits: Samuel Hall, 2024.

2. Urban Environmental Challenges: Cities like Kabul are on the brink, struggling with severe environmental degradation exacerbated by rapid urbanisation and population growth. Kabul, the most densely populated area, faces acute air pollution, especially during the winter and summer months, driven by vehicle emissions and the burning of low-quality materials for heating. Water scarcity and contamination are also pressing issues, with the city's water supply often polluted due to inadequate water management and the overwhelming population. Waste management is another critical challenge, with improper disposal practices leading to unhygienic conditions and public health risks.

3. Mobility and Displacement Challenges: The adverse effects of climate change are compelling many Afghan communities to migrate, often seeing it as the last resort when other coping mechanisms fail. This forced migration is seen as a necessary but undesirable option, as it involves leaving behind their land, social networks, and traditional ways of life. The perception is that migration, whether internal or to neighbouring countries, is a survival strategy in the face of unrelenting environmental pressures. Climate-induced displacement has led to increased levels of social tension over already strained resources. Flooding is most likely to cause temporary displacement of entire communities. Temporary displacement then turned into protracted displacement when significant assets, such as housing and livestock, were destroyed or killed. External migration to Iran and Pakistan has predominantly consisted of youth, discouraged from farming by the incapacity of communities to respond to climate shocks.²³

4. Policy Challenges: The root of Afghanistan's environmental issues lies in the lack of effective, locally tailored policies. Policymakers often attempt to import policies from other countries without considering Afghanistan's unique environmental and social dynamics. This approach has led to ineffective policy implementation and insufficient monitoring. For instance, efforts to address air pollution in Kabul have been hampered by poor enforcement and a lack of community involvement. Additionally, the absence of gender-sensitive policies limits the participation of women, particularly in rural areas, in environmental decision-making and action. As Maryam aptly observes, "To fix these issues, Afghanistan needs to develop policies that are tailored to the local context, based on input from experts who understand the country's environmental and social dynamics."

²³ IOM & Samuel Hall, 'IOM Afghanistan Climate Change Research Brief Displacement Trends and Challenges in Afghanistan Since August 2021 Research Series on Return and Reintegration in Afghanistan', 2022

5. Integration Challenges: A significant challenge lies in siloed engagement of stakeholders, especially in bridging the gap between local faith actors and external experts in specialised fields such as climate science and environmental management. The integration of local initiatives with broader stakeholder engagement, especially involving faith actors, is a significant challenge in Afghanistan. Faith actors like Zeba play a crucial role in addressing social and environmental issues within their communities, but their efforts often lack the support and collaboration needed from national and international stakeholders. This disconnect limits the effectiveness of these initiatives, as local actors may have deep cultural knowledge but lack technical expertise, while external experts may not fully understand local dynamics. The absence of coordinated support from governmental bodies, NGOs, and international organisations further exacerbates this issue. To maximise impact, a more integrated approach is needed that values and incorporates the contributions of faith actors, ensuring their efforts are effectively supported and amplified.



Photo credits: Samuel Hall, 2024.



4. Towards Faith-Inspired, and Eco-Inclusive/Equity Futures: Maryam & Zeba's Efforts in Empowering Women for Climate Action

Maryam and Zeba understand that the protection of women and the environment are deeply connected.

In Afghanistan, Maryam has seen how violence against the environment often parallels the oppression of women. For Maryam, these two forms of violence must be addressed together, using an intersectional approach that tackles both gender inequality and environmental degradation. Maryam advocates for ecological action rooted in gender equality. She believes that when women are empowered with knowledge about the environment, they can play a vital role in protecting it. This empowerment also challenges the systems that oppress both women and nature. Maryam believes this strategy aligns the empowerment of women with environmental preservation.

Zeba believes that in Afghanistan, people often base their lives decisions on their faith, differentiating between what is permissible (halal) and what is forbidden (haram) as per the religious teachings. Therefore, faith scholars are in a position to influence and enhance awareness about environmental issues, encouraging communities to seek and implement eco-friendly solutions.

