



Afghan Youth Representative
to the United Nations

AFGHAN YOUTH INCLUSION MECHANISM (AYIM)

Afghan Youth Representative to United Nations
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Acknowledgments:

The Afghan Youth Inclusion Mechanism Framework was developed under the [Afghan Youth Representative to the United Nations \(2025-2026\)](#), with support from [Afghans for Progressive Thinking \(APT\)](#), and engagement with the Office of the [United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights \(OHCHR\)](#).

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Introduction:

Afghanistan has one of the youngest populations in the world, with 75% under the age of 30 (UNFPA, 2020). Since 2021, Afghan youth, especially young women, have faced severe restrictions on education, work, and public life. As a result, they are largely excluded from decisions that shape their future, despite continuing to speak up and call for inclusion. The Afghan Youth Inclusion Mechanism (AYIM) responds to this gap by providing a clear framework focused on protection, participation, representation, and accountability.

The report highlights key barriers such as unsafe environments, social restrictions, limited opportunities, economic pressure, and digital access gaps. It also identifies youth priorities, including education, jobs and livelihoods, political participation, mental health, and addressing ongoing human rights violations, including gender apartheid. The report then recommends specific regulatory and public policy approaches to advance youth inclusion based on the experiences and examples of consultation feedback. A companion piece to this report, youth aspirations and expectations directly quoted from collected testimonies is available to members and stakeholders seeking to integrate youth policy considerations in their NYP.

Issue & Rationale:

Despite being the primary stakeholders in the country's future, Afghan youth were largely absent from key peace and political processes, including the Doha negotiations and subsequent international engagements. UN reports have consistently highlighted the limited inclusivity of peace processes and shrinking civic space, with youth notably absent from formal representation (UNAMA; UNSC; OHCHR). Moreover, evidence from youth consultations and surveys in this report also highlights this exclusion is both structural, systemic, and overlapping,

Including:

- Afghan youth lack formal representation in decision-making at national and international levels.
- Many face safety risks, fear of retaliation, and limited access to information due to censorship and surveillance.
- Participation processes are complex, inaccessible, and often tokenistic, with little feedback or accountability.
- Youth efforts remain fragmented, with limited coordination and support.
- Many face overlapping discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, religion, and identity.
- Declining international support has reduced investment in youth-led initiatives.

Objectives

There is a clear need for a youth-led, safe, and coordinated participation mechanism that turns Afghan youth perspectives into practical guidance for decision-makers. Therefore, AYIM aims to:

- Understand youth needs by identifying the main priorities, challenges, and aspirations of Afghan youth based on evidence across geography and genders.
- Ensure safe and meaningful participation of youth inside Afghanistan and in the diaspora.
- Provide a trusted, youth-led reference for UN agencies and international partners to guide their work.
- Make participation easier and more accessible for young people.
- Bring together Afghan youth voices from local communities, refugees, and the diaspora into one clear and practical strategy.
- Highlights hopes, dreams, and aspirations of youth.
- Support the work and advocacy of the Afghan Youth Representative to the United Nations.

Methodology:

Between 10 September 2025 and 31 March 2026, several surveys, youth dialogues, and consultations both online and in person were conducted. Additional perspectives were gathered through the [#HeStandsWithHer](#) campaign, a solidarity initiative encouraging men's allyship in support of Afghan women's rights and advocacy efforts, and the [Friday Talks podcast](#), a platform connecting Afghan youth from inside Afghanistan and the diaspora to discuss their experiences, priorities, and recommendations. Through these initiatives, over 3,000 Afghan youth from 73 countries shared their views, including those living inside Afghanistan, refugees, and diaspora communities.

The process combined discussions and survey data to capture diverse perspectives as following:

Phase 1: Online Consultations

Over 50 Afghan youth leaders from inside Afghanistan and refugee contexts in structured online discussions on 21 February 2026 to gather additional input.

Phase 2: In-Person Consultation

An in-person youth consultation during the Human Rights Council on 27 February 2026 in Geneva, Switzerland. A total of 27 Afghan youth leaders from across Europe participated in the consultation.

Phase 3: Advocacy and Policy Engagement

APT will lead advocacy to promote the implementation of the strategy at national and global levels.

