



Women's Education: Cultural and Religious Solutions from the Heart of Afghanistan

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COVER IMAGE: Afghan girls attend their class at a primary school in Bati Kot district of Nangarhar province on September 18, 2023. (Photo by Shafiullah KAKAR / AFP)

The ban on educating women above the age of 12 in Afghanistan is one of the most pressing human rights issues. This ban was implemented after the Taliban government decided in December 2022 to prohibit girls over the age of 12 from receiving an education, and has yet to be reversed, despite extensive international efforts. Reflecting on the history of women's education reveals an issue that has always been a point of contention within Afghan society. It is identified in many studies as a major barrier to the country's economic development, linked to the matter of women's employment. Currently, it poses one of the greatest challenges preventing the international community from investing in Afghanistan or participating in its reconstruction.

This paper delves into education's historical, social, and religious backdrop, revealing a complex interplay of power dynamics involving society, religion, customs, traditions, and the political environment. It identifies a prevalent pattern leading to societal resistance against Afghan women's participation in public life. Associating women's education and employment fuels resistance with narratives of moral degradation and religious corruption, narratives often crafted by an occupying force or authority advocating perspectives that deviate from societal norms.

This paper recommends transformative yet progressive solutions, embedding women's education as the rule rather than the exception. It advocates leveraging educational institutions that resonate with society's beliefs and traditions. Furthermore, it calls for establishing dialogue and integration channels between Afghan society and Islamic communities to dismantle the prevailing obstructions to women's education and employment.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper offers recommendations grounded in Afghan historical, social, religious, and economic insights to foster an education environment culturally attuned to the Afghan context. This approach aims to establish a new platform for negotiation with the Taliban government, as outlined below:

Investing in a 'Religious School' System for Women

Developing the religious school system and formulating legal frameworks for its recognition as an institution that academically and practically empowers women.

Enhancing Primary Education for Girls and Distance Learning

Constructing primary schools in remote areas, along with offering online educational opportunities for university-level girls.

Islamic Mediation

Emphasizing the role of Islamic entities to engage the Afghan populace in delivering educational services, while formulating messages in harmony with societal values.

Fostering Integration with Other Islamic Societies

Encouraging dialogue and interaction between Afghan society and other Islamic communities to counteract narratives that associate education with societal breakdown, moral deterioration, and religious erosion.

KEYWORDS

Afghanistan

Women's Education

Taliban

Transformative Solutions

INTRODUCTION

In September 2021, the Taliban banned education for girls beyond primary school in Afghanistan. According to UNESCO, “currently, 80% of Afghan girls and young women of school age are not attending school, which amounts to about 2.5 million individuals. Additionally, nearly 30% of Afghan girls have never attended primary school.”¹ The Taliban media rationalized the ban as economic resource shortages, which they claim hinder their ability to provide a safe educational environment and curricula in line with Islamic Sharia principles. However, they have not clearly defined what they consider to be curriculum compatibility with Islamic teachings, nor their intentions for a Sharia-compliant dress code for women.²

It should be noted, the Taliban has already revised much of the educational curriculum to suit its educational vision. Yet they use these curricula for male students which raises questions about the Sharia adherence justification. The established dress code for girls’ schools in Afghanistan typically includes the hijab, reflecting traditional public attire for women. Nonetheless, they could have easily altered aspects deemed inconsistent with their vision of appropriate hijab attire for women in a relatively short time. Security conditions, often cited as a concern, can vary significantly.

“Educating Afghan women has always been a complex and multifaceted challenge since the inception of formal education in the country. It has consistently faced hurdles, primarily because most solutions have been top-down impositions rather than stemming from genuine popular will.”

Women’s education is not just a basic human rights issue; it is also a critical factor hindering Afghanistan’s economic development. Studies have demonstrated that gender disparities in education

adversely affect the country’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP).³ This human rights violation also poses a substantial barrier to potential international investments and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. A private source indicated a ban on women’s employment led to the closure of 151 institutions and job losses for nearly 100,000 women in the beauty industry.⁴

Educating Afghan women has always been a complex and multifaceted challenge since the inception of formal education in the country. It has consistently faced hurdles, primarily because most solutions have been top-down impositions rather than stemming from genuine popular will. These approaches often neglect the importance of gradual educational integration, allowing it to evolve organically within its local context without external pressures. Consequently, more nuanced and progressive solutions that take into account the Afghan political, social, and economic contexts are essential.

