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## The silent crisis: Afghan women and the right to education

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**Abstract.** This research investigates the challenges to Afghan women's education in Afghanistan under the rule of Taliban, focusing on cultural, socio-economic and political factors. Using a qualitative approach, it investigates secondary data from literature, policies and media to explore the historical evolution of the education of women and the effects of Taliban restrictions. The findings reveal that poverty, patriarchal norms and institutional discrimination strictly limit the access of education, in spite of Islamic teachings encouraging gender-equal education. The resilience of Afghan women is evident via online learning platforms and underground schools. The research underscores the Taliban's policies as opposing Islamic principles, which historically support women's educational and intellectual roles. It concludes with strategic recommendations, including international advocacy, community-led initiatives, and engagement with religious leaders, to restore educational rights. Wider implications emphasize education as a fundamental human right and a source of socio-economic development. Future research should study effective application of these strategies and their continuing impact on gender equality.

**Keywords:** Taliban, women's education, gender equality, Islamic teachings, Afghanistan

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### Introduction

The Taliban rule in Afghanistan has placed restrictions on women's education that may potentially slow down global human rights and gender equality advancement. Such unwelcomed governmental policies have questioned the possibility of economic progress and have also revoked women's fundamental right to education [1]. Decades worth of investment on women's education and empowerment seems to be getting undone as Afghanistan dives into what is potentially the worst cultural and political chaos in its history [2].

Education is the key to sustained development and social justice, and so is considered a basic human right [3]. In order for societies to progress, all women and girls in Afghanistan must be given the opportunity to receive the same education as their male counterparts. This is, however, a distant dream as such opportunities depend on the political and cultural situation, which is a long shot [4]. From 2001 to 2020, the country was able to provide an increase in educational opportunities with the help of domestic reforms and international support due to the strong restrictions placed on women education between the years 1996 to 2001. With the hope of seeing educational reforms, women during this period were positively optimistic. Under the most recent reign of the Taliban, the education previously available to females is now forthcoming to an end, which further correlates with the abuse and discrimination that is institutional wide [5].

The interpretation of religious texts by the Taliban sets a strong foundation of oppression towards Afghan women and serves to intensify the strict social system. Islam history does not support this sort of opinion because scholars clearly advocate women and men should equally seek knowledge [6].

This research addresses a crucial and timely question: How might educational strategies be designed to protect and improve educational access for Afghan women through existing political and social structures? The research combines literature reviews with policy assessments and media analytics to present detailed insights about initiatives and barriers to women's education in Afghanistan together with appropriate cultural strategies for their educational development.

Research demonstrates that Afghan females encounter massive institutional obstacles to receive education. Cultural norms along with religious beliefs use women's domestic duties as a basis to bar public life activities [7]. The combination of financial difficulties with inadequate facilities leads to long term educational exclusion because both poverty and insufficient infrastructure exist separately. The Taliban's consolidation of power has elevated previous obstacles through mandated school shutdowns and discriminatory gender rules and revival of cultural norms that restricts women from exercising their natural freedoms [8].

Traditional political rules can be effectively dismantled by reference to Islamic teachings about obtaining knowledge. Islamic scriptures and Hadiths establish that education represents a religious and ethical responsibility which all persons must perform independently of their gender [9]. Through this counter-narrative we demonstrate that Islam requires women to educate themselves to achieve individual expansion and community advancement. This investigation places these principles into local frameworks to activate stakeholder and social group support for women's educational rights.

The objectives of this research are twofold: This research both analyzes systematically the hurdles which

Afghan women experience in educational pursuit and establishes meaningful solutions which align with local traditions. The research draws from peer-reviewed studies as well as government records and media accounts to supply a detailed comprehension of the prevailing factors which fuel this crisis through secondary data analysis. The study addresses both ethical dilemmas and practical obstacles in conflict zones to maintain deep comprehensive evidence analysis.