Key questions and discussion points:

- The consultation focused on key questions about barriers to youth participation.
- What are the main barriers to youth participation?
- What are safe and practical ways to increase youth participation?
- What is the role of digital tools in youth participation?
- How can collaboration between the diaspora and youth inside Afghanistan be strengthened?

Analysis of Participant Insights:

The analysis highlights clear differences in priorities and experiences across age, gender, and geographic groups.

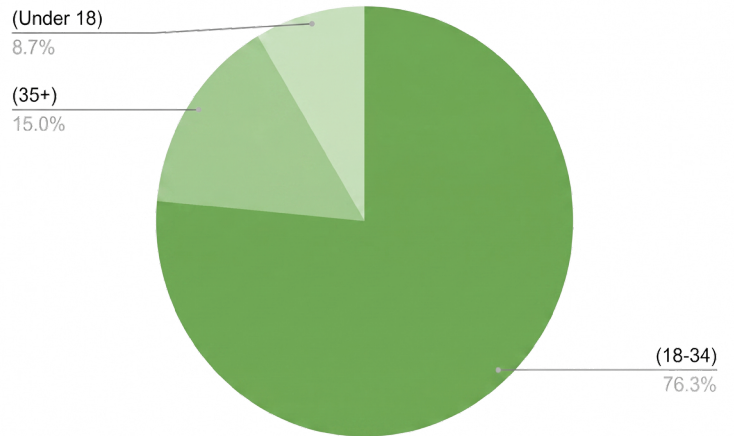
Age:

There is no universal definition of youth in terms of age and official age definitions differ by country, a reflection of different sociocultural, institutional, economic and political factors. For this study, youth are defined as individuals aged 15–34.

Figure 1

The chart shows that the majority of participants are aged 18–34, making up 76.3% of the total. This indicates very high engagement from young adults.

Participant Breakdown by Age Group



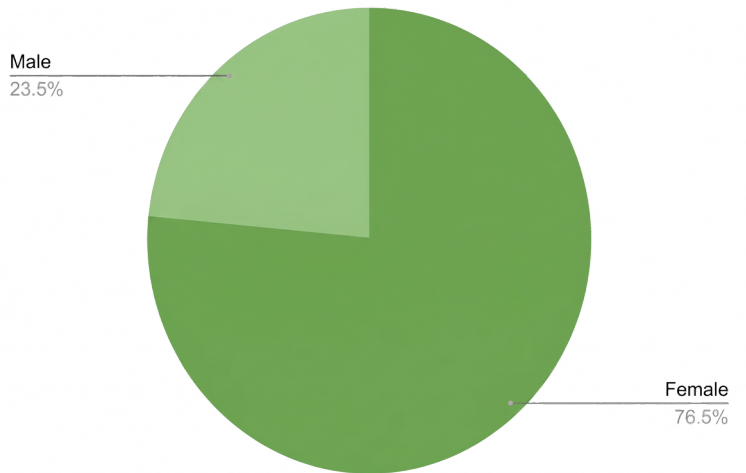
Gender:

Overall, women were highly engaged and willing to share their views in the surveys. It also suggests that women are more affected by current restrictions and more motivated to share their views through a safe and trusted platform.

Figure 2

Women contributed the majority of submissions at 73.9%, compared to 27.8% from male participants.

Participant Breakdown by Gender (Female and Male)



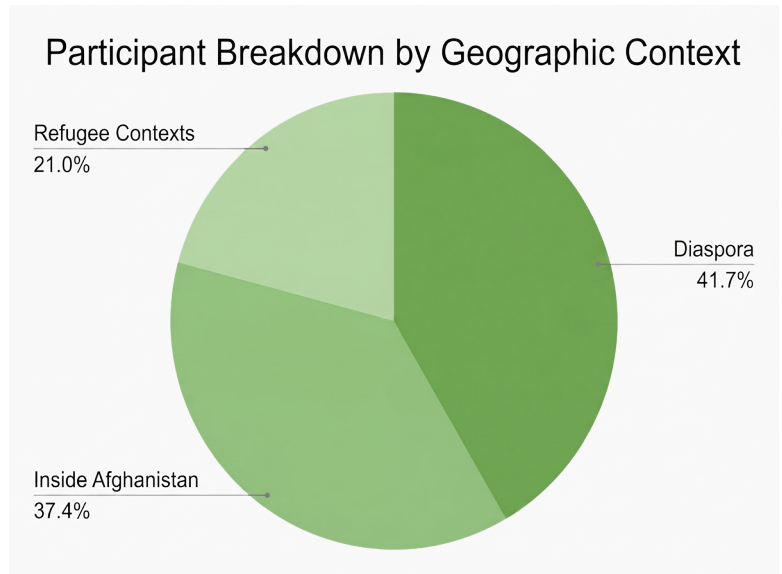
Geography:

Responses are categorized into three geographic groups based on participants' location and lived context: (1) youth inside Afghanistan; (2) refugees and displaced persons in host countries such as Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey; and (3) diaspora participants living outside Afghanistan and neighboring refugee-hosting countries, across 73 countries including Europe, North America, and other regions.



Figure 3

Most participants are from the diaspora (41.7%), followed by youth inside Afghanistan (37.4%). Lower participation from refugees (21%) suggests access barriers.



Top Priorities & Challenges:

The data shows that Afghan youth prioritize rebuilding their future, restoring rights, and being included in decision making. The five most frequently mentioned priorities are:

1. Education (1,976 mentions) is the top priority.

Across all groups, education is consistently emphasized, showing that youth want to be skilled and educated, especially in learning and adapting to advancements in technology and world developments.

2. Jobs and Livelihoods (1,477 mentions) as second priority. Many youth highlighted difficulties in finding jobs, lack of investment, cuts in funding and projects, and ongoing restrictions. Women specifically report a complete ban on access to job opportunities.

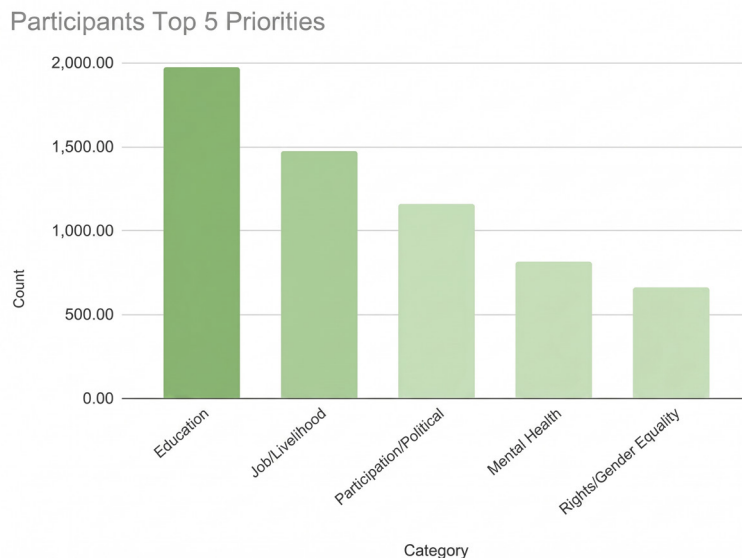
3. Political Participation/Inclusion (1,160 mentions) shows a strong demand for inclusion and voice. Many youth highlight limited or symbolic participation in decision-making processes and having little influence over decisions that shape their future. Many youth say they do not trust leaders, organizations, or the government. They feel left in the middle of the crisis, with little support, unclear decisions, and no one truly listening to their needs or making decisions that benefit their future.

4. Mental Health (815 mentions) across all age groups, including youth, underscores the profound psychological toll of the current situation. Feelings of isolation and hopelessness are consistently mentioned, with many youth describing their lives as similar to living in a prison due to restrictions and insecurity.

5. Rights/Gender Equality (665 mentions) highlights calls for systemic change, including ending ongoing gender apartheid. Any youth report lack of access to basic rights, freedom of expression, and equality, alongside fear of detention, torture, and punishment for speaking up.

Figure 4

Across all groups, youth consistently highlight five top priorities: the need for women's education, ending gender apartheid, and addressing basic needs such as jobs and health.