This paper briefly traces the history of women’s education in Afghanistan, underscoring its politicization from the beginning, which is at the core of the issue. Education has been linked to either Western-aligned elites, causing societal anxiety over threats to religious and national identity, or to occupying forces using women’s education to bolster or justify their presence. Furthermore, the promotion of women’s education has been entangled with narratives conflicting with traditional family structures and the portrayal of the Afghan Muslim woman. As a result, the general perception of education is marred by notions of coercion, westernization, destruction of the Afghan family unit, and moral decline. This situation points to a dominant narrative that needs to be deconstructed.

The paper also focuses on the current state of women’s education under the second Taliban regime starting in 2021, noting the differences from their initial rule in 1996. It discusses the Taliban’s religious perspective and explores the possibility of dialogue to find preliminary solutions for women’s education issues.

Therefore, the recommendations are based on the history, culture, and religion of the Afghan people themselves. They underscore the need to provide education to girls in a way that is appropriate for the Afghan context—distinct from other political and social issues—and to advocate for an Islamic narrative that respects Afghan national and religious sensitivities.

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BACKGROUND

The phases of modern formal education in Afghanistan can be divided as follows:

First Phase of the Royal Barakzai Dynasty

The era of modernization in Afghanistan began with Amir Abdul Rahman Khan’s rule from 1880 to 1901.⁵ His reign was characterized by significant unrest and revolts from various popular groups, who perceived him as an ally of Britain, though Afghanistan was not under direct occupation. Some of his initiatives, which provoked conservative Afghan society, included abolishing the obligation for widows to marry their deceased husband’s brothers. His wife notably challenged traditional norms by appearing in West-

ern clothes without a hijab, defying customary practices and religious prescriptions.⁶

However, the specific call for women’s education in the modern system, or what is known as formal education in Afghanistan, was initiated during the reign of Amir Habibullah Khan (between 1901 and 1919).ⁱ The first girls’ school to open followed the English curriculum during his era but faced severe opposition from Afghan tribal chiefs and religious leaders. These reforms—perceived as undermining societal values and religious customs—were associated with his efforts to impose restrictions on dowries and to integrate Western modernity into Afghan society.⁷ Despite targeting Afghanistan’s elite, conservative factions listed these changes among the main reasons for his assassination.⁸

Amanullah Khan, Habibullah Khan’s successor,ⁱⁱ along with Mahmud Tarzi, introduced a novel reformist discourse in Afghanistan.ⁱⁱⁱ Tarzi, a progressive intellectual, believed education was key to economic growth, strength, and advancement.⁹ He argued for equal opportunities in education and employment for both men and women as a catalyst for societal, urban, political, and economic progress.¹⁰

Initially, Amanullah Khan attempted to harmonize Islam and modernity. However, his administration eventually clashed with conservative forces.¹¹ This conflict partly stemmed from failing to provide compelling arguments that directly challenged conservative norms.

Princess Soraya, Amanullah Khan’s wife and Mahmud Tarzi’s daughter, founded Masturat, the first girls’ school, in 1921. Between 1921 and 1928,

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- i. Emir Habibullah Khan (1872–1919 CE) ruled Afghanistan between 1901–1919 CE. He was assassinated during a hunting trip following popular campaigns against him due to his reformist and modernizing initiatives.
 - ii. Amanullah Khan (1892–1960) ruled Afghanistan from 1919 to 1929 and led his country to complete independence from British influence. He abdicated the throne under the pressure of the challenges that affected his rule. His brother, Inayatullah Khan, ruled for three days, after which Habibullah Kalakani seized power. Amanullah Khan died in exile.
 - iii. Mahmud Tarzi (1865–1933) was an Afghan politician and intellectual. He served as Afghan Minister of Foreign Affairs during Amanullah Khan’s reign, holding several diplomatic positions, and played a role in declaring Afghanistan’s independence. He advocated for removing the veil and increasing women’s public participation. Tarzi called for a renewal of Islamic jurisprudence regarding women’s issues and workforce integration through the newspaper “Saraj al-Akhbar.”

over 800 girls enrolled in the school. Ten of the 205 Afghan students sent abroad for higher education were female.¹²

This educational reform period also saw various calls for societal modernization, initiated by the ruling authority at that time, such as banning polygamy, abolishing dowries, and promoting women's workforce participation. However, the most controversial proposal was encouraging women to go unveiled in public. This suggestion was met with fierce resistance from tribal leaders and Islamic groups. In response, Amanullah Khan retracted many of these reforms, including bans on polygamy and raising the legal age of marriage. Consequently, women in Kabul resumed wearing hijabs, and the rural women's schools were closed. However, these late concessions could not quell the growing conservative opposition, which ultimately led Habibullah Kalakani to overthrow Amanullah Khan, who lived out his days in exile. Kalakani's nine-month regime saw the closure of all women's schools.¹³

