

# 'No skin contact with males': Afghan women left under earthquake rubble.

From the [Hindustan Times](#) and [India Today](#)

Scores of women remain trapped and neglected after earthquake as male rescuers prioritise men and children owing to the "no skin-contact" rule in Afghanistan.

Centuries-old customs that have long held women back in Afghanistan are now ensuring they are among the last to be rescued or not rescued at all after the deadly earthquake and massive aftershocks that reduced scores of buildings to rubble and killed at least 2,200 people.

In the absence of female rescuers, many women survivors trapped under debris are not being pulled out, while the bodies of the dead are dragged out by their clothes because of prohibitions on men touching women.

Rescue efforts have been stumbling upon not only over rubble but also over gender rules in Afghanistan which is governed by the Taliban – known for imposing stringent restrictions on women – since four years. This rule makes the situation even more dire in the absence of female rescue workers, a consequence of the Taliban's ban on women's enrollment in medical education and other public roles.

"They gathered us in one corner and forgot about us," a [New York Times report](#) quoted Bibi Aysha, whose village – Andarluckak in Kunar province – saw first rescue workers after over 36 hours of the earthquake ripping through eastern Afghanistan's mountainous areas on Sunday.

No one offered the women help, asked what they needed or even

approached them, according to the NYT report.

While emergency teams promptly pulled out injured men and children, 19-year-old Aysha and other women as well as adolescent girls were pushed aside, with some of them left bleeding. "They pushed us aside and took men for the treatment," said a woman

Tahzeebullah Muhazeb, a male volunteer who traveled to Mazar Dara in the same province, said it appeared as if rescuers could not see women as members of the all-male medical team there were hesitant to rescue them from the rubble of collapsed buildings.

It took rescuers 20 hours to reach Devagarh village on Monday in one of the worst-hit areas. When they did arrive, the women hid behind the broken walls of their houses after seeing the all-male rescue team, one rescuer told [The Telegraph](#). "We can't speak with the women or try to contact them because it's prohibited. Touching even a dead woman will have consequences," he said, seeking anonymity.

Hamid Badshah, a resident of Kunar Province ... described women fleeing the tremors, then turning back midway for headscarves. "I heard women turning back midway looking for hijab after fleeing from tremors and then came under the collapsed houses,"



An injured woman sits outside her house with children in Nangarhar. Some women reportedly ran back inside their houses to get their burkas and head niqabs when the earthquake struck and were hurt fleeing Credit: AFP

Kunar is a conservative area, so for cultural reasons women might end up being treated later. It's feared some women may have chosen to stay, or to wait for daylight to be taken to hospital by their families.

At Jalalabad's provincial hospital, doctors admitted that in the initial hours, female patients were refused treatment by male staff.

A Community Health Worker confirmed to The Telegraph that more than three pregnant women died because they were not treated by men. "I believe their number could be too high, in hundreds," he said.

While the Taliban have not released a gender-specific casualty count, survivors, doctors and aid workers consistently report that women are suffering disproportionately. Many remain trapped, untreated or unaccounted for, hindered by rules that restrict male rescuers from physically assisting them.

A critical shortage of female healthcare workers has only made this worse in the quake-hit regions. The New York Times report also mentioned how one of the hospitals visited by their journalist had no female staff at all. Sharafat Zaman, a spokesperson for the Taliban-run Ministry of Health, acknowledged the lack of female workers but insisted women were serving in hospitals across Kunar, Nangarhar and Laghman provinces to treat earthquake victims.