Both their work in Afghanistan is guided by their belief, demonstrating the critical role women can play in creating a more sustainable and equitable world. This includes:

1. Educating Women on Sustainable Practices: While implementing projects at NEPA, Maryam focused on increasing environmental awareness among women in rural villages and districts, educating them on how to effectively utilise waste from animals, plants, and trees. Before her intervention, they would burn animal waste, contributing to air pollution. After learning about safer and more sustainable practices, these women began collecting tree leaves and animal waste to convert into biogas for later use. This shift in behaviour not only reduced pollution but also significantly improved their quality of life. Moreover, leveraging her role as a professor, Maryam spreads awareness about general sustainable practices. **“My students learn about their local environment and share this knowledge with their families, applying at least 10% of what they’ve learned,”** Maryam says reflecting on the most rewarding part of her work.

With the same zeal, Zeba focuses on training and inspiring individuals through religious schools, particularly targeting mothers deprived of education. By raising their awareness, she addresses various challenges, whether related to religious beliefs or environmental concerns like climate change. Her gatherings prioritise critical community issues such as water scarcity and heat waves, emphasising water conservation and the benefits of tree and plant cultivation, often incorporating practical lessons on these topics alongside guidance on mitigation and reduction strategies.

“While our awareness-raising efforts have had a modest impact, they are far from insignificant. Many dedicated mothers have integrated our teachings into their daily lives, actively protecting their families from environmental hazards. However, addressing such an issue cannot be achieved through a single meeting or one-off lecture. It requires continuous education and support.”



Photo credits: Oriane Zerah

2. Tactical Interventions: Tree Planting: Zeba extended the teachings in her madrasa by incorporating practical lessons for the students. She organised tree-planting activities, actively engaging them in environmental protection. Islam encourages the planting of trees and plants, and a notable Hadith states that anyone who plants a tree, which then provides sustenance for animals, birds, or is utilised by humans, will receive ongoing rewards. This act is considered Sadaqah Jariyah, a form of continuous charity, benefiting the planter both in this life and the hereafter. Through this hands-on experience, she was able to discuss the benefits of these actions from both environmental and religious perspectives.

Introducing Biogas Systems in Urban Areas: Building on her success in rural areas, Maryam extended her environmental initiatives to urban centres. In Kabul City, she introduced a biogas system to hotel owners, addressing the issue of organic waste and unpleasant odours. Although the biogas system only operated for 20 minutes to an hour, it allowed hotel owners to convert their waste into usable energy, making the initiative both practical and impactful.

3. Promoting Composting as an Alternative to Chemical Fertilisers: In a continuation of her work to introduce sustainable practices, Maryam tackled the widespread use of chemical fertilisers and the burning of organic waste. In the past, women in the community relied on these harmful methods to manage waste and fertilise their land. Maryam introduced compost packages and taught them how to compost these materials, transforming waste into natural fertiliser for the following year. This not only eliminated the need for synthetic alternatives but also provided an environmentally friendly solution to manage organic waste. Tree leaves, rich in carbon dioxide, were transformed into excellent organic fertilisers through proper composting. Similarly, organic waste that previously contributed to methane emissions was converted into beneficial compost.

Zeba too has actively addressed this by raising awareness among women in her madrasas about the harmful practices some engage in during winter, such as burning plastics and tires for heating, which contributes to pollution and health issues in the region. She has emphasised the Islamic teachings that forbid causing harm to oneself or others, highlighting that anything harmful is clearly prohibited in the religion.

5. The Cultural, Political, and Environmental Challenges to Women's Climate Leadership: Unpacking Barriers and Opportunities

In spite of their strong initiatives, Maryam and Zeba's journeys in climate activism and advocacy has been deeply influenced by the cultural and environmental context of Afghanistan, particularly following the change in government.

