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Opportunities and Challenges for Girls' Education in Afghanistan

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Abstract: In Afghanistan's long past, there have been many ups and downs when it comes to girls' education. When it came to education, women in Afghanistan have had the worst time in the past. Before the civil war in Afghanistan, girls' education wasn't very good from the start. The three decades of fighting and war made things worse for girls who were trying to learn. During the time of the Taliban government (1996–2001), no girls were in school. With the help of the rest of the world and the formation of a new government in 2001, hopes came back to life. But even after sixteen years, the schooling of women is still not good enough. The main topic of this study is how girls and boys don't have the same access to primary, secondary, and especially higher education. The study will also look into the main problems that make it hard for women to go to school. A lot of different research papers, educational pieces, reports, and other similar sources were used to gather data for this study.

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Introduction

Every child is entitled to receive an education, as it is a fundamental right (UNESCO, 2022). Acquiring an education enables individuals to lead a dignified life and actively contribute to their community. Education is a significant factor that influences the social and economic development of entire families. Despite some progress in education in recent years, girls continue to face discrimination and are frequently denied access to schooling. In 2015, the UN Children's Fund published research indicating that around 31 million females who are of primary school age and 32 million girls who are of lower secondary school age are not receiving an education (Roser, 2021). In addition to being a fundamental entitlement, it is imperative that girls have the opportunity to attend educational institutions. Additionally, it serves as a crucial instrument that can facilitate the attainment of other significant objectives related to expansion. Acquiring an education is the sole means by which a girl can escape the cycle of poverty. Female individuals who have received formal education are far less prone to get into early and forced marriages (Smith et al., 2012). Consequently, their likelihood of perishing during childbirth will be reduced, their probability of bearing healthy offspring will be increased, and they will certainly ensure their children's education. When every kid is afforded a quality education based on human rights and gender equality, it sets in motion a series of interconnected opportunities that will have a lasting impact on future generations. Education is widely seen as a catalyst for personal improvement and national development. Providing education to both males and females will undoubtedly enhance their long-term earning potential while also expanding their future opportunities and possibilities (Kamal, 2022). Conversely, the education of women yields several social and economic advantages that undeniably benefit the entire collective. For instance, these advantages encompass an increase in the production of goods and services, augmented financial resources for families, a postponement of marriage, a decrease in mortality rates, and improved health and survival rates for infants and children. Historically, there has been insufficient focus on the

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aspects of retention and success, as well as the caliber and pertinence of education (Coolahan, [2002](#)). However, education has primarily emphasized ensuring equal opportunities and equality, namely by reducing the disparity in enrollment rates between females and males. Providing education of superior quality that is both valuable and practical is crucial for increasing enrollment and retention rates in schools. Furthermore, it is imperative to implement rigorous measures to ensure that both males and females may fully benefit from education. Both male and female students should receive equal levels of attention and emphasis on their education, as it holds significant importance. Focusing solely on an individual or a certain group will not result in achieving success. The emphasis on girls' access to education may overlook the educational requirements of boys. This approach fails to address the behaviors and attitudes that contribute to inequality, which is another inherent flaw.

The persistent gender disparity remains a significant impediment to societal advancement. Undeniably, women and girls have experienced significant advancements in their educational opportunities during the past two to three decades (Olson, [2020](#)). Nevertheless, they have not yet achieved gender parity. Numerous global challenges and obstacles hinder children, particularly females, from accessing education. This statement holds particularly true for girls. This category includes factors such as constraints on the supply side, detrimental ideologies and social norms, and various other issues. Girls' educational opportunities are vulnerable due to the presence of poverty and parents who do not prioritize their children's education. For instance, detrimental gender stereotypes and the diminished social standing of women and girls are types of discrimination that significantly undermine the significance of girls' education. Additionally, numerous other forms of discrimination exist. The daily attendance in primary schools is increasing. However, the proportion of girls who successfully complete primary school is typically lower than the proportion of girls who proceed to high school, notwithstanding this prevailing pattern. Girls often face obstacles that force them to discontinue their education, such as domestic responsibilities, early pregnancies, early marriages, or parental concerns regarding their safety and reputation (Olson, [2020](#)).

Objective of the Study

This article aims to conduct a comprehensive analysis of Afghanistan's education system for girls, examining the opportunities and challenges encountered by girls in their pursuit of quality education. This analysis examines sociological, economic, and political variables to identify the barriers hindering girls' education and propose potential solutions. The essay integrates empirical data, policy analysis, and case studies to propose policy recommendations, educational strategies, and stakeholder initiatives aimed at enhancing girls' education in Afghanistan and fostering inclusive and equitable learning environments.