The research follows a structure composed of four essential components. The research evaluates women's participation in education with respect to important political shifts in Afghanistan's history. The study also examines the cultural norms and the economic and political factors that contribute to present day barriers to education. The fourth part employs the Islamic Perspective on Knowledge and Education Framework for teaching and learning about the obstructions in education while working towards minimizing their adverse impact. The research ends with the important conclusion with some important recommendations including community-led initiatives, international advocacy, and engagement with religious leaders, to restore educational rights.

The research uses the above strategies and fully documents the concealed barriers in women's education participation and speaks for important changes in the system. The research reveals that educational access serves Afghan and universal interests because it calls for stronger protection measures for enabling women in Afghanistan to achieve their educational goals.

### **Historical evolution of women's education in Afghanistan**

From the advent of organized learning for women in Afghanistan, patterns of limitation and growth formulated in cycles have been occurring which followed the cultural dynamics and current regime change in the country. Over the years, the opportunities for women's education have been influenced by responsive government and ideological changes, permitting the rapid modifications from one socio-political transition to the next. This over time analysis of women's educational rights in Afghanistan looks at the journey of progress in relation with the women's position in education from a time featured by some advanced developments in the past to their present status.

However, during the initial stages of the 20th century, the women were obtaining only the minimal level of formal education in Afghanistan. Lack of resources, alongside imbalanced lifestyle choices, have been related by researchers to a number of indications, including certain health issues. While spirituality blended with household activities, education of girls remained limited to family teachings during that time. Quranic schooling together with basic principles of religious upbringing completed the women's education offered during that time because of the minimum information expected of a good wife and mother [10].

In Afghan society, established men-made authority structures limited women in such a way that they were fully capable but their traditional governance and rule channeled them to a private family role away from

accessing public learning environments. In Afghan society, this created women with limited access to formal education, thus leaving them in socio-economic secondary roles. The Birth of Change-King Amanullah Khan, who ruled Afghanistan from 1919 to 1929, exercised his power to set the benchmarks for modernization of the educational reforms taking place in Afghanistan [11]. Education, in fact, was viewed by him as the basic instrument on which the development of the country would stand; in line with this, trailblazing educational reforms were enforced to enhance educational access for women. King Amanullah's rule was marked by significant educational reforms. He inaugurated the Master of Education program, and during this same period, the first class of university graduates included 13 women who earned their degrees in education [12].

Under the rule of King Zahir Shah (1933–1973), Afghanistan experienced relative political stability, allowing for modest advancements in education. The establishment of more schools for girls and the inclusion of women in higher education signaled a cautious but steady progress [13]. By the 1960s and 1970s, women began to enter professional fields, including medicine, teaching, and law. The efforts put into developing a system of public education brought schools closer to the rural areas, though disparities continued strongly. More changes were evident in urban cities such as Kabul, while the most conservative countryside remained resistant to the very idea of sending girls to school. The Constitution of 1964 gave equal rights to men and women, thus encouraging female participation in education and public life. Yet, this improvement was tempered by persisting cultural resistance and lack of adequate resources [12].

Women's education took a dramatic turn with the Soviet invasion in 1979 and the ensuing war. The communist regime promoted gender equality, therefore investing in women's education. Many girls' schools were constructed, and more women went to university [14]. The Taliban, who came into power in 1996, gave women's education in Afghanistan an all-time low. With a strict interpretation of Islamic Law, the Taliban sealed girls' schools and banned female education beyond the primary grades. That was one generation of educated women that got lost during that time, for which the aftershocks can still be felt in Afghan society. The few underground schools that existed operated at great personal risk, offering a lifeline to a small number of girls, although obviously unable to meet the needs of the broader population [15].

After the U.S.-led intervention in 2001 and the new government that followed, a period of reconstruction began. Among many focal points, nationally and internationally, was women's education, by which significant progress ensued [16]. By 2018, almost 50% of female enrollment in primary schools increased, and thousands of women had pursued higher education. The internationally funded programs sought to build schools, train teachers, and remove the cultural impediments to education. Although the challenges were still very much present, most especially in rural areas, this was the era that shines as a beacon of hope for Afghan women and girls. More women started contributing to public life as they entered professions previously barred to them [17].