1. Opportunities in Localisation: Before the change in governance, Maryam and her colleagues enjoyed the freedom to engage in various activities, supported by the government. They could organise events, collaborate with religious leaders, and access relevant policies and guidelines that facilitated their work. However, after the current authorities assumed control, they faced significant challenges. Their activities were initially suspended, and when they sought to restart, they encountered barriers, particularly regarding women in leadership roles.

However, Zeba believes that by grounding the conversation in Islamic teachings, the current government, which is a faith-based government, can be urged to address environmental concerns. Highlighting climate change through religious principles can emphasise its urgency and encourage government action. As a faith scholar and activist, she sees her role in effectively conveying this message.

This situation highlights the need for a truly localised approach to development in Afghanistan. Localisation involves empowering communities to lead environmental projects in a culturally sensitive and context-specific manner. This includes Local and National NGOs (LNGOs and NNGOs) designing and leading programs with donor oversight, supported by multi-year funding, international support, and capacity building. Zeba also suggests the potential of strong inter-level partnerships. **"To build strong partnerships between faith communities, NGOs, and government agencies, joint seminars and training on climate change should be organised. Participants can share information, discuss solutions, and distribute research papers, reports, and brochures to address the issue collaboratively."** Key to success is leveraging existing relationships, engaging religious leaders, and gradually incorporating women's voices in ways that are politically feasible.

2. Opportunities to Work With Faith Leaders: Another significant challenge is the cultural practices of Afghanistan, where women's participation in programmes is often discouraged. The primary challenge however, stems from the current government policies which have made it even more challenging for women to hold positions of higher status, making it difficult to implement programs involving women. Maryam and Zeba emphasise that these problems cannot be addressed by them alone: **"We need the cooperation of the community, including the religious leaders."** Maryam believes that if these inequalities were addressed through equal laws and policies, many problems could be resolved.

Theological approaches to gender interventions have proven to be an efficient tool at the intersection of religion and gender.²⁴ The story of Zeba highlights how faith can address challenges that are of urgent concern. The international community has frequently overlooked the complex power dynamics within Afghan communities, particularly concerning gender. Programmes that did not adequately involve or gain the support of local male leaders or religious authorities have often failed to achieve their objectives, particularly in areas where women's participation is heavily restricted. To gain broader acceptance, localised efforts that involve partnerships with religious leaders who can advocate for women's participation in ways that align with Islamic teachings is essential. This can help mitigate resistance and create more space for women's involvement in community development because as Maryam also pointed out, **'many Afghans trust the imams more than those with formal education.'**

²⁴ Samuel Hall & Islamic Relief: The Added Value of Faith Actors in Localisation: Opportunities and Barriers in Humanitarian Action. Lessons from Afghanistan-Pakistan, Ethiopia-Kenya, Palestine and Mozambique



Photo credits: Oriane Zerah

3. Opportunities to Tackle Negative Adaptation Strategies: Research by Samuel Hall²⁵ indicates that Afghan civilians' ability to cope with climate change has significantly decreased, particularly after 2021. Poverty has severely hampered community-based and locally led solutions. In response to these challenges, communities have resorted to harmful coping mechanisms. These include over-extraction of groundwater through deep wells, leading to further environmental degradation, and deforestation for firewood, which accelerates soil erosion and biodiversity loss. Farmers have also reduced crop diversity, focusing solely on drought-resistant crops, which increases vulnerability to pests and diseases. Poor harvests have forced families to sell livestock, reducing food security, while child labour has risen as families struggle with diminished incomes. Community health is also on the decline,²⁶ meaning people no longer have the resources to care for their own. Zeba says:

“Currently, many women, including mothers, are dealing with mental and psychological challenges. Faith actors can provide them with better guidance on identifying the root causes of their troubles and offering solutions or mitigation strategies.”

