



The Knowledge House

United Kingdom

www.thekhcs.org

How we did it: Diaries from behind the research in Afghanistan

(SOHS In-country Research)

The Knowledge House United Kingdom (TKH – UK)
15A Southern Avenue
Frenchwood, Preston, United Kingdom PR1 4NL

Introduction

The diaries below provide an overview of researchers' experiences navigating field work amid a challenging operating environment in Afghanistan. They draw on observations made during data collection including contextual details, non-verbal cues, overall atmosphere of data collection sessions, unexpected events, and researcher-participant interactions. They also present the adaptive measures researchers took to reach respondents, especially women and girls.

For safety purposes, this commentary is based on information provided by sources who have chosen to remain anonymous.

Researchers

1. Field Coordinator who was responsible for planning and organising field visits, liaising with the target communities, and completing the necessary arrangements for field work.
2. Field Researchers (two female, one male): They organised and conducted interviews and focus group discussion with women and girls, and men, respectively.
3. Lead Researcher who oversaw the country research design, analysis, and reporting.

JULY 2025

Preparatory work for data collection

Field coordinator

We conducted a successful training for researchers. They have all been provided with printed questionnaires and relevant materials. Unlike our previous data collection trainings, we were unable to bring both male and female field researchers together for a joint training as required by the current operating environment in Afghanistan. Some sessions were conducted separately, and others virtually. This added logistical complexity and required additional time to manage effectively.

Because we recently completed an extensive household survey in the three target provinces, we had a good understanding of the authorities' requirements at central, provincial, and district levels for conducting research. This prior experience helped us plan our fieldwork and logistics more efficiently.

AUGUST 2025

Organising and conducting a women's Focus Group Discussion (FGD) in Target province I

Female field researcher

I suggested we conduct the female FGD in an area that had both returnees¹ and eligible host community households. After a brief call and consideration of other potential areas, the team agreed on this location.

We had the female FGD planned for Monday 26 August, but two days before, a colleague flagged an issue that arose from the consultation of the community leader which had been ongoing for three days. The community leader did not agree to support us or take responsibility for gathering FGD participants in a single venue, as he was concerned about potential scrutiny from local authorities. He believed that bringing women out of their homes and gathering them for a group discussion was not allowed and could lead to consequences if detected by local authorities. Instead, he suggested talking to each of the FGD participant individually at their houses.

However, conducting the FGD was essential to maintaining the integrity of our research, as it required women participants to reflect collectively, build on one another's responses, and surface community-level norms and concerns – insights that would have been lost through individual

¹ Returnees from Iran and Pakistan (more than 2.9 million people forcibly repatriated since October 2023) largely unsettled, with limited social support and few livelihood opportunities to meet basic needs, and predominantly dependent on humanitarian assistance.

interviews. I contacted Nadia (not her real name), a widow who runs a small dairy business from her home. She had previously participated in similar research work and was happy to support us in mobilising participants and organising the discussion. We scheduled the FGD for 31 August 2025. It was to be held at Khalida's (not her real name) house – a member of the community. It was culturally acceptable for the other participants to come to her house because she is the head of her household and does not live with any adult male. On the day of the FGD, we followed agreed fieldwork protocols and kept a low profile. My husband (my Mahram) and I took a taxi to the area. We had all the papers and stationery for the FGD concealed, and our Tazkiras (national ID cards) readily available with us. I dressed appropriately.

Before the discussion, I received several calls from Nadia telling me that many additional women were eager to participate and share their experiences and concerns, even though they understood that this was purely a research activity with no direct material benefit. Indeed, during the FGD, I observed that the participants had felt bottled up and didn't have any opportunity to express their thoughts and share the issues they have been encountering before this. The current restrictions, especially those affecting women's education and work, had significantly affected them as all the women brought it up in response to almost all of the questions. Off the record and after the FGD completion, all 8 members said they felt lighter, and thanked me and Nadia for this opportunity where they could express themselves.