### **The Taliban's resurgence (2021–present)**

This marked a tragic reversal of twenty years of progress, as the Taliban returned to power in August 2021. Restrictions on girls' education were reimposed almost immediately; these included a ban on girls and women attending secondary and higher education. Girls were prohibited from high school through decrees issued by the Taliban government, as were women from universities. They then justified such policies, claiming they were in accordance with their interpretation of Islamic principles and Afghan culture [2]. In December 2022, the Taliban formally declared a ban on women's university education – a further entrenching of their exclusion from formal systems of education. These restrictions brought certain limitations on women's lives, such as bans on certain governmental positions, working in NGOs, etc. Due to these restrictions, the Taliban also closed organizations, which were working for women rights, and silenced or sent women's right activists and educators into custody [18].

These policies have brought Afghanistan back to the era of the dark period, labeling saying that the twenty years of efforts to zero. This coercion returns yet again and remains the dreams of millions of women in Afghanistan. These situations presented a critical blow to the socio-economic development for the nation [19]. The international community showed and faced a disappointing failure to respond efficiently to the crisis. The leaders of the world community condemned and called for revival of women's rights, leaders at best supplementary restrictions with verbal statements and representative actions. These phases have done little to drive the Taliban to revisit their policies as Afghan females persist in a state of a deep ambiguity. The humanitarian and economic disasters in Afghanistan further strengthened the worse situation, as these challenges have been strengthened by insecurity and poverty [20].

However, Afghan girls have demonstrated strong resistance to the challenges. The alternative schools recommence their functions as a way of confronting the Taliban in education. The platforms of learning, accompanied by international organizations, have become a significant source to reach students, who have been denied to go from traditional schooling. However, such struggles are very minimal to compensate for the unprivileged and under-resourced millions of women that have been refused to obtain their right to education. The revival of the Taliban Government has brought back the fear of the return to the dark days of their first governmental period (1996–2001), where women were denied to take part in their public life. Constant advocacy, along with well-planned engagement with the Afghan community, will make possible that Afghan women rights become the possible memory. The current situation in Afghanistan may indeed represent a clear picture about how ambiguous development may be about human rights issues in general [21].

### **Barriers to women's education in Afghanistan**

The restriction on Afghan women's education is the description of deeper structural challenges that have long

delayed development. These challenges are complex, multi-dimensional, surrounding economic, cultural and political dimensions.

The cultural values deeply embedded in the patriarchal societies limit the women's access to education. In many Afghan communities, the main priority of the society is domestic responsibilities and marriage over education for women. It is the opinion that education challenges the traditional dominant gender roles and continues confrontation to women schooling [22]. Moreover, the lack of teachers in rural areas worsens these situations, as families are also unwilling to send their daughters to school operated by men [23]. This cultural resistance is often implemented by religious interpretation also, they frame that religious education for girls as unnecessary or even not beneficial for girls [24].

Poverty remains an important barrier to educational rights in Afghanistan. Families confronting economic difficulties often prioritize male education over female, describing it as a more respected investment. The expenses related to education, including supplies, uniforms, and transportation further enhances the challenges for women education [25]. The destruction of infrastructure due to twenty years of war has also affected many communities without working schools, excessively those girls are affected who are not able to travel long distances for school. Economic challenges have further stressed the abilities of the NGOs and government to enhance educational initiatives, creating a worse cycle of exclusion [26].

The Taliban Government policies characterize the most significant and immediate challenge to women's education. The organized exclusion of women from educational institutions is implemented via punitive, decrees, and surveillance actions. The lack of political agreement to challenge these verdicts, both within Afghanistan and internationally, further worsens the crisis [27]. The international restrictions and freezing the Afghanistan assets have also stressed possessions, discouraging struggles to rebuild educational infrastructure. The Islamic religion's perception is one of the most significant frameworks for challenging the Taliban educational policies is the Islamic perception on education and knowledge. This view concludes on Quranic teachings and Hadith that preach that the gaining of knowledge is a universal obligation [28].