Significance of the Research

The article is highly significant as it illuminates a vital topic with substantial ramifications for the country's development. The paper offers useful insights into the obstacles that impede Afghan girls' access to decent education by analyzing the intricate aspects of the issue. Moreover, it provides practical suggestions to policymakers, educators, and stakeholders, directing their endeavors to advance gender equality and inclusive education. In addition to its relevance to Afghanistan, the article makes a significant contribution to the international discussion on achieving gender equality in education. It serves as a great tool for promoting girls' education on a global scale.

Literature Review

The prolonged civil battles spanning three decades have devastated every sector of Afghanistan, with the education sector suffering the most severe harm (UNESCO, [2009](#)). The educational institutions were devastated and incinerated throughout the entire territory. Individuals who emigrated to various nations, particularly those who

possessed literacy skills, departed the area at an early stage, leaving the county enveloped in the pernicious veil of ignorance. The political environment in the country has had a significant impact on access to higher education, particularly for women. Access to higher education has been greatly diminished since the downfall of the communist administration under Najibullah in 1992 (Mashwani, 2017). During the Mujahideen government (1992-1996), access to higher education was severely restricted. During the Taliban regime (1996-2001), the situation deteriorated, and coeducation was prohibited (Gul, 2022). Women were also denied access to education until the government was overthrown in 2001. Under the Taliban regime, schools functioned only for male students, whereas female education was categorically prohibited and forbidden.

Consequently, the majority of Afghan females have been denied access to education and have consequently entered a state of ignorance (Barakat, 2022). There was a complete absence of female students in formal educational institutions, while the number of male students enrolled was only one million. Following the overthrow of the Taliban administration and the installation of a new government, significant attention was directed towards the enhancement of education. Undoubtedly, the education sector has witnessed notable improvements and continues to progress steadily. Following the reopening of schools, new educational institutions are being constructed in various regions across the country. Teacher training colleges are established in each province, as well as in certain districts. The network of universities extended to nearly every province. The number of private universities is growing steadily. Nevertheless, despite the numerous enhancements and progress made, the education system continues to face significant challenges, particularly in the realm of female education. Although there has been a significant rise in enrollment over the past few years, around one-third of districts lack educational institutions specifically for girls. In certain regions of the country, there exists a reasonable proportion of female students. However, in the majority of areas, females lack access to education. The literacy rate in Afghanistan is only 26%, with a significantly lower percentage of 12% among women (ReliefWeb, 2022). Among the population of children who are of school age, a mere 38% (equivalent to 4.2 million individuals) lack the opportunity to attend educational institutions, with the majority of this group being girls. Multiple factors contribute to the issue. The primary factor contributing to the low enrollment of females in schools, as stated in the 2013 UNICEF report, is the inadequate provision of schools and infrastructure. Conversely, the areas under Taliban control are severely impacted and completely lack operational schools for girls due to their opposition to female education. The frequency of assaults by rebels opposing female education has led to a notable rise in the number of girls' schools being shut down. Tradition is a contributing factor that impedes the progress of female education. The Afghan population is predominantly composed of Pashtoons, who traditionally do not prioritize female education. Girls are only permitted to receive primary education, which focuses on fundamental reading and writing skills (Shayan, 2015). However, their educational future becomes uncertain once they complete primary education. Girls just need to possess basic literacy skills, such as reading and writing, and any additional skills beyond that are deemed unnecessary. According to their culture and tradition, females are prohibited from leaving their houses unless there are circumstances of great urgency. Individuals who permit their females to venture outside their residences on a regular basis are regarded as inferior within the community. Factors such as poverty, security concerns, and forced marriages pose significant obstacles to female education in Afghanistan. This study aims to shed light on the issue of gender disparity in education and specifically focuses on the state of female education in Afghanistan.

