

The Afghan Crisis, Higher Education and Female's Access to Education

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The Afghanistan Conflict and Crisis

Afghanistan is a landlocked country located at the crossroads of Central Asia and South Asia with long pre-historic evidence of the existence of people who lived there since 5000 BC (World History Encyclopedia, n.d.). Since then, several pre-historic civilizations and historical dynasties (from Oxus/Bactria and Gandhara civilizations to the Achaemenid, and Alexander the Great, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Parthian, and Sasanian empires and periods) existed and ruled there under different names, kingdoms, and empires. The contemporary history of geography which was later called Afghanistan began with the Durrani Dynasty in the mid-18th century (1747), however, the political border shrank and finally fixated by the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Although Afghanistan was never colonized and was not part of the British Empire, it had a British protectorate status for 4 decades (1879-1919). The country gained its independence after the third Anglo-Afghan war and by signing the Anglo-Afghan Treaty in August 1919 under the young king Amanullah Khan. King Amanullah (1919-1929) began the first rapid modernization wave of the country in numerous dimensions including education, industry, administration, and cultural-religious domains. As a newly independent state, Afghanistan had to face external and internal challenges on the way to remaining independent and neutral externally and developing and modernizing internally. The external and internal challenges (mainly as a result of fundamental and rapid reforms) eventually halted the modernization process (Malik, 2011) and led to the collapse of the first kingdom after independence and the exile of King Amanullah Khan in 1929.

The short unrest and unstable period of Habibullah Kalakani (Jan-Oct 1929) and Mohammad Nadir Shah (1929-1933) was followed by a long, stable, and peaceful period of 4 decades of his son's ruling, King Mohammad Zahir until he was deposed in 1973 by his cousin Mohammad Daud Khan who ended the kingdom and became the first president of the republic of Afghanistan (1973-1978). The longest civil war and the invasion of the country by the USSR began after Daud's deposition and assassination by the pro-Soviet revolutionist party in 1978. This was the beginning of pro-Soviet regimes in Kabul and the

resistance continued for several decades and resulted in the loss of hundreds of thousands of Afghan civilians and forced migrations of several millions to the neighboring countries and worldwide.

A decade of resistance against the pro-Soviet government and invasion of the country by the former USSR (1979-1989), continued by another decade of civil war among the numerous Mujahideen factions vied for power until the Taliban emerged in 1996 to substitute existing in-war Mujahideen factions. The Taliban could eventually control most of the country including Kabul by 2001. During this period of brutal civil war, they witnessed widespread destruction of the basic infrastructures and violations of human rights. The forgotten country trapped in civil war supported and backed by several countries in the region and beyond suddenly became the focus of the international and Western countries when the United States and its allies in NATO launched a military intervention after the 9/11 airplane attacks in New York and The Pentagon to target Al-Qaeda and oust the Taliban.

Despite the initial hope and optimism for the end of two decades of conflicts and the beginning of peace and stability in the country, the Taliban reformed in Pakistan and began their guerilla and suicide attacks and bomb explosions against the newly transitioned administration and government and the international forces (NATO). The country continued to face insurgency, political instability, and challenges related to governance, security, and development in the two following decades until the withdrawal of US-led NATO forces in August 2021 and the takeover of the country by the Taliban for the second time.

Internal and External Factors Contributing to the Crisis in Afghanistan

The recent four decades of instability, political crisis, and violence in Afghanistan which began with the military coup of the pro-Soviet parties against Mohammad Daud Khan in 1978 and followed by the Soviet military invasion of the country in 1979 can be attributed to a complex interplay of several internal and external factors. Internal factors have significantly contributed to the protracted conflict and violence in Afghanistan over the last four decades. These internal factors are deeply rooted in the country's history, society, politics, and governance structures. Some of the main internal factors that have played a role, especially in the recent conflicts since the 1980s are as follows.

1. *Ethnic and Tribal Divisions:* Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic and multi-tribal society with a history of ethnic tension. Although the Afghan constitution of 2004 referred to 14 ethnic groups, some other sources including the official government reports refer to more than 50 ethnic groups. Competition for political power and resources among major ethnic groups, such as Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, and other minor ethnic groups, has fueled internal conflicts. This is especially true after the end of the Cold War when the Afghan war and resistance against the Soviet invasion transformed from a mainly ideological struggle into a brutal ethno-nationalist conflict (Amin, 1998).