### **Quranic teachings**

The Religious Book of Islamic is Quran, throughout its text, describes to its believer how significant both the attainment of knowledge and education are to the believer. This can be found in many instances such as "Read in the name of your Lord who has created" [29]. Religious texts influence by communicating to all believers that seeking knowledge holds divine priority. In the teachings under Muslim, it is the right of all Muslims of either gender to attain basic education as a human right [30].

Through Quranic teachings, believers find intellectual and spiritual development because it instructs them to study and think deeply about observable phenomena in nature. Knowledge acquisition according to the Quran

extends without gender bias to all believers. "Allah will raise those who have believed among you and those who were given knowledge, by degrees" [29]. According to Allah's plan, through degrees, the knowledgeable people and the ones who believe will be moved to higher positions. The God-made truth in Surah Al-Mujadila declares that education takes people forward both in life and in society; thus, staying uneducated on purpose goes against the true Islam mandates. "Say: Are those equal, who know and those who do not know?" [29].

### Prophetic traditions

Religious teachings from Prophet Muhammad teach people about how education must equally benefit men and women. Prophet Muhammad revealed through a Hadith recording that seeking knowledge remains compulsory for every Muslim person [31]. Through their scholarly interests Aisha and other wives of the Prophet made significant contributions to representing Islamic knowledge to the wider community. Through her dual roles as teacher and scholar Aisha continues to demonstrate how Islamic tradition upholds women's essential educational roles [32].

Prophet Muhammad preaches practical education because Islamic education, along with the education of all the academic subjects, is reading and different fields of studies. The early evidence that women used to take an active role in scientific investigation, political leadership, and medical practices while depicting Islamic teachings of inclusive education to all is shown by Islamic historical documents [33].

"Narrated abu Burda's Father: Allah Apostle said, any man who has a slave girl whom he educates properly, teaches good manners, manumits and marries her, will get a double reward" [34]. It was narrated from Anas bin Malik that the Messenger of Allah said: "Seeking knowledge is a duty upon every Muslim, and he who imparts knowledge to those who do not deserve it, is like one who puts a necklace of jewels, pearls and gold around the neck of swines" [35].

### Historical contributions of Muslim women in education

Throughout Islamic history, Muslim women never ceased to make significant impacts on academic scholarship and learning. Alongside the knowledge sources that enriched intellectual pursuits within the society, the women members of the Muslim community opened education centers. The University of Al-Qarawiyyin was instituted by Fatima Al-Fihri in 859 CE as a mosque [36]. It became a leading educational and spiritual center of the Islamic golden age and operates to this date. Al-Qarawiyyin University exists today as the longest operating educational establishment on the planet due to the sweeping vision and sustained educational dedication of Muslim women throughout centuries. The manufacturing and establishment of this university is a significant example of how the Islam is strongly in favor and committed knowledge, settling a perpetual model that portrays women's academic development [37].

Via their leadership both Rabi'ah Al-Adawiyya and Zaynab bint Ali became the initiators in different intellectual domains of their time. The Muslim Historian Rabi'ah Al-Adawiyya obtains acceptance because she used her teachings to stress worship and divine love [38. P. 21]. In the limits of Islamic thoughts, Zaynab Bint Ali collected social equality, justice with religious instructions as active participation outdated social gender roles. According to these contributions Islamic values actively promotes women participation in intellectual pursuits as well as educational [39. P. 259].

Historically, Islam has set no barriers towards women's education and has not established any formal limitations to their intellectual development. Examples of early Muslim women serve as a witness to how education was set as an important part of Islamic heritage. Even more so, the Taliban restrictions go against the religious teaching; they go against Islamic beliefs.

### Strategic application

Islamic traditions, with their heavy doctrinal baggage, provide a backdrop upon which to counter the Taliban's extreme religious restrictions and interpretations. Because advocacy activities are thus framed in concert with Islamic beliefs, it allows proponents of women's education to create evidence-based arguments that draw interest from religious leaders and the local population. Islamic scholarship is leading and has the important potential to rebrand prejudice through the leadership of social discourse to renounce anachronistic religious views.