Other priorities and challenges mentioned are:

- **Diaspora youth often carry the burden of stigma for being from Afghanistan.** They are seen through the lens of war and crisis, and are sometimes viewed as oppressed and less skilled, which affects their confidence and opportunities.
- **Displacement remains a major challenge,** as refugee youth face legal uncertainty, involuntary detention in host countries, difficulties integrating, and discrimination, including visa rejections and a growing trend of deportation.
- **Pressure and punishment.** Youth face fear, restrictions, and risk when starting new initiatives, speaking out, or participating in public life. Many youth, or their family members, have faced harassment, detention, or torture for speaking up.
- **Paying the price of the political crisis** despite having little or no involvement in decision-making processes. Youth are affected by international decisions and ongoing political instability. Many scholarships, investments, and educational or professional opportunities have been closed or restricted for Afghan youth due to the political situation.
- **Lack of role models and leadership pathways remains a major challenge,** as Afghan youth see few examples of positive leadership or opportunities to grow into leadership roles. Many have witnessed repeated failures in leadership, contributing to feelings of powerlessness and exclusion from shaping their future.
- **Lack of safe spaces and access to information,** where youth do not feel secure to gather or express themselves. Many youth do not know what is happening or why decisions are made.
- **Risk of radicalization,** with limited opportunities, frustration, and lack of support, some youth are at risk of being influenced by extreme groups.
- **Lack of guidance and support systems:** Few positive pathways, mentorship, or community support to help youth stay engaged and hopeful.
- **Youth initiatives are often fragmented,** with limited coordination and weak collective impact.

Key Narratives and Differences by Gender, Age, and Geography:

Narrative analysis of youth priorities show different areas of emphasis across gender and geographic groups. Overall, while priorities are similar, the level of emphasis varies by gender and location, reflecting different realities.

Table 1

The chart shows a comparison across geography and age groups. Education is the top priority across all groups, especially inside Afghanistan. Jobs are most emphasized in refugee contexts, while political participation is highlighted more by men and youth inside the country. Mental health and discrimination remain important across all groups, with slightly higher focus among refugees and women.

Theme	Gender		Geography	
	Female Emphasis	Male Emphasis	Inside Afghanistan Emphasis	Diaspora & Refugee Contexts Emphasis
Education	32.00%	34.20%	35.90%	30.90%
Job/Livelihood	25.30%	20.70%	21.00%	25.90%
Inclusion/Political Role	16.80%	26.40%	21.40%	19.30%
Mental Health	14.40%	9.70%	11.40%	13.20%
Discrimination/ Gender Apartheid	11.50%	9.00%	10.30%	10.70%

Based on the analysis, education remains the top priority across all age groups, accounting for around 26-28% of responses. Younger participants showed slightly higher concern for jobs and economic opportunities, while the importance of political inclusion increased with age. Gender apartheid and discrimination remained a consistent concern across all groups, representing nearly 18% of responses overall.

Table 2

The chart highlighting the dominant role of education and employment across the different age groups.



Priority Category	Under 18 (%)	18-34 (%)	35+ (%)
Education	27.80%	27.10%	26.50%
Job/Economy	25.60%	24.50%	22.00%
Gender Apartheid/Discrimination	17.90%	18.10%	18.30%
Political Inclusion	12.50%	13.30%	16.80%
Mental Health	11.60%	12.40%	14.10%

Key Gender Narrative Themes Men:

Male participants emphasize more on the lack of opportunities, unemployment, refugee challenges, and a strong sense of hopelessness. Additionally, male participants place a higher proportional emphasis on Participation/Political Role.

“ Nobody hires me, and I am suffering. ”
 - Male participant, Herat, Afghanistan

“ I cannot move or speak freely, I cannot sit peacefully in cafés or restaurants to enjoy, I cannot dress the way I want or style my hair as I wish. I feel deeply hopeless living like this. ”
 - Male participant, Kabul, Afghanistan

“ I was detained and tortured, like hundreds of other young men in my village, after the government collapsed because I was accused of being connected to a resistance group. My village used to be a safe place where people from other provinces visited during holidays, and I had a business there. Now, it looks like a military camp. Businesses have shut down, even taking animals to graze in the mountains is banned, people live in fear, most aid does not reach us, one of the schools has been turned into a camp for the de facto authorities, and I cannot find a job either. ”
 - Male participant, Panjshir, Afghanistan

A significant majority of male participants expressed concern about restrictions on women's rights, particularly access to education, and showed strong support for women's right to education and employment. These findings suggest that support for women's rights is widely shared among young men and is commonly viewed as a collective responsibility rather than an individual or gender-specific issue.

