

A New Chapter for Afghan Returnees: Gains, Gaps, and the Road Ahead in Areas of Return



UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

Time helps returnees stabilize economically, but masks deeper structural problems—particularly gender disparities and unmet basic needs—leading to rising debt, food insecurity, and vulnerability.

Fragile but positive progress in reintegration of returnees from Pakistan

The large-scale return of Afghans from Pakistan, and now from Iran, has marked a new chapter for thousands of families seeking to rebuild their lives amidst uncertainty. But returning home is only the beginning - the real challenge lies in achieving meaningful reintegration, securing livelihoods, and restoring dignity. As the latest UNHCR post-return monitoring study shows, returnees from Pakistan - particularly men - experience gradual economic improvements in income and employment over time. However, others, especially women, face mounting barriers, deepening vulnerabilities, and worsening food insecurity. These contrasting realities reveal both the fragile progress in reintegration over time and the urgent need for targeted development interventions to ensure that no one is left behind.

Income gains and widening gender gaps

For men both wages and employment improve the longer they spend in their area of return, likely because they transition from reliance on humanitarian assistance to labor-based income, and those better positioned - typically men - benefit more from emerging opportunities. Over time, some economic indicators suggest cautious progress: employment rates for returnees rise by 16 percentage points within six months of their return, possibly driven by increased daily wage labor as returnees become better connected with the local community and better in accessing labor market information. Men, experience these gains, with wages in male-headed households increasing by 7% on average and employment rising from 53% to 69%.

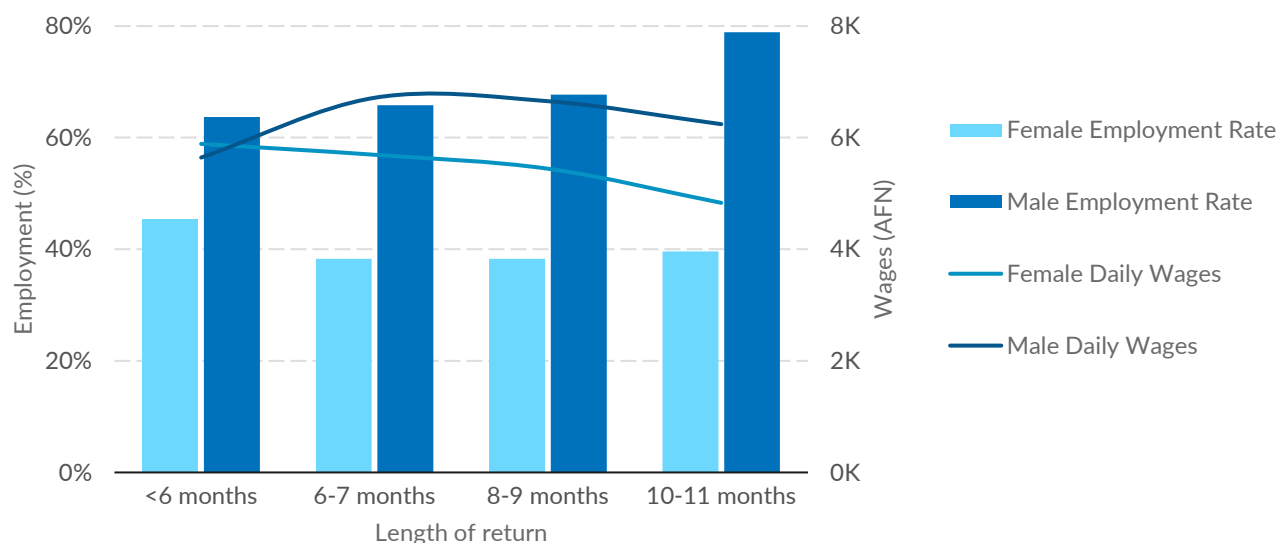
Women are excluded from these gains, with their wages declining and employment rates dropping, reinforcing gender inequalities. For women-headed households, income outcomes worsen significantly. Six months after return, women's wages decline by 23%, and their employment rate drops from 42% to 39%. This widening gender gap leaves women earning nearly 17% lower than men, while also facing barriers to essential services, legal rights, and safety.

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For the full report, please click [here](#).

UNHCR Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific (RBAP)

Gender Disparity in Employment Rate and Daily Wages



Women lack access to more than economic opportunities

Alarming, women are cut off from vital support, services, and economic opportunities in other significant ways that extend far beyond employment, such as access to documentation and a mobile phone. Only 25% of women have access to a mobile phone, compared to 95% of men. Similarly, one in five women lacks national identity documents, compared to just 5% of men.



Household vulnerability is on the rise

At the household level, despite men's rising employment, debt and food insecurity increases, indicating that the income gains are insufficient to meet growing needs, repay debts, or cope with rising costs. This rise in debt and food insecurity is particularly evident in woman-headed or vulnerable households. Nearly 89% of returnee families are in debt - a figure that climbs by 7 percentage points within six months of return. Food insecurity is another stark indicator: over half of returnee households lack sufficient food, and this problem intensifies over time, rising by 6 percentage points. These trends highlight that even as pockets of economic activity emerge, structural challenges and persistent inequalities prevent many families from achieving real stability.

Here to stay: the urgent need for economic opportunities for the receiving areas, returnees and hosts.

The vast majority of returnees, **over 94%**, intend to stay in their current communities, signaling that these returns are not temporary, so long as support and opportunities are available.

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These findings indicate that emergency assistance alone is insufficient. Sustainable reintegration requires multi-dimensional schemes. Without targeted, gender-responsive interventions to create viable economic and employment opportunities, socio-economic exclusion, rising debt, and food insecurity will continue to erode resilience, particularly for the most vulnerable.

This critical moment calls for donors, development, and humanitarian actors to invest not only in livelihoods, but in closing the gender gap and expanding access to documentation, so that all Afghan returnees can rebuild their lives with dignity.