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Second Phase of the Royal Barakzai Dynasty

This phase commenced in 1929 under King Mohammad Nader Shah,^{iv} who approached women's freedoms and education with extreme caution. From the beginning of his rule, he enforced the wearing of hijabs and shut down all women's schools. Additionally, he recalled and imprisoned female students

who were studying abroad, maintaining only one antiquated secondary school for international visitors. This school operated under strict conditions, reflecting his alliance with conservative factions.¹⁴

Following Nader Shah's assassination, his son Mohammad Zaher Shah^v ascended the throne. Prime Minister Sardar Mohammad Daoud Khan, a supporter of modernization, was more circumspect in addressing Afghan public opinion. In 1946, Kabul witnessed the opening of its first women's institute, followed by two girls' high schools and a women's college of education in 1947. By 1949, the first cohort of female high school graduates began teaching in elementary schools.¹⁵

The 1950s and 60s marked significant progress in women's education and workforce integration. Prime Minister Daoud championed a balanced approach, navigating between reformist and conservative ideologies. He regarded the hijab as a personal choice for women, advocating for moderation and respect for cultural values and norms. With Soviet support, he enhanced infrastructure, significantly boosting education in Afghanistan and cultivating a generation of female educators, doctors, and nurses.¹⁶

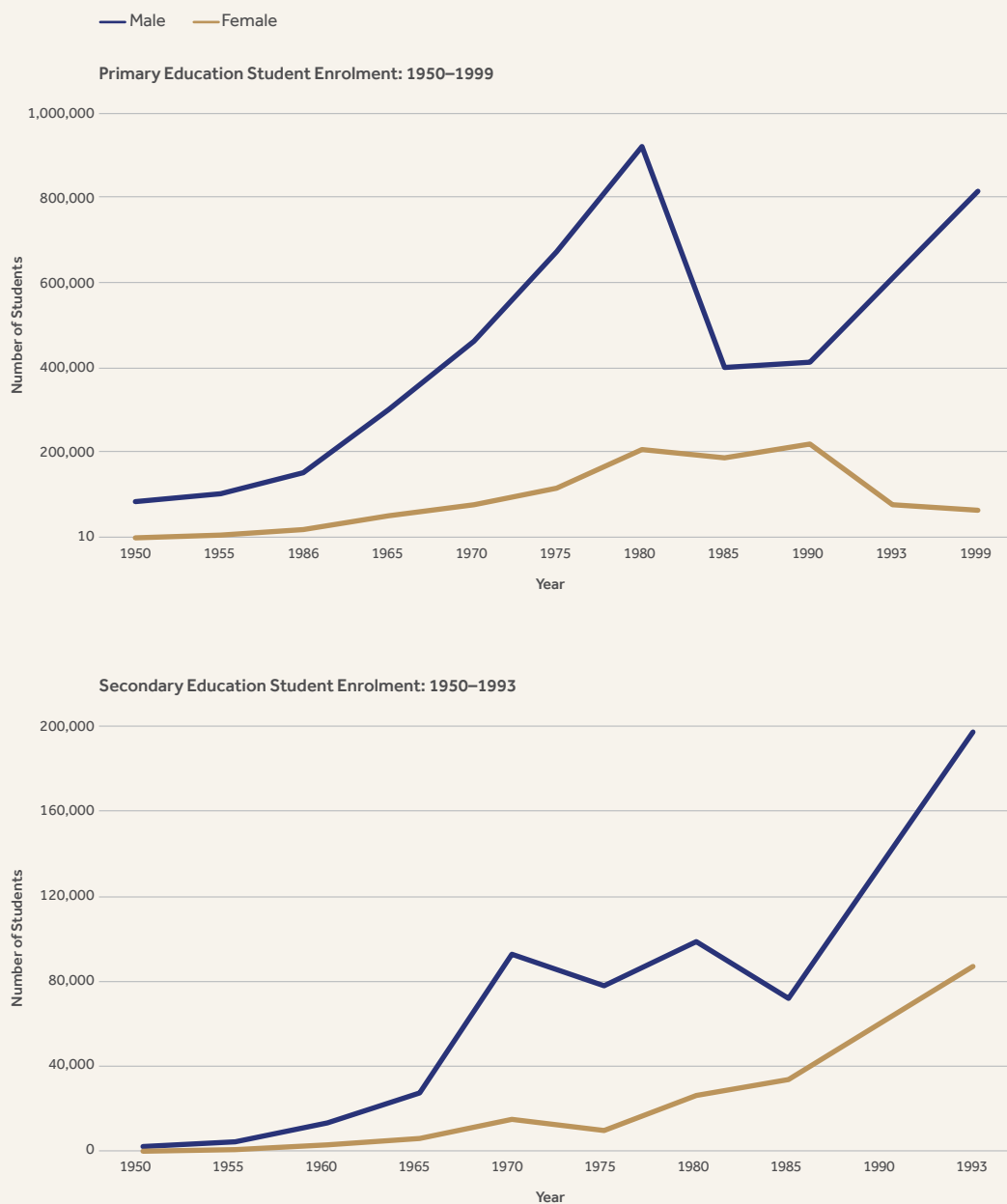
The third constitution, enacted in 1964, recognized women's political participation and voting rights. A woman was appointed as the Minister of Health, and three women served as deputies in parliament. This era also saw the formation of the first women's associations, campaigning against forced marriage, promoting female literacy, and demanding women's rights.¹⁷

