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Mental Health for Young Afghan Women



Report on Afghan Women's Mental Health and Support Gaps



Part 1: Context

The mental health situation for women in Afghanistan has significantly deteriorated in recent years, particularly following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021. This period has been marked by increased restrictions on women's rights and freedoms, leading to widespread psychological distress. According to the United Nations, between April and June, nearly 70% of Afghan women reported that feelings of anxiety, isolation, and depression had worsened significantly, up from 57% in the previous quarter¹. Several interrelated factors contributed to the mental health crisis among Afghan women, including social restrictions, gender-based violence, economic hardship, and lack of access to healthcare.

In response to these conditions, Afghans for Progressive Thinking (APT) organized a Trauma Healing program for female university students to support their well-being amid the unprecedented challenges they are facing, and also conducted a survey to assess the mental health situation and accessibility of mental health care among 238 Afghan women. The survey was conducted online, focusing on 238 Afghan women who voluntarily participated. The survey consisted of questions designed to assess their experiences and lives under Taliban restrictions, as well as their own perceptions and understanding of their mental health. Participants shared personal insights into the challenges they faced and their emotional well-being, enabling the study to gauge the broader mental health implications of their circumstances. The self-reported nature of the responses provided a qualitative understanding of their mental health conditions. The participants represent diverse regions of Afghanistan—including Herat, Kandahar, Nangarhar, Kabul, Balkh, Khost, Parwan, Badakhshan, Logar, and Kunduz—and range in age from 15 to 35. The survey results highlight serious mental health challenges faced by Afghan women and emphasize the urgent need for mental health education and support programs.

Part 2: Mental health situation

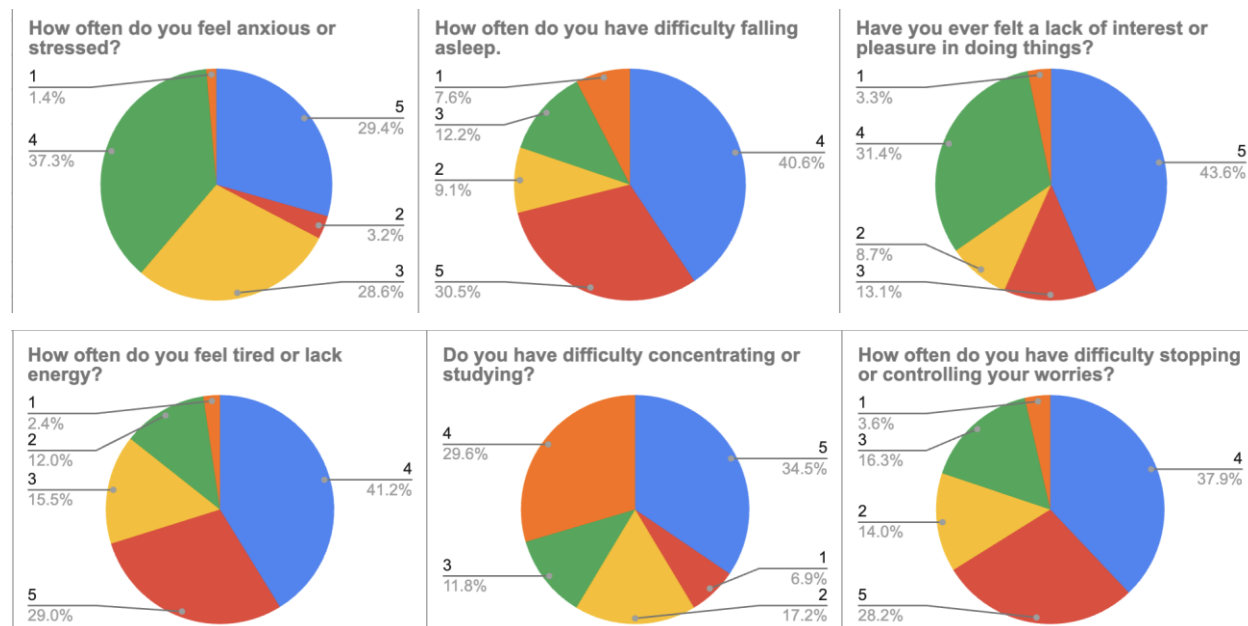
Across the survey, participants consistently reported high levels of mental health distress, regardless of age, region, education background, or marital status. Over 50% of respondents said they frequently experience anxiety or stress (rating 4 or 5), while only about 2% reported no stress at all. Over 70% of respondents exhibited symptoms associated with depression such as difficulty falling asleep and consistent fatigue or lack of energy. Feelings of disinterest in daily activities and difficulty concentrating

¹ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/mental-health-among-women-in-afghanistan-is-deteriorating-un-report-finds>



or studying were also prevalent, with many participants rating these symptoms as severe or frequent on the self-assessment scale utilized in the survey. Additionally, 67% reported emotional numbness in daily life.

