

The War on Schoolgirls: Responding to the Education Crisis in Afghanistan

POLICY BRIEF

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June 2023

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Introduction

In Afghanistan over the past four decades, educational opportunities, especially for girls, have been limited. Chronic poverty, war, insecurity, and cultural norms have all impeded girls' access to education.ⁱ The greatest barrier, however, has been the Taliban, which has systematically denied education to girls. In late 2001, when a US-led coalition removed the regime from power, it was estimated only three percent of Afghan girls were receiving some form of primary education.ⁱⁱ In the ensuing 20 years of quasi-democratic government considerable progress occurred. According to UNESCO, the number of girls enrolled in primary school increased to 2.5 million by 2018. Similarly, the number of women in higher education increased from 5,000 in 2001 to 100,000 in 2021, and female literacy rates during that period jumped from 17 percent to 30 percent.ⁱⁱⁱ

Nearly all of that progress was threatened when the Taliban regained power in August 2021.^{iv} In addition to other restrictions on women's rights, the regime began closing schools and preventing girls from accessing education, despite making promises to the contrary.^v According to UNESCO, as of early 2023, 80% of school-aged Afghan females – a total of 2.5 million – were out of school.^{vi} This denial of education to girls has severe social and economic consequences and darkens the outlook for the country's future.

This brief relies on primary source interviews to analyze the barriers to education for girls in Afghanistan and to assess the impacts on Afghan society of Taliban restrictions. It ends with a series of recommendations aimed at the international community. The analysis in this brief is based on high-level roundtable discussions held by the Afghanistan Policy Lab, as well as on an in-country survey, the respondents of which included ten female students of secondary and high school age who are now not allowed to go to school; ten female and five male teachers; and three female and three male policymakers who have experience in the areas of education. Separately, interviews were conducted with ten outside experts (five men and five women) who work in the fields of education, political analysis, and activism.

Background: The Challenges for Girls Education Before the Taliban

Even before the Taliban took power in August 2021, girls faced severe difficulties accessing education. Persistent insecurity, a lack of services in remote areas, and cultural factors all contributed. In an interview, Ibrahim Shinwari, the former Deputy Minister of Education in the Republic of Afghanistan, detailed these obstacles:

- Terrorism and terrorist propaganda made many families feel it was unsafe to send their daughters to school.
- There were few female teachers.
- There was a lack of schools and educational infrastructure.
- There was a lack of water and basic sanitation facilities in schools
- Many families lived far from a school.
- Poverty prevented many families from supporting their children's education.
- Teachers were inexperienced or unqualified.
- Teachers lacked access to materials and curriculum guidance.



- More conservative families would forbid girls, especially those in seventh grade and above, from attending school for cultural reasons.

Storai Tapesh, a women’s rights activist and founder of the Tapesh Foundation, which works on gender equality in Afghanistan, noted that cultural factors were major barriers to female education: “Even before the collapse of Afghanistan, 3.5 million children were out of school, and 85 percent of them were girls. Most families in rural areas of Afghanistan are conservative. They assume women should be homemakers who raise children and do housework.”^{vii}

Despite these obstacles, communities across Afghanistan found ways to educate girls, even in remote and impoverished areas. The picture below, taken in September 2020, showed girls and boys learning in a school called Funangziu in Pachir Wa Agam district in Nangarhar province.



The Taliban Motivations for Denying Education to Girls

The Taliban has stated it is neither appropriate nor necessary for women to obtain an education. That belief contradicts the words of the Quran, which calls for all Muslims to become educated: “Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim” (*Sunan Ibn Mājah* 224). According to Tapesh, “The Taliban’s ideology and beliefs contradict Islam and Islamic values. In Islam, education is a divine command for both men and women. The Quran and the hadith leave no doubt that women, like men, must pursue knowledge.” Moreover, she points out that there is not ideological cohesion among the Taliban and that many of the group’s members are illiterate and do not have access to accurate information about Islam.

She and others suggest there are other motivations besides religion for the Taliban to prevent women from becoming educated. They argue the main motivation is power because the more educated the population is the more able it will be to oppose the group’s rule. According to Sahira Sharif, an exiled Afghan politician, “The Taliban understand that if a girl is educated, it means that the entire family is educated. The Taliban and their allies are frightened of educated and intelligent women. They apply the saying: If you want to destroy a society, take the pen out of its hands.”