Based on figure 1, which represents the enrollment movement of students in public schools by gender, a significant development can be observed in the number of girls engaged in formal education, both in primary and secondary schooling.

iv. Mohammad Nadir Shah (1883–1933) assisted the southern tribes of Afghanistan in regaining control from Amanullah Khan in 1929. He continued to rule until his demise in 1933 when his policies angered a Taliban member.

v. Mohammad Zaher Shah (1914–1978) came to power at the age of 19 and his rule lasted from 1933 until 1978 when he was killed in a Communist Party orchestrated coup.

Figure 1: The Growth of General Education in Afghanistan (Student Enrolments: 1950–1999)



Source: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).¹⁸

Communist Era (1979–1989)

During the communist era in Afghanistan, the Soviet Union ramped up its support for education through increased funding, curriculum reform, and initiatives promoting gender equality in both education and the workforce.¹⁹ However, the onset of the conflict in the early 1980s led to a decline in male student enrollment, while the number of female students in educational institutions notably increased, as illustrated in figure 1.²⁰

By 1990, enrollment in higher education had risen to a total of 14,600 students, with approximately 10,000 of them (60% female) and 620 faculty members at Kabul University.²¹ Yet, the escalating security issues and conflict between the Russian-backed government and conservative Afghan factions severely affected the education sector. Notably, the Soviet-led literacy campaign for both men and women ended up inciting considerable resentment among conservative groups throughout Afghanistan and among the refugees, who saw it as an intrusion into their societal values and traditions.²²

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Women’s Education During the Mujahideen Era (1992–1996)

After the Mujahideen took control of Kabul in 1992, discrimination against women in education and employment began to surface. Nevertheless, from their rise to power up to the Taliban’s takeover in 1996, a report by the Ministry of Education (1994/1995) indicated there were 628,660 students in Afghan elementary schools, of which

168,820 (27%) were girls, and 11,548 teachers, with 6,662 (58%) being women. In secondary education (grades 7 to 12), there were 282,340 students, including 85,692 girls (30%), with a teaching staff of 5,926 men and 6,522 women (52%). In higher education, there were a total of 10,700 students, including around 3,000 female students (roughly 28%).²³

Despite the considerable constraints on women and the difficult economic and security landscape, their education persisted. However, women’s education during this period was not as critical or contentious as it had been under previous regimes.²⁴ The primary challenges faced by women seemed to stem from the broader conditions and violations that affected the general populace in their everyday lives.

Women’s Education in Afghanistan (2001–2021)

During the Taliban’s initial ruling in 1996, women’s education was banned. However, with the commencement of the U.S. occupation in 2001, educational institutions once again opened their doors to women. Despite significant efforts towards education, particularly for women, challenges in girls’ education continued to exist.²⁵ The crisis was multifaceted, with major hurdles, including societal resistance, security issues, physical and verbal assaults on women en route to education, and economic constraints, such as a shortage of schools, deficient teaching staff, and administrative corruption.²⁶

According to a 2021 UNESCO report, the student population witnessed a substantial increase from 2001 to 2018, rising from one million to approximately ten million across various educational levels. This figure comprised 6.5 million primary school students (40% females), one million middle school students (35.7% females), one million high school students (34% females), and 400,000 university students (24.6% females). Furthermore, the female illiteracy rate saw a decline from 83% to 70% between 2011 and 2018.²⁷

HOW IS WOMEN'S EDUCATION LINKED TO MORAL DECAY, WESTERNIZATION, AND SUBSERVIENCE?