2. *Historical Grievances and Resentment*: Deep-seated historical grievances related to land, power, and resources have contributed to the conflict. Past injustices, including land disputes and historical power imbalances, remain sources of contention (Sadr, 2019).
3. *Weak Governance and Corruption*: Corruption, nepotism, and weak governance have plagued Afghanistan for decades. The lack of effective state institutions, coupled with widespread corruption at all levels, has undermined public trust and hindered the establishment of a stable government, refueled grievances against the Afghan government, and channeled support to the insurgencies (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2016).
4. *Warlordism and Factionalism*: The fragmentation of power and influence among warlords and factions during and after the Soviet-Afghan War and the subsequent civil war created a culture of warlordism and factionalism which impeded state consolidation and fostered ongoing violence (Cassidy, 2012).
5. *Lack of Political Consensus*: Afghanistan has struggled to achieve a stable and inclusive political consensus. Disputes over election results, power-sharing agreements, and political ideologies have hindered the formation of a unified national government, contributing to ongoing political instability. The post-2001 governing architecture also enabled an “elite orientation toward self-aggrandizement, parochialism, and brinkmanship that has had deleterious effects on the work of key institutions and sectors” in the country (United States Institute for Peace, 2021).
6. *Economic Challenges and Poverty*: Poverty and conflict go side by side in most of the poorest and least developed countries (Marks, 2016). Poverty, unemployment, and economic instability have been pervasive issues in Afghanistan. The lack of economic opportunities has fueled discontent and provided fertile ground for recruitment by militant groups.
7. *Opium Economy and Criminal Networks*: Afghanistan's position as a major producer of opium poppy has created a substantial illegal drug trade. The opium trade has become deeply embedded in the politics of the country and the region (United States Institute of Peace, 2009), and criminal networks and the opium economy have financed insurgent groups, contributing to the perpetuation of violence and conflict (DuPee, 2012).
8. *Illiteracy and Education*: Disparities in access to education, particularly in rural and conflict-affected areas, have fueled grievances. Limited access to quality education has perpetuated a cycle of poverty and insecurity. Globally, although education has not been a primary cause of conflict, it has often been an underlying element in the political dynamic pushing countries towards armed conflict (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization - UNESCO, 2011).

External factors have played a crucial role in shaping the conflict and violence in Afghanistan over the past four decades. These factors have ranged from geopolitical interests and regional dynamics to foreign interventions and support for various factions. The main external factors that have contributed to the recent 4 decades of conflict in Afghanistan are as follows:

1. *Soviet Union Invasion and Occupation (1979-1989)*: The Soviet Union's military intervention in Afghanistan in 1979 to support the pro-Soviet government marked the beginning of the conflict. The invasion escalated the struggle and drew in international actors, including the United States

and its allies, who supported the Afghan resistance (Mujahideen) against the Soviet forces and its allied government in Kabul.

2. *Cold War Dynamics*: The Afghanistan conflict became a battleground of the Cold War, with the United States, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and other Western nations supporting the Afghan resistance against Soviet influence. The U.S. saw the conflict in Afghanistan as an opportunity to weaken the Soviet Union's geopolitical position (Rubin, 2000).
3. *Interests and interventions of neighboring countries and those of the region*: Since the birth of modern Afghanistan in the mid-18th century, the country has been the battleground of two major global powers, Russian in the North and the British in the South (East India Company). This strategic geopolitical situation of the country has always been one of the main sources of global competition between the East and the West, even until now. The geopolitical interests of neighboring countries, including India, Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and China, among other neighboring and regional powers, influenced the Afghan conflict. These countries have at times supported various factions and groups to advance their interests, leading to regional power struggles. Pakistan, with its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) - which is believed to be the true “brains” of insurgency in Afghanistan (Kleinberg, 2012), played a significant role in supporting the Mujahideen against Soviet forces. The ISI later supported the Taliban against the Afghan government and its international allies (Waldman, 2010). Iran also became a major actor, particularly after the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Iran supported various Afghan factions (mainly Shia factions), often with competing interests, and later on the Taliban against US-led NATO forces, further fueling the conflict and adding a dimension of regional rivalry. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states provided significant financial support to the Mujahideen, contributing to the funding and equipping of anti-Soviet forces. This support played a critical role in sustaining the resistance movement in the 1980s and 1990s.
4. *Arms and Military Assistance*: The United States, along with several other countries, provided extensive military and financial assistance to the Mujahideen in the 1980s (Coll, 2005) then to the post-2001 Kabul governments (Amiri, 2021). This support significantly impacts the course of the conflict.
5. *Post-9/11 U.S. and NATO Intervention*: The U.S.-led NATO intervention in Afghanistan in response to the 9/11 attacks targeted Al-Qaeda and the Taliban regime—the intervention aimed to eliminate terrorist networks and create a stable and democratic Afghanistan. However, the aftermath of the intervention and subsequent nation-building efforts were complex and contributed to ongoing conflict.