After the FGD was completed, we spent about 30 minutes discussing random topics, in which few of the participants said that they are now only teaching their young daughters on how to become a good wife. To me, this reflected a sense of diminished expectations regarding girls' future opportunities. Previously, mothers often told me that they wanted their daughters to become doctors, engineers, politicians... This ambition has now been lowered to becoming a good housewife. This statement kept me up at least for a couple of nights – realising that they were right and thinking about my own daughter and myself.

August 2025

Negotiating district-level access in Target Province I

Male field researcher

The engagement with district authorities yielded limited results today (20 August 2025). They indicated that additional procedural steps would be needed before the FGDs and KIIs could move forward. Completing the required coordination with the relevant provincial department was not straightforward. I was required to return to Kabul to address the outstanding administrative requirements. During our subsequent discussions with more senior authorities at the provincial government, we were ultimately able to resolve the matter and move forward with the planned FGDs and KIIs, although some reservations remained.

The district authorities accepted the updated arrangements and required us to adhere to their regulations, including not taking pictures of people, ensuring female researchers were accompanied by their Mahram and have proper Hijab. The discussion with the community leader and identification of FGD participants went smoothly thereafter.

Organising and conducting the men's Focus Group Discussion (FGD) in Target Province II

Male field researcher

The FGD for men was planned for 27 August 2025 but we could not proceed with it as one of the participants with a disability was not able to find transportation to get him and his wheelchair to the FGD venue. We had to reschedule it for the next day when we could arrange transportation for him.

All participants arrived on time the next day, however, we were unable to start on time because the doorway to the room (FGD venue) was too narrow for the wheelchair to go through. We spent about 40 minutes trying to get the wheelchair through and exploring alternative venues nearby. Ultimately, the participant with disability chose to remain in the hallway, and the rest of the group members gathered closer to the doorway so that he could still participate in the discussion.

The arrangement felt somewhat awkward and not ideal, but it was the only feasible option to ensure he was included, especially as he did not feel comfortable being transferred out of his wheelchair. This situation made me more aware of the need to proactively assess accessibility needs during planning FGDs, and ensuring that the venues we choose are fully accessible for all, as we had not encountered such an issue in the past. Fortunately, this did not influence group discussion dynamics and we had very fruitful contributions from this participant.

Scheduling Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with UN agencies and INGOs in Target Province I

Male field researcher

The KIIs with some representatives of UN agencies were difficult to schedule, in this province. Despite repeated contact via email and phone, I got the same response “he will get back to me the next day,” which did not happen and I had to get in touch again. It was only after our Research Lead contacted the agency’s head office in Kabul directly that I finally received a confirmation and was able to proceed with the interview. We experienced a similar pattern with INGOs where the Research Lead had to reach out to their headquarters-level representatives before any progress was made at the field level. From my observation, this reluctance was because of the concerns about being misrepresented or having their information misused, especially given the already restrictive and sensitive operational environment. Their cautiousness was to protect organisational reputation and ensure that any engagement did not inadvertently create risk for their offices or staff. The institutional reputation of TKH I believe, also made it possible for us to gain access.

The interview with a Provincial Authority in Target Province I

Male field researcher

The interview with this Provincial Director was a new experience for me. On the day of interview, I entered his office and found a heightened security presence that was more visible than I had encountered during previous visits to other provincial offices. This was a bit unorthodox and required some adjustment on my part as I prepared to conduct the interview. After I had explained the purpose of the interview, he asked me if I was a journalist or YouTuber. I elaborated on the purpose of SOHS research and how the data will inform the report. He gave me a smile and said that he did not have any prior interaction with researchers as such.

“I thought research is only conducted in laboratories and on mice,” he said.

He took a pause and said that he was busy, he recommended I do the interview with the head of a department within his directorate instead. That was convenient for both of us and I was happy hearing this. He called that person and asked him to do the interview with me. We moved to another room where the atmosphere was not that tense. This head of department had a masters in Economics, unlike many current authorities who come from a religious education background and are not fully

accustomed to NGO and UN agency operations. However, he also had several queries about the interview. Specifically, he indicated that additional coordination with his line ministry in Kabul would normally be expected for an interview of this nature. After further discussion and clarification regarding the purpose and scope of the research, he finally agreed to proceed with the interview. The interview was interrupted multiple times by visitors to his office. He was a busy person. Despite these interruptions, we were able to complete the interview successfully.