“ I stand with the women of Afghanistan. Afghan women are brave, resilient, and worthy of freedom, education, and a bright future. Their voices must be heard, and their right to choose and to a humane life must not be taken from them. ”

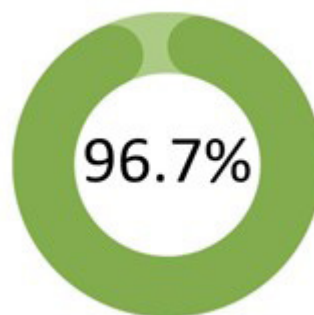
- Male participant, Kabul, Afghanistan

“ I suffered seeing disappointment on the faces of my two daughters because they could not go to school. Now, they have started an online learning program and they are very happy. I hope they can go back to school one day and chase their dreams. ”

- Male participant, Kabul, Afghanistan

Figure 5

96.7% of male participants expressed concern about Afghan women's rights and supported action to protect them.



Most male participants do not agree that the strict interpretation of rules on women's rights is Islamic, reflecting a shared perspective that current restrictions are extreme and not aligned with their understanding of religion.

“ What is happening is not Islamic law. The Holy Quran also commands respect for the dignity and status of women. As a man, I believe we must restore the rightful Islamic rights of women and honor the women of my country. ”

- Afghan male participant from Germany

Key Gender Narrative Themes for Women:

The majority of female participants' stories emphasize education bans, fear, and resistance through learning and advocacy. Many women described pursuing education or any act toward empowerment as feeling like committing a crime, with constant fear of punishment under the current system, highlighting systemic exclusion and discrimination.

“ I live between dreams and fear. Every day is an effort to survive, to learn, to create, and to remain hopeful. For Afghan girls, it means waking up with courage in a world that tries to silence us. Yet, there are still small moments of joy, when I paint with my students, hear their laughter, and see that the light of hope is still alive in their eyes. Despite all the hardships, we keep going, because we believe that art and education can change our future. ”

- Female participant from Kabul, Afghanistan

“ We have been told that women should not leave the house or work on our agricultural land, and I cannot even leave home by myself without a man. I have 14 and 12 year old sons who need my support, and my daughters also help on the land, but they cannot manage everything on their own. ”

- Female participant from Panjshir, Afghanistan

“ I go to classes secretly. I hide it from everyone and live in fear that someone will report me. I heard that some girls were arrested. It feels strange that I have to hide studying and constantly question whether this is really or anyone in any part of this world live like me. ”

- Female participant from Kunduz, Afghanistan

Women report multiple layers of discrimination based on gender, age, ethnicity, and language, along with strict social and mobility restrictions. This also includes being denied from receiving work licences, leadership boards, and enforcement of dress codes and limits in public spaces, such as being stopped or detained for clothing or seating arrangements.

“ I am a medical graduate, and for the past five years I have been denied my medical license because I am a woman. I have watched all my male classmates become licensed doctors already. Despite studying day and night for eight years, hoping that one day I would become a doctor, I never believed my gender should make me less human or less capable. ”

- Female participant from Kabul, Afghanistan

“ A de facto authority member stopped my uncle’s taxi and arrested me for sitting in the front seat while wearing a manteau and scarf. They silenced me and verbally harassed me because I spoke Dari, and forced me to sign a commitment not to leave home without a Chador-e-Namaz. ”

- Female participant from Herat, Afghanistan

Based on Table 1, female participants show a stronger proportional focus on Mental Health (14.4%) compared to male participants (9.7%), reflecting the psychological impact of ongoing restrictions. However, many testimonies from male participants frequently mentioned feelings of hopelessness. The findings also highlight challenges in accessing mental health support

and growing concerns about discriminatory gender roles becoming normalized for the next generation of young women.