The establishment of educational development as a pivotal Islamic value turns educational investments from individual dreams to sacred religious imperatives and public duties. Partnerships with religious groups are strategic components to emphasize, through awareness programs and public seminars, building up campaigns that cite Quranic lessons regarding the value of education for both genders. It will be these movements that will be at the forefront of the struggle for women's right to education and counter Taliban propaganda.

### Conclusion

The women's right to education is one of the most alarming human rights issues in the current time. Restrictions on women's education are not only a violation of fundamental rights but could also be a major setback for the socio-economic progress of Afghanistan as a whole. Historically, Afghan women have struggled to gain access to education due to deeply embedded cultural values, political instability and economic difficulties. However, several stages of reforms and development have proven that when given the opportunity, Afghan women can contribute importantly to the development of their community. The prohibition of female education today signifies a tragic deterioration, downfall of decades of development and endangering the future of millions of Afghan women.

This research has widely analyzed the historical evolution of women's educational journey in Afghanistan, highlighting how different stages of development were

often shadowed by stages of severe restrictions, specifically in Taliban governmental rule. From the very sincere efforts in the early stages of the 20th century to the modernization policy of King Aman Ullah Khan and following expansions under Zahir Shah, women's education in Afghanistan has witnessed stages of deterioration and development. In the 1980s, the Soviet Union's back government made some efforts to promote female education, but later on in 1996, the Taliban government severely wasted these efforts.

After 9/11, the Afghan government brought the era of development, hope, with major international aids in women's education, yet this development was once again reversed with the Taliban's revival in 2021.

There are complex and multifaceted barriers, which prevent Afghan women from accessing education. Cultural values embedded in patriarchal setup, place a less intention towards female education, every so often giving priorities domestic responsibilities over knowledge and intellectual development. Economic issues further worsen these challenges, as many individuals struggle to afford education and give priority to male education over female education. Political barriers, including the Taliban policies on female education, have resulted in complete bans on education for females, efficiently removing their opportunities for professional growth and learning.

However, these policies are directly against the teachings of Islam. Historically, Islam highlights the search of knowledge for both male and female, as proved by several Quranic verses and Hadith of Prophet Muhammad. The text of the religion is clearly in favor of education with no gender discrimination, and examples in the history of many prominent women, such as Fatima Al-Fihri, who established one of the world's oldest institutions, underscores the role of women's participation in educational services. The Taliban's governmental policies about women are restrictive in nature; they lack scholarly consensus and are against the main Islamic principles. Therefore, historical guides and leveraging Islamic guiding principles offer a strong counter narrative

that can be used to advocate for Afghan women's right to education.

This study also proposed many tactics to remove these crises and revive the educational rights for Afghan women. Community-led initiatives, such as e-learning platforms and home schools, will provide the immediate solutions to bypass restrictions and provision alternative educational models. The diplomatic pressure and international community, along with some sanctions, can assist as influence to affect Taliban policies. The economic support initiatives, such as stipends and scholarships, can assist in removing the financial burdens on female education. Lastly, engagement with religious leaders and community leaders can assist to change the narration about women's education, emphasizing its connection with Islamic and cultural values.

In this context, the Taliban government's ban on women's education not only violates basic human rights but also hinders Afghanistan's overall development. Denying half the population access to education erodes the nation's economic and intellectual capacity, leaving it further isolated and underdeveloped. Despite these severe conditions, the women of Afghanistan have shown remarkable resilience, continuing to learn through underground schools, online platforms, and international aid. Their willpower serves as a beacon of hope in an otherwise bleak situation.

Moving forward, a combined effort of including international organizations, local communities, and Islamic scholars is necessary to encounter the Taliban policies about female educational rights. Sustainable resolutions must be executed to make sure Afghan girls and women can regain their right to education. While the immediate future is not clear, history has shown that coercion is never permanent. The support and collective struggles of Afghan women, human rights activists, and the world community will play a significant role in shaping a future where Afghan women can once again fulfill their dream to pursue education freely and contribute to the development of their society. The struggle for Afghan women's education is not merely a national issue but a global responsibility.

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