Ups and Downs of Higher Education in Afghanistan

A brief history of higher education in Afghanistan

The introduction of modern education in Afghanistan goes back to the late 19th and early 20th century. Before that, education was provided at home, in mosques and madrasas (religious schools) preparing young men to be religious and community guides and teachers (Samady, 2001a).

Although modern education structure received its formal shape in Afghanistan during Amir Sher Ali Khan's reign (1868-1878) it was in the early 1900s during Habibullah Khan (1901-1919) when more schools were established including a high school or college (Habibia High School). His son, Amanullah Khan is known as the first political leader and ruler of the country who aimed to modernize the country and bring fundamental reforms in all socio-economic aspects of the country including education. The first Ministry of Education was established in 1921 and more than a hundred schools were founded in Kabul and other provinces, including the first girls' schools (Kazim 2005). The history of the recent century of higher education in Afghanistan can be divided into 5 phases in line with the political changes and ideologies.

1. *The Foundation of Higher Education – Kingdom and Republic of Afghanistan (1932-1978)*

The origins of modern higher education institutions can be traced back to the early 1930s when the Faculty of Medicine was established in 1932 which later merged with other faculties (Law, Science, Political Science, and Literature faculties) to found the first university of the country, (Kabul University) in 1946 (Khwajamir, 2016). The second major higher education institution was founded three decades later out of the capital in Jalalabad province (Nangarhar University) in 1963, and the third higher education institution (Polytechnic University) was founded in Kabul in 1969. A new Ministry of Higher Education and Ideological Training was established in 1977 and all the higher education institutions along with the vocational institutes were placed under its administration (Abdulbaqi, 2009).

King Zaher was criticized for a very conservative approach to the overall development of the country, including higher education, considering 40 years of peaceful era ruling the country (1933-1973). However, the faculties and students were enjoying academic freedom, freedom of speech, and political activism. Although the development of higher education was relatively significant during the 1960s and 1970s considering the overall population of the country and the enrolment rate in neighboring countries, it was low. In 1980, the number of students in higher education per 100,000 inhabitants was 130, which was smaller than the neighboring countries (Pakistan 189, Iran 350, India 515) (Samady, 2001b). During Daud Khan's Presidency (1973-1978) the emphasis was placed more on technical and professional education to meet the demands of a developing economy as well as military education to renovate and modernize the military system with the growing internal and external threats including the USSR in the North and Islamists and the Western allies in the South (Pakistan).

2. *Democratic/Republic of Afghanistan (DRA-DA) – Politicization and Secularization of Higher Education 1978-1992*

The period between 1978 and 1992 in Afghanistan was marked by political upheaval, the USSR's invasion, conflict and resistance, as well as several coups and government changes within the DRA, mainly backed by the Soviet Union and their military forces in Kabul. The situation of higher education during this time was influenced by political changes, social reforms, and the

impact of the Soviet intervention. The quality and quantity of higher education were undermined due to the continued war and political instability in the country. Some key features of the situation of higher education during the 1980s and the pro-Soviet governments are socialist reforms and new ideological educational policies, increased access to education and expansion of higher education institutions, efforts for the secularization of education and gender equality in education, and Soviet assistance and influence as well as political unrest and resistance.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, three more provincial universities were established Balkh (1986), Herat (1988), the University of Islamic Research (1988), and Kandahar (1991). The Faculty of Medicine of the University of Kabul was also recognized as the Kabul Medical Institute and attached to the Ministry of Health. Besides these universities, some higher education institutions in Kabul and other major provinces like Nangarhar, Herat, Balkh, and Kandahar were founded mainly for teacher training and were known as pedagogic institutes (Abdulbaqi, 2009).