“ I give mental consultations to young girls. They have beautiful dreams of becoming doctors, engineers, and teachers. But now they are graduating from grade six. They live with stress and deep disappointment, fearing they will never become what they once dreamed of being. Not only do we as a young generation see no future for ourselves, but we are raising another generation that does not see itself capable of creating a future ”

- Female participant from Balkh, Afghanistan

An overwhelming number of female participants emphasized that the extreme restrictions imposed on women are destructive to social life, and, in some cases, life-threatening and amounting to femicide. Many described these conditions as gender apartheid and called for its recognition in law to ensure protection and accountability.

“ What is happening in Afghanistan to women is unbelievably inhumane and painful to witness. We need to codify gender apartheid as a crime against humanity to protect women in Afghanistan and prevent it from becoming an example for others. ”

- Female participant from Switzerland

Narrative Gender Themes for Non-Binary Participants:

Participation from non-binary individuals in the survey was limited. The perspectives included are presented for reference and have not been considered representative of broader trends.

“ The dream I live in is a free Afghanistan, a land without prejudice, a place where all people breathe freely. A place where youth are educated, where their laughter fills the streets, and they know the future is theirs. ”

- Afghan non-binary participant from Germany

Geographic Narratives (Inside Afghanistan, Diaspora, and Refugees):

Youth inside Afghanistan focus on daily challenges, especially access to education (35.9%) and having a voice in decisions (21.4%) (see Figure 5). Refugees focus on displacement challenges, including limited opportunities, difficult living conditions, and discrimination in host countries. Diaspora youth focus on advocacy, stigmas, raising global awareness, and influencing policy for accountability and inclusion.

Despite these different realities, youth across all groups remain deeply connected to the future of Afghanistan. Across contexts, they continue to call for dignity, inclusion, education, and meaningful opportunities to shape their future.

“ In Afghanistan, I faced countless challenges because I was a woman so I left the country. In Iran, I experienced discrimination every day as an Afghan refugee. And now, moving abroad has meant accepting separation from my family and the possibility that I may never see them again. ”

- Afghan Female participant from Iran

“ Being young in Afghanistan today is truly painful. We live in a society that feels disconnected from the rest of the world, where people are economically suffocating and half of society, women, are excluded from education. I just want to live a normal life like every other young person around the world. ”

- Male participant, Bamyan, Afghanistan

“ Whenever people ask me where I am from and I say Afghanistan, I notice an uncomfortable expression on their faces. Most of the time, I feel people see me only as an oppressed Afghan woman, while my country is constantly labeled by war and violence. I no longer feel able to say the name of my country with pride. ”

- Afghan Female participant from the Spain

Perceived Decline in Global Attention:

The majority of participants also highlight a lack of sustained international attention to Afghanistan’s situation, which has further limited access to opportunities such as education, mobility, and investment.

“ The world’s attention has moved to other crises, and Afghanistan is slowly being forgotten. But people are still suffering, especially women and girls who have lost their basic rights and access to education. The world should not stay silent. ”

- Female participant, Badakhshan, Afghanistan

Figure 6

Over 85% of participants in the survey believed Afghanistan is being forgotten on the global agenda.



Youth Inclusion Gap:

A survey conducted in November 2025 with 171 youth participants found that nearly 82% reported their voices were ignored or only symbolically included, while over two-thirds stated that leaders rarely or never listened to them or explained decisions. These findings reflect a significant gap between youth engagement efforts and meaningful inclusion in decision-making processes.

Figure 7

Over 82% of participants believed their voices are not included in the decision making process.



“ Decisions about our future are made and announced without us even knowing what is happening. I do not see any consideration for our suffering or how we are expected to survive. Next to all the other suffering, I cannot find a job, and many others like me are struggling to provide for their families. The only option seems to be leaving the country, but even that is no longer possible. ”

- Male participants from Samangan

Policy Recommendations:

1. Establish a Formal Afghan Youth Inclusion Mechanism with Clear Benchmarks

UN agencies and partners should create a structured mechanism that ensures safe and meaningful youth participation across Afghanistan, refugee contexts, and the diaspora. This should address key barriers such as safety risks, restrictions, and discrimination, and include clear benchmarks and measurable outcomes.

2. Ensure Official Representation of Afghan Youth in Decision-Making

Afghan youth, including women, refugees, and those inside the country, should be formally represented in all major policy discussions. Participation must be structured, inclusive, and directly linked to decision-making processes.