The intertwining of women's education with concepts of moral decay, westernization, and subservience is evident throughout the history of women's education in Afghanistan. From its inception in the era of Amir Habibullah Khan and subsequently under Amanullah Khan, women's education has been embroiled in culturally sensitive issues. Initiatives for educating women were perceived as attacks on Afghan culture, religious values, and traditions, particularly in aspects like the hijab, marital customs, and divorce laws, as well as the perceived imposition of occupier culture. The resistance to women's education was not unique to the Taliban era; even with advancements in women's education before the Taliban's resurgence, the percentage of educated women remained markedly low. The shift towards formal education faced significant hurdles, mainly due to deep-rooted societal narratives acting as formidable barriers.²⁸

“The U.S. authorities' use of liberating Afghan women from the Taliban as a pretext for war on the Taliban further entrenched women's view and their rights as tools for political manipulation and coercion against the Afghan people.”

During Amanullah Khan's reign, the royal family and aristocracy's stance on the hijab—portraying it as a regressive symbol impeding women's progress—played a crucial role in fueling public dissent that eventually led to their downfall.²⁹ This indicates that the political framing of women's issues gave traditional society ample grounds to view women's education as a conduit for westernization, familial disintegration, moral degradation, and an affront to Islamic values.

In Habibullah Khan's time, the incorporation of the British educational model triggered widespread

public discontent, a sentiment similarly echoed during the communist era with the Russian educational approach. As Professor Hamza Hakimi points out, during the American occupation, local television channels, funded by the U.S., showcased educated women in Western-style clothing and lifestyles, targeting particularly rural audiences who later, with the rise of the Taliban, gained influence in major cities.³⁰ This portrayal provoked the younger generation of fighters, stirring their national and religious sentiments in dealing with women's education.

The U.S. authorities' use of liberating Afghan women from the Taliban as a pretext for war on the Taliban further entrenched women's view and their rights as tools for political manipulation and coercion against the Afghan people.³¹ Efforts to regulate marriage and divorce, seen by Afghans as an affront to religious and tribal norms, were often linked to women's education. Thus, any advocacy for education was seen as an invitation to moral and religious corruption, leading some Afghan women to fear societal westernization and favor the preservation of traditional social structures that uphold family unity and strength.³²

THE CURRENT SITUATION

Hawks and Doves

Observers have noted a shift in the Taliban's rhetoric since Kabul's capture in August 2021, which differed from their discourse in the 1990s. Taliban representatives in the media have emphasized their commitment to preserving the legal and political rights of opponents, civil society organizations, and media agencies, focusing on the security and the well-being of the Afghan people. They have also affirmed their dedication to women's rights, including education and employment. So, what has happened?

The Taliban is not a uniform group; it consists of various internal streams and factions with internal debates. There are both military and political wings, and within the military wing, there are generations with different perspectives, yet united in their loyalty to the movement.

Broadly, there are two principal orientations within the Taliban. The first, known as the Hawks, is a hardline faction that views women's education and workforce participation as issues contrary to Islamic Sharia, traditional values, and customs. Leading this group are Taliban leader Hibatullah Akhundzada and several key figures from the current government, including the Minister of Higher Education Sheikh Nada Mohammad Nadim, Prime Minister Mullah Hassan Akhund, Minister of Hajj and Religious Affairs Mawlawi Noor Mohammad Saqib, and Chief Justice Mawlawi Abdul Hakim,³³ alongside a group of religious scholars close to Akhundzada. According to a private source, most scholars in the last Loya Jirga^{vi} meeting were in favor of women's education.³⁴

“A confidential source indicates that many Taliban officials now support the return of women's education but do not publicly express this view.”

The second group, the Doves, consists of members predominantly involved in civil work and those with higher education. This trend includes politicians and fighters, typically from urban areas, in contrast to the Hawks' dominant rural background. The Doves include those who negotiated in Doha and other prominent Taliban figures, such as the Minister of Minerals Mawlawi Shabuddin Dilawar, the Deputy Prime Minister and former head of the political office Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the Minister of Defense Mullah Yaqoob, the son of the late Mullah Mohammad Omar, the founder of the movement, and the Minister of Interior and leader of the Haqqani Network Sirajuddin Haqqani.³⁵ According to an Afghan journalist, the older generation of Taliban fighters is more open to modernization and the education of women than the younger generation raised during U.S. occupation.³⁶