3. *The Mujahideen and the Taliban Era – Civil War and Islamization of Higher Education (1992-2001)*

The period between 1992 and 2001 in Afghanistan, often referred to as the Islamic State (the Mujahideen) and the Islamic Emarat (the Taliban) of Afghanistan, was marked by continued political instability, armed conflicts, and changes in government. This turbulent period and the sectarian and ethnic armed conflicts all over the country had significant consequences for all aspects of the lives of people including education and higher education in the country. Mujahideen and then the Taliban fundamentally revised the curriculums to make them more “Islamic” and closer to their ideologies. During the Mujahideen era, some higher education institutions that had been established by Mujahideen for Afghan refugees were transferred from Pakistan to Afghanistan: the University of Dawat and Jihad, Islamic University, Abdullah Bin Masoud University, Ummahatul Momineen University and The Academic of Islamic Education and Technology (Abdulbaqi, 2009). The continued war all over the country and throughout the 1990s led to the destruction of facilities and educational buildings and had detrimental effects on educational institutions, especially in Kabul with the majority of institutions and armed conflicts. In 1995, there were only 6 active universities and higher education institutions in the country with around 10 thousand students enrolled overall, less than one-third of whom were girls. These universities were operating under extremely difficult conditions lacking basic facilities and human resources (Samady, 2001b).

The Taliban banned education (primary, secondary, and higher education) for girls when they controlled the majority of the country between 1996 and 2001. During the Taliban regime, the condition of higher education in the country underwent significant changes, characterized by strict ideological and social policies as well as a harsh interpretation of Islamic law (Sharia) that had profound implications for education at all levels, including higher education, especially girls’ access to education (Ahmadi, 2022). The curricula of schools and higher education mainly

consisted of Islamic subjects and lack of resources and trained staff and faculties. The quantity and quality of education and higher education deteriorated and experienced the worst scenario of all time. Overall, from the 14 institutions of higher education in the early 1990s, during the Mujahideen era, there were only 7 institutions active by the end of the Taliban regime in 2001 (Abdulbaqi, 2009).

4. *Post-Taliban Era – Reconstruction and Development (2001-2021)*

After the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, efforts were made to rebuild and rehabilitate the higher education system, which had suffered severe damage over two decades of conflict and war. Between 2001 and 2021, Afghanistan underwent significant changes, including in the realm of higher education. Starting in 2001, post-Taliban investments in the country rejuvenated the higher education sector. This is seen as one of the important achievements of the international community in Afghanistan.

When the Taliban regime collapsed in 2001, there were only 7 active public universities in Kabul and some main provincial centers such as Nangarhar, Balkh, Herat, and Kandahar with less than 10,000 students enrolled across the country. These figures had a dramatic expansion to 167 universities and higher education institutions with over 425,000 (over one-quarter female) students after less than two decades in 2019 (National Statistics and Information Authority-NSIA, 2019). Since the existing public universities neither had the capacities nor the potential to respond to the increasing demand for higher education after 2001, the new constitution of 2004 and subsequent higher education laws and regulations paved the way for the private sector to enter the demanding field of higher education. The new law, the privatization of higher education, existing demand, and the inability of the public sector to respond to this rapidly growing demand for higher education, opened the door for private institutions to grow and reach a remarkable number of 128 universities and higher education institutions in one decade and a half (2006-2021) which was characterized as an “explosion” of private education in Afghanistan.