The Impacts of Keeping Girls out of School

The Taliban's restrictions on girls' education have had severe impacts on the lives of Afghan girls and on Afghan society. Not being able to attend school has negative effects on the mental health and well-being of girls. According to Mohammad Hamid Kadwal, a lecturer at Nangarhar University, "The closing of the schools has had a very negative impact on the mental condition of girls. Many are experiencing severe depression." Moreover, when girls are not in school they are more likely to face forced child marriage, domestic abuse, and other acts of gender-based discrimination and violence.^{viii}

Keeping girls out of school also harms Afghan society overall. Aqa Mohammad Qureshi, a writer and policy analyst, said, "Banning girls' education not only leaves girls uneducated but also excludes half of the country's human capital from the development process. Afghanistan faces a shortage of professional women in the public and private sectors. In the long run, this gap can only be filled through a standard education system in which women and girls have a significant role to play and learn. A healthy and educated society is impossible without healthy and educated women."

Sahira Sharif, the exiled politician, added, "Women are half of the financial and human side of society, meaning that the role of an educated woman in the economy, culture, politics, and governance of the society is as important as that of a man." Yet under the Taliban, women are excluded from government and most private employment, as well as the education system.

How Girls' Education is Continuing, Despite the Taliban

Even though the doors of schools are largely closed to girls above the age of 12, many are continuing to study. In a questionnaire given to 20 female teachers, students, and others in the education space in Afghanistan, 16 of the respondents said they were aware of ongoing educational activities for girls. These included both online and in-person activities.

Many female students and teachers have turned to online platforms for education. Mahbooba Akbar, a former lecturer, now teaches girls through her YouTube channel. "I was expelled from Kandahar Teacher Training College, and then I created a YouTube channel where I teach mathematics, geometry, and statistics online at the seventh through twelfth grade levels," she explained. "My work is welcomed and admired by people and my family, and I am driven to continue."^{ix}

Many Afghan students and teachers became familiar with online classes and learning platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in 2020, when some schools and universities closed and adopted remote learning. The challenge, however, is access. Afghanistan has one of the lowest internet penetration rates in the world. Many Afghans, especially those who live in rural areas, do not have access to the internet or to computers or other technology needed to carry out online education.



In addition to online education, some communities and families secretly try to provide in-person educational opportunities for girls. There are underground classes taking place in many areas, and some primary schools illegally hold classes for girls above the age of 12. In interviews, some of the teachers and parents who are involved in organizing these classes described the danger they face. One activist who organizes four classes for older girls in a primary school recalled an instance when a Taliban official arrived to inspect the school to ensure classes above sixth grade were not being held. “We had to help all the [older] girls escape out of the classroom windows,” she said. “We then threw their bags over the wall into the street and helped them to climb the walls. I was crying because the girls were panicked and running around scared, and the teachers were trying to get them out.” She continued to say the girls and the teachers escaped safely, and that despite the close call, “we still continue to study.”

Parents, especially fathers as they are responsible for the women in their household, can be killed for breaking the law and allowing their daughters to attend school illicitly. One father said in an interview, “From the time when my daughter leaves home for school until she comes home safely, I consider that she might be dead, and I think that the Taliban will come and kill me because I’m committing the crime of letting my daughter go to school. But I will continue committing this crime for the future of my daughters and my country. Today, illiterate people are in power, bringing the country to its terrible state. I don’t want my daughter to be illiterate.”

In Their Own Words: The Future for Afghan Girls

The 20 persons interviewed for this brief all expressed concern for the future of Afghan girls and the country should the Taliban continue to bar girls from attending school. Below are some of their reflections on the future. Their names have been omitted at their request.

“I am a teacher, and I am at home ever since the Taliban put in place their bans. I think of my students, who had dreams of becoming pilots, engineers, scientists, and singers, and I think those dreams are already fading since they have already missed two years of school. If this continues, the only future for women will be in the home.”

“Right now, the future of Afghan women and girls is disastrous because they have neither the right to study nor to work. Many educated Afghans already fled their homeland, and many others will leave the country for the sake of their children’s education. In another five years, there will not be an educated or literate girl or woman left in Afghanistan.”