September 2025

Negotiating access for data collection in Target Province II

Male field researcher

Taking into account our experience in Province I, we thought it would be good to first have the necessary coordination with the relevant provincial departments before starting data collection in Province II. Unlike our experience in Province I, the process in this province took much longer than we expected and lasted almost one week. The concerned provincial department required additional information about the SOHS research project, including details of the budget and planned activities specific for this province. They had multiple queries about various budget lines and allocations. After reviewing the research budget in detail, we also discussed fieldwork arrangements and the department required us to involve two of its staff in our fieldwork. Together with another team member, I explained that it would not be possible for an independent research project with only 10 days of data collection in this province to accommodate two additional people. These discussions continued for several days during which we were responding to queries and providing additional clarification about the research. After multiple rounds of meetings, the issues were resolved and we were able to proceed with the fieldwork. The process required considerable time and persistence, but it appeared that the provincial department was also keen to bring the matter to a conclusion after several days of repeated follow-up.

Organising and conducting women's Focus Group Discussion (FGD) in Target Province II

Female field researcher

The Female FGD in Province – II went smoothly. Unlike the experience in Province I, the community leader was very supportive. He connected us with a woman in the community who had previously worked as a social worker for a human rights organisation during the republic period and also helped us identify an appropriate venue for the FGD. She played a key role in coordinating the session, identifying eligible participants and inviting them to the discussion. She had a good reputation in the community among women, her familiarity with community dynamics and prior experience contributed to a comfortable environment for the participants.

We maintained a low profile and used unmarked cars. My father was with me at all times as my Mahram. We had our Tazkiras readily available with us, and I dressed appropriately.

The interview with a Provincial Authority in Target Province II

Male field researcher

Unlike the experience with authorities in Province I, the interview with the provincial director in Province II went smoothly. He raised a similar initial concern, asking whether I was a journalist or YouTuber. After describing the purpose of research, he seemed to relax. He was an easy-going person. His office was very busy though with frequent interruptions from visitors. Halfway through the

interview, he suggested that we continue the discussion outside in the garden to avoid further disruptions. At the end of the conversation, he asked whether the information he provided would be shared with UNHCR and IOM. This question, in my view, suggested that there may be some gaps in coordination between his office and these agencies, particularly regarding differing eligibility criteria for returnees.

Other Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) in Target Province II

Male field researcher

The rest of the interviews were conducted without any major issues, except for the fact that we had to reschedule few of the interviews more than a couple of times as the key informants were busy with earthquake response in Kunar province. We remained flexible throughout this period, adjusting our plans as needed to accommodate their availability.

Organising and conducting Men's Focus Group Discussion (FGD) in Target Province II

Male field researcher

The male FGD in the target district encountered a major disruption that delayed the session by more than three hours. Just as we were preparing to begin, we noticed a crowd gathering outside the venue. Three brothers from a nearby family were insisting that they should be part of the discussion, assuming that the FGD was connected to some form of aid distribution. I went outside to explain that the session was only for research purposes and that participants were selected based on predefined vulnerability criteria, which they did not meet. They refused to accept this and continued to insist on joining, threatening to prevent the FGD from taking place if they were not included.

The exchange quickly became tense. They became frustrated and increasingly confrontational, including making verbal threats. To reduce tension and avoid further escalation, the community leader asked me to go inside and then contacted the district authorities for support. Two personnel from the district office arrived afterwards and instructed the brothers not to interfere with our work.

Afterward, the community leader explained that such incidents are relatively common in the district, particularly during household surveys or aid distributions. I did not start the FGD immediately, rather took a cup of green tea with the group members to have everyone settled and then started our FGD.

November 2025

Organising and conducting women Focus Group Discussion (FGD) in Target Province III

Female field researcher

We identified participants for this FGD through a vocational training centre that teaches tailoring and embroidery work to vulnerable women. A former girls' high school teacher, who we had previously collaborated with on research work in Kabul, runs the centre. I visited the houses of each identified FGD participant and invited them to the FGD. The FGD was organised at the vocational training centre in the community, which was safe and convenient for all the participants.