Islamic Relief and Samuel Hall's research extensively highlight the role faith actors play as actors uniquely positioned to offer mental health and psychosocial support due to their deep-rooted trust within communities and their ability to foster a sense of belonging and solidarity through faith-based coping mechanisms. In the current situation of Afghanistan - whether due to conflict, natural disasters, or other factors - faith actors can play a more significant role in addressing trauma and distress, especially to women. They offer not only immediate relief but also long-term resilience by drawing on religious teachings and rituals.²⁷

²⁵ IOM & Samuel Hall, 'IOM Afghanistan Climate Change Research Brief Displacement Trends and Challenges in Afghanistan Since August 2021 Research Series on Return and Reintegration in Afghanistan', 2022

²⁶ IOM & Samuel Hall, 'IOM Afghanistan: Mental Health Research Brief Displacement Trends and Challenges in Afghanistan Since August 2021 Research Series on Return and Reintegration in Afghanistan', 2022

²⁷ ibid

6. Adapting Against the Odds: Creative Solutions by Afghan Women in Climate Action

Both Maryam and Zeba have encountered significant societal obstacles, as many families are reluctant to allow female members to participate in social activities. This made advocating for climate change initiatives, especially in rural areas, extremely challenging. However, they have continued to organise numerous awareness-raising workshops and training sessions, coming up with innovative ways to address challenges.

An illustrative example comes from one of Maryam's colleague's experiences. Her friend's organisation aimed to implement a project called "Rights Awareness for Women" in several provinces. When they sought the necessary approvals from the Ministry of Economy, they were redirected to the provincial authorities, where they faced opposition. The government's approach typically emphasises traditional roles for women, often prioritising family and domestic responsibilities over political or social participation, so the authorities questioned, "Do you want to put women in a democratic situation like other countries?" To overcome this resistance, the organisation simply renamed the project "Rights Awareness of Islamic Rights for Women." By adding the word "Islamic," they successfully implemented the project without making any other changes. Maryam reflects on this by saying, "It shows that the people of Afghanistan are more receptive to initiatives that are framed within the context of Islamic principles."



Photo credits: Oriane Zerah

Both Zeba and Maryam emphasise the importance of community involvement in tackling environmental issues, such as reducing plastic burning or installing climate-friendly filters. For example, introducing a drip irrigation system to save water and combat drought could reduce the impact of climate change by irrigating more land with less water. Maryam believes that if farmers are taught how to set up this system, possibly through building friendships and relationships, they could be convinced to adopt these environment-friendly practices.

Similarly, Zeba suggests leveraging the successful COVID-19 awareness initiatives as a model for spreading climate change awareness. During the pandemic, public health messages were effectively disseminated through various channels, including social media, telecommunications, and traditional media. For instance, before calls were connected, people would hear recorded messages about preventive measures. Television ads regularly aired guidance on how to stay safe, and mosques played a crucial role by having imams share

vital information during sermons. These coordinated efforts reached a wide audience, ensuring that essential information about COVID-19 was widely understood and acted upon. Zeba believes that a similar multi-channel approach could be equally effective in educating the public about the realities of climate change, making it a well-known and urgent issue in Afghanistan.

Collaboration with faith actors could be crucial here. Zeba says:

“Research organisations should share findings with us, and use visuals like photos and videos that clearly demonstrate the destructive human activities harming the climate. Simply telling people about the problem may not be as impactful as showing them the evidence through these visual aids.”

Afghan women have had to find creative ways to address issues like access to clean water. For example, in areas where clean water is scarce, women would collect water from rivers, allow particles to settle by placing it in dishes in the sun, and then boil the water for drinking. This method, though basic, is a practical solution in a country with limited access to advanced water treatment systems. She also shares a story of a woman in Bamiyan who cultivated mushrooms indoors using a dark room due to the hot weather and lack of other facilities. The woman allowed minimal sunlight into the room through small holes in the plastic, creating a suitable environment for mushroom growth. This innovative approach allowed her to harvest mushrooms through the small holes, despite the challenging conditions.