The divergence in viewpoints within the Taliban led to a meeting called by the leader in Kandahar to discuss various issues, notably women's education, and to form a follow-up committee. The leader advised attendees to avoid making statements that could be interpreted as indicative of internal divisions.³⁷ Notably, the Hawks have not presented a robust religious argument against women's education that withstands broader Islamic criticism. Their stance often relies on poorly substantiated texts or arguments that other Islamic perspectives can counter. Opposition to the West and international organizations appear to influence their position rather than women's education per se; they perceive any concession to global pressure as a submission to Western values.³⁸

A confidential source indicates that many Taliban officials now support the return of women's education but do not publicly express this view.³⁹ However, any push by the Doves to modernize the Taliban's agenda could pose a significant security threat in Afghanistan, potentially leading to internal conflict. This is because powerful rural Taliban leaders and their followers view the isolation of women from public life as a cultural stance against Western influence. A new internal war, particularly one sparked by the issue of women's education, would not be conducive to advancing women's education in Afghanistan.

Customs and Traditions

Afghanistan is home to multiple ethnicities, sects, and social structures, with the Pashtun being one of the largest ethnic groups. They have their own language and adhere to rigid customs and traditions, governed by the principle of 'Pashtunwali,' which embodies the cultural and emotional traits specific to Pashtuns. This ethical code interprets practices aimed at protecting the tribe's structure and hierarchy. Within this framework, women's

vi. The Loya Jirga is a tribal institution that includes tribe leaders and dignitaries. The word is Pashto—Pashtun tribes constitute most Afghans. Loya means “the great or expansive,” and Jirga means “a gathering for reconciliation.” Essentially, it translates to “Expanded Council of Reconciliation.” A special Loya Jirga was convened for Islamic scholars in Afghanistan on June 22, 2022, to discuss various topics, including the issue of women's education.

role in Pashtun society is primarily domestic, and their venture into education is viewed as a deviation from traditional norms.⁴⁰ An Afghan post-graduate student, belonging to the Pashtun tribe, pointed out in an interview that a woman leaving her home is traditionally seen as a disgrace among Pashtun tribes, who have a longstanding custom of prohibiting women's education. They also believe that modern education disrupts family harmony. This tribal aspect thus presents an additional hurdle to women's education.⁴¹

However, it is important to note distinctions within the Pashtun community itself, particularly between urban and rural Pashtuns. Ms. Asmaa Qant, herself a Pashtun, managed to attain higher education with her family's support. She observed that some rural Pashtuns do wish to educate their daughters, although they are in the minority. Those who oppose women's education are in alignment with other conservative elements from Tajik tribes and beyond.⁴²

“**Entrenched customs and traditions might not be the sole reason for hindering women's education but are among several critical and inter-related factors. These include issues like harassment, abduction, and rape, contributing to women's physical insecurity.**”

Therefore, entrenched customs and traditions might not be the sole reason for hindering women's education but are among several critical and inter-related factors. These include issues like harassment, abduction, and rape, contributing to women's physical insecurity. Women who face physical harassment and kidnapping suffer compounded damages, with societal stigma leading to severe familial backlash. Families often abandon or ostracize girls abducted on their way to school. In such cases, the victims are frequently blamed for their predicament, especially if they encounter harassment. As a result, many

families prefer to keep their daughters out of school to avoid societal disgrace.⁴³

Significantly, most Taliban fighters and leaders come from rural Pashtun backgrounds. In discussions with a Taliban official, it was noted that the Taliban considers these traditions and security challenges when addressing women's education. The Taliban acknowledges the injustices women face in conservative circles, such as the denial of inheritance rights and non-recognition of their capacity to manage external affairs. Consequently, the group has issued several statements condemning these injustices.⁴⁴

The Educational System from a Religious Perspective in Afghanistan

Islamic Sharia emphasizes the need to guide interactions between genders and ensure safe spaces for women that protects them from male harassment in public areas. Historically, Islamic urban planning often involved gender segregation. Many believe that the modern contemporary educational system, drawn from a different intellectual space than the Islamic cultural and intellectual context, has faced challenges in integration and adaptation in Islamic countries since the early 20th century. Afghanistan, in particular, has struggled with incorporating modern formal education for Muslim women.