Organising and conducting men's Focus Group Discussion (FGD) in Target Province III

Male field researcher

A couple of participants were not interested in attending the FGD at community leader's house, raising concerns about community leader's integrity. The next option for the FGD venue for us was a mosque or another communal centre. Because mosques in cities usually remain locked outside prayer times, we hired a venue suitable for FGD and convenient for participants. Finding a rental venue with disability access was a bit challenging and this delayed the FGD for a day.

Other Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) in Target Province III

Male field researcher

The interview with the current authorities in Province III went smoothly, they knew us for our previous work and did not even ask for any documentation. The interviews with national NGOs were also easy to schedule and conduct as most of the participants were those with whom we previously worked, knew us for our work, and had good level of trust.

Overall observations: Lead Researcher

Scheduling interviews with UN agencies and international NGOs was a bit complicated, it required multiple follow-ups and, in some cases had to involve ALNAP to facilitate. We only had one non-response during the study.

Overall observations: Field Coordinator

Except for the two major challenges encountered in Province I & II, the fieldwork went smoothly. In Province I, access to data collection was initially delayed until the necessary provincial coordination process was completed and the situation was clarified with the relevant local authorities. In Province II, the process also required additional engagement with the concerned provincial department before field activities could proceed, which resulted in delays. Our primary concern throughout the data collection was ensuring safety of our field researchers and security/authenticity of the data we collected. This required extensive coordination and careful planning of each field visit, particularly for the women's FGDs which involved participants leaving their homes and gathering in a shared space, an activity that carries heightened sensitivity under current restrictions.

For the women's FGDs across all three provinces, we relied on influential women within the target communities with whom we had previously collaborated. Their involvement was critical in mobilising participants, securing safe locations, and ensuring that the discussions could take place without drawing unwanted attention.

Overall observations: Female Field Researcher - I

Aligning my field work with my husband's schedule was a bit of a challenge, especially if the FGD or interview is cancelled or postponed on short notice. I needed my husband as my Mahram to be with me during the field work and as he has fulltime job it had to be carefully planned. TKH remained flexible but my husband still had to juggle it around his schedule.

On the other hand, despite keeping low profile, going to the field with proper prior coordination, the fear of an unwanted incidents loomed throughout the field work making me concerned about safety of myself and my husband. I felt anxious when an interview or FGD was getting longer, fearing of unexpected events– as there are often discussion about female aid workers and researchers being

stopped or questioned by various provincial authorities. I even used to carry a copy of my marriage certificate with me while going to field for data collection.

Overall observations: Male Field Researcher

In my 11 years of data collection experience, I did not come across a situation of interviewing an individual in a heightened security environment – what I experienced in Province I made me somewhat unsettled.

We had previously worked with the community leaders in the target districts, and knew about their strengths, limitations, and way of working. This familiarity made coordination relatively smooth, and they also understood the nature of our work—research and data collection rather than aid delivery.

The community leader in Province - III was too busy and had no prior experience of facilitating a research assignment. It took a bit of time to orient him and ensure he understood the process, particularly the fact that the interviews and FGDs would not lead to any aid commitments.

From my observation, the national NGOs representatives were noticeably cautious when discussing challenges and instances of interference by the authorities. I had to probe extensively, and even then it was clear that they were reluctant to say anything that might be perceived as sensitive or potentially harmful to their organisations.

Overall observations: Female Field Researcher - II

I like my work and appreciate the opportunity it gives me to interact with women across different communities. Despite the increasing restrictions on women's movement, I felt fortunate to have my father accompanying me as both my Mahram and coworker during field visits. His presence made it easier for me to do my field work and gives me a sense of safety. At the same time, I cannot ignore the fact that I wish I could carry out research work independently and build a career from it, something that currently feels out of reach.

Engaging with women in the community has also been emotionally demanding, particularly during interviews with women who head their households. Witnessing their difficult living conditions, the extent of their daily struggles, and the limited opportunities available to them has been deeply distressing. These interactions stay with me long after the interviews end.