Research examining the potential influence of political institutions, cultural practices, and religious beliefs on gender disparities in education. They encompassed a total of 157 nations from 1991 to 2006 (Goh, 2007). The findings indicate that the influence on female education does not stem from political institutions, whether autocratic regimes or democracies. Instead, it is the cultural and religious factors that contribute to gender imbalance in education by denying girls educational chances. The primary reasons for poor school enrollment are the inadequate number of schools and lack of infrastructure, which leads to vast distances that students have to walk and a lack

of security. Currently, there are a total of 14,000 schools. Out of these, only 15% are specifically designated for girls. Additionally, 50% of these schools lack proper infrastructure, such as buildings, clean water, and sanitary facilities. Afghan women face significant challenges in accessing education. The lack of security and the marginalization of women and girls have adversely impacted female education in many regions. Several factors impede girls' access to school and education, with social factors being the most significant. These factors, such as lack of security, exacerbated by long distances, absence of transportation means, scarcity of female teachers, and inadequate access to clean water and healthcare, have a detrimental impact. In addition to these obstacles, coerced marriages pose challenges for girls and women in pursuing their education. Security is a crucial consideration due to the prevalence of adversaries engaging in damaging actions, such as arson attacks on girls' schools, motivated by their opposition to female education.

The Status of Female Education Following the Demise of the Taliban

Following the overthrow of the Taliban administration and the subsequent formation of a new administration with international help, there has been a significant emphasis on education (Rubin, [2022](#)). The events that unfolded in the past thirty years in the history of Afghanistan were a harrowing experience for every Afghan. The majority of Afghans attribute the challenges they encounter to a lack of knowledge. Consequently, with the formation of a new administration, there was a strong collective demand for the improvement of the education sector. The government has prioritized education, and notable progress may be observed in multiple domains. Nevertheless, the progress of female education has not met the expected level of improvement and remains a subject of doubt.

Literacy

Afghanistan is in the middle of a war, so it doesn't have a great track record when it comes to school reading. The government has done some things to deal with the problem. Different NGOs and agencies across the country usually give different types of literacy classes. However, things are still not going well and are not satisfactory, especially for women. The reading rate for men and women ages 15 to 24 in 2004 was 50.8% for men and 18.4% for women (Mashwani, [2017](#)). Overall, 31.3% of people in the same age group could read and write in 2005; 19.6% of women and 39.9% of men were literate. In 2007, 50.8% of men (15–24 years old) could read and write, while only 18.4% of women could do the same. The lowest literacy rates in SAARC are in Afghanistan. The rate of young Afghan women who could read and write dropped from 19.6% in 2005 to 18.4% in 2007 (AbiRafeh, [2022](#)). The National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment also says that the national rate of female literacy is 12%, with 18 of the 34 areas having rates of 10% or less. In some areas, mostly those in the south of the country, the rate was as low as 1%. This is a clear sign that women don't have many chances to learn to read and write. At the moment, only 23.5% of people in the country can read and write, which is the lowest rate among poor countries. Of those people, 87% are women.

Secondary School

Each year, the amount of time that females are able to attend school decreases in Afghanistan (Ebadi, [2022](#)). The statistics provided by the Ministry of Education indicate that the country has a total of 5,124 elementary schools, 3,634 middle schools, and 2,702 high schools. Out of these, only 2/8 are high schools, whereas 3/9 are primary schools specifically for girls. There is only a single high school in all of Herat city. Due to the lack of transport options, pupils residing far away are unable to attend. This is the reason why young women discontinue their education after completing high school and opt to marry and start a family instead. Due to the lack of childcare facilities at the school, women are unable to return and so choose to stay at home in order to be with their children. There is still a significant disparity in the number of boys and girls involved in various regions of the country. Despite

an increase in the girls-to-boys ratio in primary, secondary, and university education in certain regions of the country, this statement remains valid. During elementary school, the level of gender equality between boys and girls was 0.69 percent; however, in high school, it decreased to 0.49 percent. Consequently, there remains a disparity in the quantity of males and females entering. At eleven locations, the proportion of female pupils reaches up to 30%. The enrollment of girls in Badakhshan is nearly equal to the enrollment of boys, accounting for 47% of the total registered students. Nuristan is second with a percentage of 45%, while Laghman and Bamyan follow closely with a percentage of 44% each. The admittance percentages for girls in the other provinces vary between 31% and 43%. Uruzgan ranks worst, with a mere 11% of its student population being comprised of women. Helmand ranks second with a proportion of 20%, followed by Zabul at 21%, Paktia at 21%, Khost at 24%, Badghis and Wardak at 25%, and finally, Kabul province with 30% (ReliefWeb, [2022](#)). There is a significant disparity in the number of male and female students at each educational level. These distinctions demonstrate their authenticity. The proportion of female students in college courses has significantly decreased compared to previous years. Significant disparities exist in the treatment of boys and girls throughout the educational system. While the number of women who can read and write is lower than that of males, it is still higher than the number of men who can read and write. With the exception of Kabul, where the rate is slightly above 40%, the literacy rate among women in all provinces is low. While it is true that younger individuals generally exhibit higher rates of literacy, male teenagers have a reading and writing proficiency that exceeds that of their female counterparts by more than two-fold. Despite the fact that many younger individuals possess superior reading and writing skills, the statement remains valid.