Another example of resourcefulness comes from an Italian woman who introduced a biogas system in the eastern region of Afghanistan, where women are heavily involved in agricultural activities. Maryam shares that women were already composting organic and animal waste to create fertilisers at a local level, without the need for specialised equipment. This shows how traditional practices can align with modern environmental strategies, even in the absence of advanced technology.

This also resonates with Samuel Hall’s findings²⁸ on scaling positive coping mechanisms often employed by communities. These include the establishment of greenhouses, which have increased crop variety and extended growing seasons, and the use of drought-resistant seeds, which have proven essential for farmers affected by climate change. Farmers have also repurposed failed crops as livestock fodder, ensuring that even unsuccessful harvests provide some benefit. Additionally, the introduction of climate-resilient crops has helped secure food supplies and stabilise incomes. Tree planting has become a strategy to protect crops from dust winds and prevent flooding. In water-scarce areas, some farmers have reduced the land used for irrigation and dug deeper wells powered by solar panels, while others have constructed ditches and canals to mitigate flood risks. These adaptive strategies, led by communities and at times spearheaded by women, have significantly bolstered resilience and productivity in the face of climate challenges.



Photo credits: Samuel Hall, 2024.

28 IOM & Samuel Hall, 'IOM Afghanistan Climate Change Research Brief Displacement Trends and Challenges in Afghanistan Since August 2021 Research Series on Return and Reintegration in Afghanistan', 2022

7. Recommendations for Supporting Women's Leadership in Climate Resilience

In the face of significant cultural, political, and environmental challenges, strengthening women's leadership in climate resilience is essential for efficient humanitarian responses and sustainable development in Afghanistan. A targeted and intersectional approach with a strong gender lens that places women at the heart of inclusive and sustainable development is key. This also calls for collaborative efforts with the government, local communities, and international organisations. This section compiles key recommendations from Maryam, Zeba, Samuel Hall's research, and Islamic Relief, offering a comprehensive strategy to empower women and enhance community resilience in the face of climate change. These recommendations emphasise the importance of governmental support, community engagement, and targeted interventions to address both immediate and long-term environmental challenges.

Recommendations from Maryam and Zeba

1. Support Governmental Policy Changes with Environmental Expertise: Establish partnerships between faith scholars, local universities, research institutions, and environmental organisations to enhance the quality of climate education within communities. This collaboration will ensure that religious teachings are supplemented with expert knowledge, strengthening the case for government support in addressing environmental challenges.

2. Work with Faith Leaders and Build on Islamic Teachings for Environmental Stewardship: Religious scholars should integrate environmental responsibility into their religious teachings, using Islamic principles to emphasise the importance of protecting the environment. By doing so, they can effectively raise awareness within their communities and advocate for stronger governmental action on climate change. Faith scholars should communicate climate change issues using Islamic teachings to build a compelling case for government support. Additionally, they should utilise media platforms and religious institutions to widely disseminate climate change information, making it a visible and urgent issue across society.



Photo credits: Oriane Zerah

3. Lead on Practical Environmental Actions and Continuous Education: Faith scholars should lead by example through practical initiatives like tree-planting and promoting sustainable practices. These efforts should be part of an ongoing commitment to educating communities on environmental issues, ensuring that the message is reinforced through continuous engagement and media coverage. Women will continue to be a central actor on such initiatives at the community level. If women are given the opportunity, they can transform both their homes and society into more sustainable and environmentally conscious spaces. Thus, integrating an eco-feminist approach in climate policy and programming could lead the way towards a more inclusive and sustainable future. There is a pressing need for supporting women’s leadership in climate resilience in Afghanistan is securing the government’s permission and support. Tailored interventions in the form of teaching materials, training, and awareness-raising resources on climate change, for community members with different levels of understanding, are critically needed to support ongoing climate initiatives by women and faith scholars.