These findings indicate the potential for high comorbidity of anxiety and depression and the urgent need for clinical interventions in the communities. The following charts show detailed survey results. Note: a score of 5 means “frequently,” and a score of 1 means “never.”



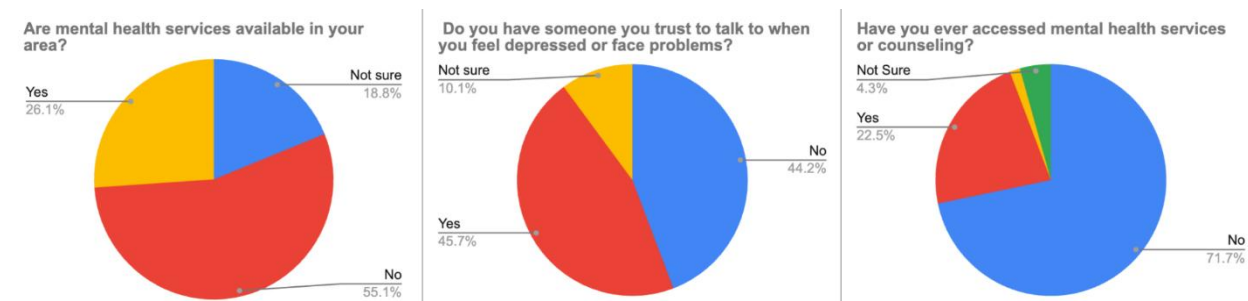
Part3: Mental health accessibility

In addition to the severe mental health situation of Afghan women, there is also a stark gap in the support system. According to the survey, more than half of participants reported a lack of mental health services in their area, and only 26.1% knew where such services were available. Even more concerning, 44.2% of participants said they do not have anyone they trust to talk to when they experience emotional difficulties. Additionally, more than 70% of participants have never accessed mental health services or counseling, despite experiencing symptoms of depression and other mental health challenges.

Furthermore, respondents cited several specific barriers that prevent them from getting the help they need. Financial hardship was the most frequently mentioned factor; many participants noted that healthcare services are extremely expensive. Others described the long physical distance to hospitals and voiced concerns about the poor quality of mental health care. Moreover, some respondents highlighted



the stigma around mental health, saying they fear judgment from relatives or the community. They further indicated that a lack of information and awareness also prevents many women from accessing the services they need.



These findings suggest a sense of emotional isolation among Afghan women, emphasizing a need for holistic psychosocial initiatives that address the attitudes and relationships among Afghan women in their communities. Social support, such as having someone to talk to during emotional distress, is one of the most important and accessible forms of mental health support, especially for women². Trusted social connections can reduce feelings of isolation, offer emotional relief, and help prevent the development of more serious mental health conditions. Community-based initiatives are urgently needed to address the social and relational component of mental health and increase not only access, but willingness to seek mental health services.

Part 4: Future Directions

The widespread mental health problems and lack of access to healthcare service indicate the urgent need for community-based healthcare service development. The survey asked participants about the types of mental health support they believe are most needed in their communities. Their responses offer valuable insight into what Afghan women truly require to improve their well-being and begin healing.

The most frequently mentioned need was free and accessible healthcare services. Many participants stressed that cost is a major barrier and financial support would benefit their community the most. Several women also requested the establishment of local mental health centers and online mental health platforms to reduce the travel burden and increase availability.

² Harandi TF, Taghinasab MM, Nayeri TD. The correlation of social support with mental health: A meta-analysis. *Electron Physician*. 2017 Sep 25;9(9):5212-5222. doi: 10.19082/5212. PMID: 29038699; PMCID: PMC5633215.



Public awareness and education were also identified as urgent needs. Respondents emphasized the importance of raising awareness about mental health. They also suggested that educational campaigns using social media, radio, or community workshops could play a critical role in reducing stigma, encouraging open conversations, and helping individuals recognize the symptoms of mental illness early on.

Overall, Afghan women are facing an extreme mental health crisis necessitating urgent and essential psychosocial support that is localized and community-based.