A major hindrance to adapting to Islamic rules and norms is the lack of educational infrastructure and economic resources. In the Afghan primary education system, gender mixing is acceptable until puberty. However, the real issue arises in middle and high schools, where many parents prevent their daughters from attending due to the presence of male teachers. Furthermore, there is a shortage of female educators to manage and teach at all-girls schools nationwide. The scarcity of rural girls receiving family support for education also discourages the establishment of girls' schools in remote areas, limiting their options as traveling to distant schools or attending boys' schools are not feasible alternatives.⁴⁵

In higher education in major cities, especially Kabul, there has been systematic stigmatization over the decades due to gender mixing at university. Notably, there are two all-women universities in Kabul with exclusively female students and staff, yet they were closed along with the nationwide ban on women's education. When inquiring a Taliban official about their Sharia-compliant closure of these institutions, he indicated that it was a necessary exception to a general Taliban policy.⁴⁶

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BETWEEN THE HANAFI SCHOOL OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT AND TALIBAN SCHOLARS' JURISPRUDENCE

One of the key texts foundational to the Hanafi school,^{vii} dominant in Afghanistan, categorizes knowledge into religious and worldly. Religious knowledge is further divided into two parts: general knowledge that every Muslim should possess, related to worship and daily life; and specialized knowledge, including Quranic studies, Hadith, jurisprudence, and other religious sciences. This is considered a collective obligation (*fard kifayah*), meaning if a few individuals in society undertake it, it suffices for the rest.

Worldly sciences are classified as permissible (*mubah*) and collectively obligatory (*fard kifayah*). Fields like medicine, engineering, and administration are permissible for all, but become a collective obligation if no one pursues them, as societal wel-

fare depends on these specializations. Importantly, in these sciences, there is no distinction between men and women.⁴⁷

The Taliban does not dispute the obligation of religious education related to women's daily lives or the permissibility of specialized Islamic education. However, their debate centers on the necessity of women learning worldly sciences, especially those where men can suffice, like civil engineering, which may involve interactions with men or expose women to risk. Nevertheless, they generally recognize the importance of medical education for women, as Islamic law prefers women to consult female doctors.⁴⁸

Moreover, in their restrictions on Sharia-permitted educational rights for women, Taliban concerns often revolve around issues such as leaving home without a male guardian, unregulated interactions with men, wearing non-Islamic attire, or neglecting familial duties. This stance is rooted in the narrative that links education with moral degradation.⁴⁹

Therefore, Muslim scholars—including those from the Hanafi school—attempt to persuade the Taliban; often these discussions shift to customs and traditions. This is because Islamic Sharia does not inherently prohibit education, and the Taliban lacks a strong religious argument. Their stance can be countered with other interpretations. This suggests a dialogue opportunity that leverages Islamic discourse to support the cause for education.

BREAKING THE NARRATIVE

Historically, various parties have utilized the issue of women's education as a political tool.⁵⁰ It has often been a component in agendas aimed at initiating top-down political and social change. The Afghan people, especially resistant to impositions from Western influences, necessitate the exploration of gradual, culturally embedded solutions. Hence, it is

vii. The Hanafi school is one of the four Sunni Islamic legal schools and is considered one of the most widespread.

crucial to develop alternative narratives for women's education, dismantling existing narratives that link education to the Muslim families being undermined and deviating from traditional and religious norms.

Religious Schools as an Alternative to Formal Education

As established earlier, the Taliban cannot ban education related to religious aspects. Given that the "madrasa"^{viii} system has remained resilient against social stigmatization in Afghanistan since Islam's advent. This educational model could serve as a viable pathway to normalize women's education within the societal fabric. It would enable education to gradually integrate into the Afghan context without significant social resistance.

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The Oslo Peace Research Institute conducted research on transboundary religious education between Afghanistan and Pakistan. One key finding is the Afghan inclination towards these schools for girls is deemed culturally appropriate.⁵¹ Interestingly, the madrasa system has evolved over time, integrating worldly subjects such as history, geography, mathematics, and languages, alongside Islamic sciences. This inclusion has been met without significant resistance. In addition, legal modifications within this educational system allow these schools to grant primary or secondary certificates after a certain age and upon passing ministry examinations.⁵²

If we consider that the literacy rate among women in Afghanistan accounts for 23% of the total female population,⁵³ it can be asserted that combating illiteracy is a priority in the matter of women's education. Since formal schools are concentrated in urban areas and less prevalent in rural areas, community schools have become a viable solution for enabling girls to acquire literacy skills. A UNESCO report (2020) on inclusive education indicated that community schools have played a positive role in providing education to women in Afghanistan.⁵⁴

However, following the emergence of the Taliban and the subsequent 9/11 attacks, a strong association was made between terrorism and religious schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Subsequent studies dedicated to investigating the roots of terrorism have determined that this association is not accurate.⁵⁵ These schools typically focus on religious education without engaging in political affairs, and violence and radicalism are more often linked to personal or economic factors rather than the educational institutions themselves.⁵⁶