3. Ensure Safe and Accessible Digital Participation

Create secure and accessible ways for youth to participate, including anonymous and online options. Expand access to the internet, devices, and safe digital platforms so youth can engage, learn, and connect without fear or risk.

4. Invest in Education, Livelihoods, and Capacity Building

Support education access, skills development, and employment opportunities, with targeted programs for women and refugee youth to address economic and social barriers.

5. Develop a Youth Participation Tracking Framework

Develop a simple system to monitor and track youth participation and outcomes, such as access to education, employment, and engagement. This ensures transparency and helps improve programs over time.

6. Support collaboration between diaspora, refugee and in-country youth

Create structured platforms for mentorship, knowledge sharing, and joint initiatives to connect Afghan youth globally and strengthen collective impact. Additionally, Provide targeted support for refugee youth, including access to education, jobs, and protection from discrimination.

Conclusion:

Afghan youth, who make up the majority of the population, continue to face major barriers to education, jobs, participation, and basic rights. These challenges are not isolated but systemic, shaped by insecurity, social restrictions, economic pressure, and limited opportunities to engage. Despite this, youth remain active, resilient, and committed to shaping their future.

The findings send a clear message: Afghan youth want meaningful participation, not symbolic inclusion. Their priorities, education, livelihoods, participation, mental health, and rights, are

closely linked and require practical and coordinated action, including addressing gender-based restrictions.

The Afghan Youth Inclusion Mechanism (AYIM) offers a clear and practical framework to respond to these needs. Its success depends on real commitment from international actors to move beyond consultation and ensure youth are included in decisions.

Meaningful youth inclusion is essential. Without it, policies will not reflect reality. With it, Afghan youth can help build a more inclusive and sustainable future.

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Annex: Aspirations of Afghan Youth:

Question:

“If tomorrow Afghanistan becomes free and peaceful, what would be the first thing you do?”

“ If Afghanistan were free and peaceful tomorrow, the first thing I would do is walk into a real school again not online, not in secret, but freely, with other girls by my side. I would sit in a classroom, hear the teacher’s voice, and feel the joy of learning without fear. Education has always been my dream, not just for myself but for every Afghan girl who has been told she can’t. One day, I want to become an advocate and a professor, someone who uses her voice to fight for girls’ right to education and empower them to believe in themselves. ”

- Female participant from Kabul, Afghanistan

“ “ We no longer have hope that Afghanistan will improve. There is no hope left for the future. ” ”

- Male participant from Paktia, Afghanistan

“ “ I want the girls of my homeland to be able to go to school, work, and live freely. ” ”

- Male participant from Balkh, Afghanistan

“ “ If tomorrow Afghanistan becomes free and peaceful, the first thing I would do is go outside peacefully and live without fear. I want to study and achieve my dreams. My wish is not only to progress myself, but also to see my country progress. ” ”

- Female participant from Kabul, Afghanistan

“ “ As an Afghan woman, the first thing I would do is create a space for the growth of Afghan girls and boys by establishing an art therapy center for empowerment and psychological support, helping them understand and discover themselves so they can reach their goals sooner and access greater opportunities. ” ”

- Female participant from Herat, Afghanistan

“ “ If Afghanistan were at peace, the first thing I would do is go to school, attend college, and learn new things. I remember when I was 10 years old, I really wanted to become a good fighter or boxer. But my real dream is to become a pilot. ” ”

- Female participant from Daykundi, Afghanistan

“ “ I would call on youth, bring them together, and motivate them to pursue education. I would provide scholarship opportunities, work for the country's resources, and create job opportunities for them. ” ”

- Female participant from Paktika, Afghanistan

“ “ If tomorrow Afghanistan becomes free and peaceful, the first thing I would do is reopen the path to education for the girls of my homeland. I would remove the hardships and barriers placed in their way and demand equal rights for those who have long been ignored and denied recognition. ” ”

- Male participant from Kabul, Afghanistan

“ “ I would continue my education and become an advocate and professor to fight for girls' right to education and empower them. ” ”

- Female participant from Badakhshan, Afghanistan

“ “ My biggest dream is the need for Afghan youth participation in decision-making and having an equal chance of education for both boys and girls. ” ”

- Male participant from Ghazni, Afghanistan