“We fear schools will remain closed for years like they did during the Taliban’s first period of rule. The academic year has started, but the doors of schools and universities are still closed. It drives us crazy. We do not know what to do, where to go, and what to do to educate our children.”

“From the outset, Afghanistan lagged far behind its neighbors and other countries in human rights and education. After the Taliban regained power, all the achievements in these areas were undone. The current regression will impact the young generation. Other countries compete among themselves to develop technology and make social progress. But Afghan women and girls are imprisoned in their homes without access to education, employment, freedom, or justice.”



“I see a bleak future for the girls of this country. Already childhood marriages are becoming more common, and they will continue to become more so.”

“Girls will become invisible in society and live isolated lives.”

“I see a dark future for the whole country.”

Recommendations for the International Community

Global collective action is needed to support education in Afghanistan. It is time for a big reset; national governments, the UN, and international donors should prioritize Afghan girls’ education and pressure the Taliban to reverse the bans and immediately re-open schools throughout the country. For leverage, these actors should impose travel bans, increase diplomatic pressure, and attempt to isolate the Taliban further-

Universities worldwide should grant more scholarships for Afghan girls in different fields, and national governments should make more student visas available for female Afghans. At the same time, donors and international organizations should provide financial and technical support for alternative learning opportunities in Afghanistan, such as online education, community-based education, literacy classes, and mobile schools.

International organizations should help see that a formal curriculum aligned with international standards, such as those developed by UNICEF, is adapted and used in online education in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, transitional measures should be adopted for integrating learners into a quality online education system, including providing psychosocial support, teacher training, accreditation, and certification.

The world’s religious scholars should raise their voices more loudly. The majority of Islamic scholars worldwide have strongly supported girls’ education in Afghanistan. In the future, religious scholars' opinions should be considered while crafting policies, since when policies are aligned with Islamic principles and the Afghan context, they are more likely to be accepted by the Afghan public. The Organization for Islamic Cooperation should develop a body that includes female scholars to pressure the Taliban.

In the long-term, the international community should do what it can to help close education gaps in Afghanistan and ensure girls can remain in school. That includes long-term capacity building for the education system, including building schools and training Afghan teachers, female ones especially; strengthening partnerships with Afghan academia and civil society; and developing a monitoring mechanism to evaluate the quality of the education system.



- ⁱ “Afghanistan: Girls Struggle for an Education,” Human Rights Watch, October 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/10/17/afghanistan-girls-struggle-education>
- ⁱⁱ “Flying Down to Kabul: Women in Afghanistan - Education,” PBS, August 1, 2006, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/wideangle/uncategorized/women-in-afghanistan-education/2200/>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ “Let girls and women in Afghanistan learn!” UNESCO, January 2023, <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/let-girls-and-women-afghanistan-learn#:~:text=Currently%2C%2080%25%20of%20school%2D,have%20never%20entered%20primary%20education>
- ^{iv} “Women in Afghanistan: Developments over the Last 20 Years and the Return of the Taliban,” CESifo Forum, January 2022, <https://www.cesifo.org/en/publications/2022/article-journal/women-afghanistan-developments-over-last-20-years-and-return>
- ^v “These Reactions to the Taliban’s Ban on Women & Girls’ Education Show Why We Must All Speak Up,” Global Citizen, January 2023, <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/afghanistan-taliban-ban-women-girls-education/>
- ^{vi} “Let girls and women in Afghanistan learn!” UNESCO, January 2023, <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/let-girls-and-women-afghanistan-learn#:~:text=Currently%2C%2080%25%20of%20school%2D,have%20never%20entered%20primary%20education>
- ^{vii} “Afghanistan: Girls Struggle for an Education,” Human Rights Watch, October 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/10/17/afghanistan-girls-struggle-education> .
- ^{viii} “Through child marriage or paid adoption, Afghan girls bear brunt of crisis,” The Washington Post, April 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/14/afghanistan-girls-child-marriage-adoption/>.
- ^{ix} Mahbooba Akbar, YouTube Channel, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC3EdudToWB4SWUo3eICqOug>.