Higher Education

The gender disparity in higher education is more pronounced compared to primary, secondary, and high school. This is primarily due to the lack of alternatives available for women to pursue further degrees. The student population was only 7800, which was one of the lowest enrollment figures globally. In the year 2002, there were 27,000 male pupils and 4,200 female students. In 2004, the figures were 24,500 for males and 6,200 for females. In 2006, the numbers increased to 30,600 for males and 8,800 for females. In 2008, the figures further rose to 48,200 for males and 12,900 for females. In 2010, the numbers reached 62,900 for males and 14,830 for females. Finally, in 2012, the figures were 81,785 for males and 19,215 for females. These numbers clearly illustrate a significant disparity in educational opportunities for girls at the higher education level.

Challenges for Female Education

The distribution system of supplies to schools, enrolment, monitoring, and school supervision is severely hindered due to internal conflicts and inadequate security (Adali et al., [2016](#)). The opposition to female education exacerbates the existing issues. Early marriage is a significant impediment to female education. The primary obstacles to female attendance in schools, particularly in rural regions, are the general scarcity of teachers, the pressing demand for female teachers, and the lack of adequate physical infrastructure. The lack of separate buildings for males and girls, distant schools, insecurity, and the absence of female teachers are some of the factors that disproportionately affect females compared to males. Out of the total of 4.2 million children who are not attending school, 60% of them are female. Additionally, in 200 out of the 412 urban and rural districts in the country, there are no pupils enrolled in grades 10-12. Amnesty International identifies the Taliban and other armed groups as the primary factors influencing female education. Their focus is on specifically addressing educators, pupils, and educational institutions for females. The primary barriers to female education in Afghanistan include poverty, early forced marriages, insecurity, lack of family support, shortage of female teachers, long distances to schools, poor quality of education, absence of female schools, harassment, and lack of community support. It was revealed that 77% of Afghan females lack access to education, with an average education level of 1.8 years. The participant, with less than 13 years of formal education, stated that their family is the primary hindrance to their education. 16% of

respondents indicated that their family's work obligations have constrained their educational pursuits. 14% responded that they do not have access to any schools, while 10% attributed their lack of education to their family's poverty.

Conventional and Religious Obstacles

Pashtuns make up the majority of Afghanistan's people. The tradition and its values are one of the things that most affect the education of women in Pashtoon. All Pashtoons try to follow a set of rules called "Pashtoonwali" very strictly (Ali, 2013). This is an ethnic code that all Pashtoons understand. It's not written down, but every Pashtoon knows what it means. This rule or code is the main thing that keeps women from going to school. The saying goes, "For women, there is either house (koo) or the grave (good)". Pashtoonwali says they will let their girls go to school if it is close to their homes and has female teachers. Families in Afghanistan believe that they will send their girls to school if there are schools close to their homes. With the way the economy is right now, it doesn't seem possible to build that many schools. But there are some families who think and claim that girls don't need to go to school at all.

Social Standards and Marriage at a Young Age

In Afghanistan, girls are expected to get married young, which makes it hard for them to go to school (Siddique, 2022). This is because of both social and legal issues. Not only do the housework and other duties that come with marriage make it harder for women to go to school, but in the 1970s, a law was passed that made it illegal for married women across the country to go to high school. In September 2003, the Afghan government kept the law in place. So they could figure out what to do, the Ministry of Education set up a high school and trade school in the Ministry of Women's Affairs. Finally, the law was thrown out by a presidential order. Under the new law, married women could go to school. The official ban was lifted, letting a married woman go to school. However, the problem still exists because married women are not only officially not allowed to go to school, but there are also many other things that make it hard for women to get an education. Family and faith leaders are the most important ones.

Poverty and Insecurity

Lack of sufficient security is a significant barrier to the advancement of female education. The high incidence of violent conflicts is causing individuals, especially girls, to stay home. The insurgents are actively engaging in efforts to impede the operations and advancement of the present government. They hold deep dissatisfaction with the current educational system and vehemently oppose the education of girls. This is a significant impediment that hampers the advancement of education. Countries involved in armed conflict would experience a decline in the quality of their education systems. Parents are reluctant to enroll their daughters in schools because of concerns about security, especially when the schools are located distant from their homes.