Furthermore, it is possible to learn from the experiences of Islamic countries where there has been cultural resistance to formal education, yet they have managed to present legal frameworks that integrate religious education into the general education system. For instance, in Mauritania, UNICEF recognized a project that introduced scientific subjects, such as science and mathematics, into 23 "mahadras"^{ix} and included training for their teachers as a promising and applicable project. This approach could be an effective way to provide education to children outside the formal education system.⁵⁷

Alternative Model/Integration

Presenting women's education to Afghan society as a radical social, economic, and political transformation project since the early 20th century has resulted

viii. The term madrasa in Afghanistan and Pakistan is used to refer to a religious school, not a school in general. Often, this type of school relies on local community funding.

ix. The term mahadra is used to refer to a religious school in Mauritania, and it carries the same meaning as the term madrasa in the Afghan context.

in apprehension and concern among a wide conservative demographic. This calls for the decoupling of education from notions of moral corruption, social disintegration, and ethical decay.

“**Breaking Afghanistan’s intellectual isolation from other Islamic societies, such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Turkey, Iran, or Arab Islamic countries, could play a significant role in normalizing women’s work in conservative circles.**”

One of the key methods to break this linkage in the collective mindset is to offer an alternative narrative, leveraging multiple approaches. The most significant among these is presenting an alternative, exemplary Islamic society model where women are educated while adhering to traditional norms and Islamic Sharia.⁵⁸ This could involve showcasing successful, educated Muslim women through popular media in Afghanistan, such as radio programs that can easily reach remote areas.⁵⁹ The focus should be on highlighting the history and achievements of Muslim women who have attained high educational levels while maintaining their commitment to the hijab, family values, and Islamic religion. Also, showcasing gender-segregated academic environments, like Saudi universities or Qatar’s National University, and offering scholarships for these institutions can be effective. These models should be introduced in ways accessible to the general public, not just to elites or authorities. Countries and donor organizations could contribute by providing financial support to establish educational institutions for women that meet these criteria.

Breaking Afghanistan’s intellectual isolation from other Islamic societies, such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Turkey, Iran, or Arab Islamic countries, could play a significant role in normalizing women’s work in conservative circles. The experiences of

these nations can challenge the Afghan societal axioms regarding the perceived harm of women’s education, offering more substantial arguments to those advocating for women’s work.⁶⁰ Hence, it is extremely important for Islamic countries and entities focused on women’s issues to foster dialogue and interaction with the Afghan populace; women’s issues is not solely a governmental matter of the Islamic Emirate but is primarily a societal issue.

Supporting Primary Education and E-Learning for Universities

A Taliban official mentioned in an interview that there is a substantial lack of infrastructure in primary schools and numerous challenges to providing education for girls at this level. The official elaborated that the donor community’s reluctance to assist in primary education—focusing only on women’s education—angers those who oppose women’s education. This is because solely emphasizing women’s education—excluding younger girls—hints that the issue is not merely about education but an intent to induce societal changes in Afghanistan, which they reject.⁶¹ Thus, it’s crucial to offer both financial and academic support to expand the reach of women’s education, beginning with primary education which the Taliban has not forbidden.

Additionally, supporting girls reaching university age can be achieved by offering scholarships for online university programs, or creating online courses tailored to them from Afghan or international universities, aiding in the completion of their education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Taliban is not the sole barrier in the matter of women's education. A large part of their stance is driven by a desire not to provoke Afghan society. Therefore, focusing on more fundamental solutions that address the Afghan populace through Islamic rhetoric from non-Western sources is important. The solution should emanate from within Afghanistan, without stirring Afghan sensitivities against Western values. Here are four proposed solutions:

- Investing in the religious schooling system for women, including infrastructure provision and institutional backing.
- Engaging Afghan society with Islamic discourse from non-Western entities, emphasizing women's rights in Islamic law, and presenting models of educated Muslim women who conform to both Sharia and societal customs.
- Working to integrate Afghan society with other Islamic communities and breaking its intellectual isolation through Islamic-Islamic dialogues. This could alter their perceptions towards women's education and employment or may include establishing branches of Islamic universities from the broader Islamic world in Afghanistan.
- Supporting primary education for girls by helping to establish schools in remote areas and supplying educational resources to existing schools. Offering online educational programs for women could significantly improve their conditions and increase the number of educated women in Afghanistan.

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