Hard Recommendations from Zeba to Address Water Issues

Drip Irrigation System: Since Afghanistan is an agricultural country, a drip irrigation system can be the best system to be introduced to the farmers so they can effectively and efficiently water plants directly at the roots. This uses water more efficiently and reduces waste.

Water Filtering: People living in areas where they don’t have access to clean water should be trained on simple local methods to filter and clean dirty water, so they can use it safely.

Water-Saving Plumbing: In urban areas, most of the houses are equipped with plumbing systems. The municipality should control the devices used in plumbing in bathrooms, toilets, and kitchens to use less water. Use low-flow fixtures, dual-flush toilets, and water-efficient appliances will reduce water waste.

Grey-water Reuse: The government and organisations should design a drainage system to collect the water from sinks, showers, and washing machines and use it for things like watering the garden.



Photo credits: Samuel Hall, 2024.



Additional Recommendations from Samuel Hall' and Islamic Relief's Research²⁹

4. Strengthen Sustainable, Community-based Resource Management: Improve mechanisms for resolving disputes and managing resources. Developing a local commons approach is essential to reduce tensions, prevent depletion and pollution of natural resources, and address government limitations. Create local-level campaigns to dismantle misconceptions and enhance communities' capacities to prepare for and respond to climate-related disasters. Engage community and religious scholars in the process.

5. Identify and Train Community Stakeholders: Conduct community consultations to determine the best support strategies for adapting to climate change. Women, in particular, should be consulted to address their specific vulnerabilities and leverage their internal community capacities.

6. Contextualise Localisation & Build Faith Literacy:³⁰ Define and clarify localisation for Afghanistan, acknowledging its unique cultural, social, and political landscape. Ensure Afghan women's voices are central in shaping what "local" means. Integrating faith literacy at the sectoral level to identify and implement faith based solutions tailored to local issues and needs, including climate change and women empowerment.

7. Bridge Local Climate and Humanitarian Expertise:³¹ Bring together humanitarian, development and climate change departments/teams across organisations to develop integrated programmes and plan for disaster response. Incorporate local climate experts in the planning and design of humanitarian programs to enhance their effectiveness and relevance. Promote nuanced approaches that allow the organic evolution of women's engagement within the Afghan context, respecting cultural and societal dynamics.

²⁹ Samuel Hall & REHA: Harnessing Hope - Community Perceptions & Climate Adaptation in Afghanistan, 2024; IOM & Samuel Hall, 'IOM Afghanistan Climate Change Research Brief Displacement Trends and Challenges in Afghanistan Since August 2021 Research Series on Return and Reintegration in Afghanistan', 2022

³⁰ Samuel Hall & Islamic Relief: The Added Value of Faith Actors in Localisation: Opportunities and Barriers in Humanitarian Action. Lessons from Afghanistan-Pakistan, Ethiopia-Kenya, Palestine and Mozambique

³¹ Humanitarian Advisory Group & Islamic Relief: Bridging Localisation and Climate Adaptation Pathways: Case studies from Asia, the Middle East, and Africa



About Us

Samuel Hall is a social enterprise specialising in research, program evaluation, and data analysis in migration and displacement contexts. Since 2010, we've focused on understanding the disproportionate impacts of climate change on vulnerable communities. Our work across Africa, South, and Central Asia shows that real change often begins at the grassroots level, where local activists, migrants, and displaced people lead constructive dialogues and actions.

Islamic Relief is an international relief and development agency working to save and transform the lives of the world's most vulnerable people. Established in 1984, we work in over 45 countries serving people and communities in crisis, according to need. Inspired by our Islamic faith and guided by our values, we envisage a caring world where communities are empowered, social obligations are fulfilled, and people respond as one to the suffering of others.

-  www.samuelhall.org
-  development@samuelhall.org
-  Samuel Hall
-  @Samuel_Hall_
-  @samuelhallhq