Despite the availability of free education for all Afghans across the country, the education system in Afghanistan encounters a significant challenge caused by the poverty circumstances of families, particularly in rural regions and among girls. The country does not have the resources to effectively support disadvantaged individuals in handling the negative consequences of not receiving a basic education. The requirement for individuals living in a country with an annual per capita GDP of approximately US\$180 to pay a fee of US\$6 per year per child, in addition to extra expenses such as uniforms, books, transportation, stationery, and midday meals, places a significant financial strain on economically disadvantaged individuals. Attaining the necessary advancement in gender equality in education is a formidable undertaking. During times of economic hardship within the family, it is typically the daughter who is anticipated to make compromises. The parents' favoritism towards their son, to the detriment of their daughter, becomes more evident with time, particularly when the family faces challenging

financial circumstances. Girls encounter more obstacles to education as a result of poverty, primarily because males are given preferential attention. Households facing economic disadvantages may lack the necessary resources to enroll all of their children in school. At the primary level of schools, boys receive preferential treatment in terms of education in comparison to girls. In addition to the tuition fees for girls' education, there are supplementary expenses, including uniforms and fees for school lunches. In order to encourage the continued enrollment and retention of female students in educational institutions, it is essential to provide them with financial support and develop effective techniques to meet their unique needs. Approximately 36% of individuals lack the capacity to fulfill their fundamental daily requirements. A portion of the revenue is derived from the child's labor. The majority of girls are unable to pursue their education due to their dire economic circumstances.

Insufficient Presence of Competent Female Educators

Approximately 26.4% of the participants indicated that the absence of female teachers had led to a decline in female education. The lack of female professors in certain areas acts as an obstacle to the progress of female education. The percentage of female instructors in grades 1-12 increased from 30.9% in 2012 to 32.91% in 2013. However, the situation in rural provinces such as Paktika, Paktia, Khost, and Uruzgan is extremely dire, with less than 5% of teachers being female. 50% of the districts lack any female teachers. About 80 out of 364 districts lack female instructors. In most districts, there is a shortage of qualified female teachers, particularly for secondary grades. This shortage is a significant factor contributing to girls dropping out of school. A significant factor contributing to the scarcity of female teachers in suburban areas is the prevailing social norms and traditions in Afghan society, which restrict adult women from venturing outside their houses. The scarcity of proficient educators in a specialized field, such as mathematics and science, poses a distinct challenge for female pupils residing in distant areas.

Insufficient Familial Assistance

A significant obstacle to female education in Afghanistan is the absence of familial assistance. It is evident that family support is crucial for one's education. However, females in Afghanistan are denied this advantage. The prevailing conditions and factors in Afghanistan have resulted in a significant number of parents refraining from allowing their daughters to attend school. Research indicates that a significant barrier to female education is the parental choice to prohibit their daughters from attending schools. A significant proportion of participants (31.8%) attribute the hindrance of female education to a perceived lack of family support. A significant proportion of parents, approximately 55%, were surveyed and indicated that they could only afford to send one daughter to school. 19.5% reported that their daughters had initially enrolled in schools but subsequently dropped out. 14.2% expressed their reluctance to allow females to attend schools, while 11.3% stated that their daughters were not yet of school age.

Conclusion

The historical trajectory of education in Afghanistan has been notably unsatisfactory, particularly with regard to the education of females. The education of women in Afghanistan has faced significant challenges, particularly during the Taliban government from 1996 to 2001, when the number of female students was effectively zero. During that period, other nations were implementing contemporary educational practices. They were seeking solutions to enhance the education system in order to align it with the demands of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Conversely, it was the most unfavorable period for the education of Afghan women. Following the overthrow of the Taliban administration and the subsequent installation of a new government, the state of education has significantly improved and continues to progress on a daily basis. Nevertheless, female education continues to face challenges

and remains unsatisfactory in comparison to male education. Research has demonstrated that there has been an improvement in female education compared to previous times. However, it is still not at the desired level. It remains in a destitute condition. Despite the allocation of a significant percentage of the state budget and the assistance from the international community to enhance the education sector, the problem continues to remain. A significant proportion of the female population lacks access to education in comparison to males. The issue is prevalent throughout all levels of education, including primary, secondary, high school, and higher education, and is directly correlated with the various levels. As the level of education increases, so does the problem.

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