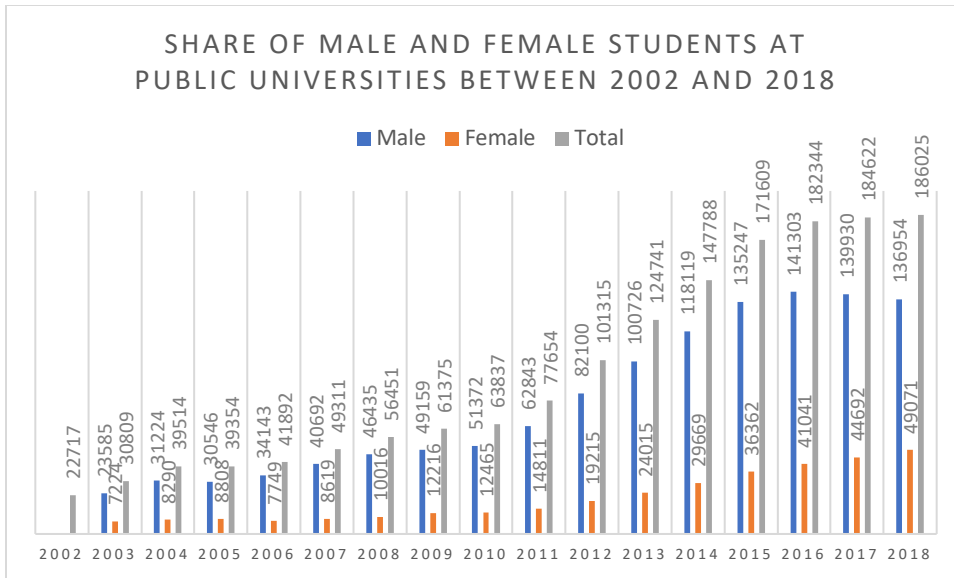


Figure 1: Male and Female students of public universities between 2002 and 2018 Source: (Kaveh, 2020)

Higher Education for Economic and Social Development of Afghanistan

In the age of globalization and advanced technology, higher education significantly impacts the economic performance of regions and countries, and tertiary education becomes one of the main factors facilitating economic performance (Volchik, et al., 2018). Education, especially tertiary education, plays an important role in human and social development and overall human well-being (Venkatraja & Indira, 2011). The economic relevance of university education is considered of central importance in the universities of both developed and developing countries (The World Bank, 2013).

In 2013, The World Bank published one of the few research papers focusing on the impact of education, particularly higher education, in Afghanistan providing a wide-ranging and evidenced-based review and analysis of the higher education sector in Afghanistan. The report finds out that

“Investment in human capital has a positive and increasing impact on economic welfare, at all levels of education from primary schooling upwards through higher education, for both urban and rural populations in Afghanistan.... These findings support the notion that investment in human capital is an important determinant of the economic welfare of households in Afghanistan... Further, the higher education coefficients are larger than the coefficients of any other levels of education, for individuals in both the urban and rural sectors (The World Bank, 2013. P4).

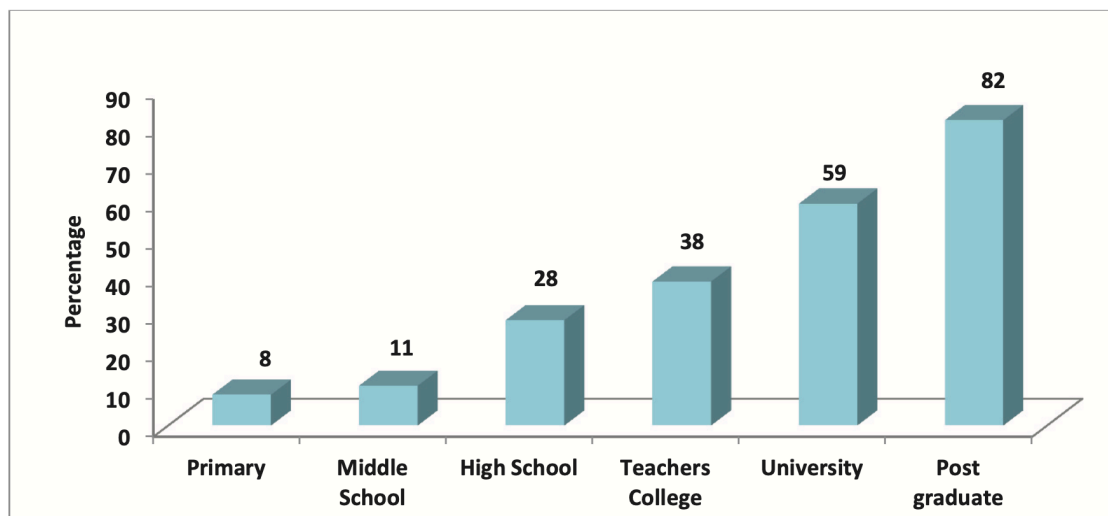


Figure 2: Impact of Education on Economic Welfare in Urban Areas in Afghanistan: Source: The World Bank 2013

As the above graph (Figure 2) shows, education levels of individuals rise their economic welfare. In this research, the economic welfare was measured by consumption expenditures per capita. The findings show a positive correlation coefficient between level of education and economic welfare (consumption expenditure) in both rural and urban areas. As the above graph indicates, individuals with higher level of education enjoys better economic condition. The report also shows (Figure 3) how education, especially higher education, increases the participation of women in the workforce in the urban areas of Afghanistan.

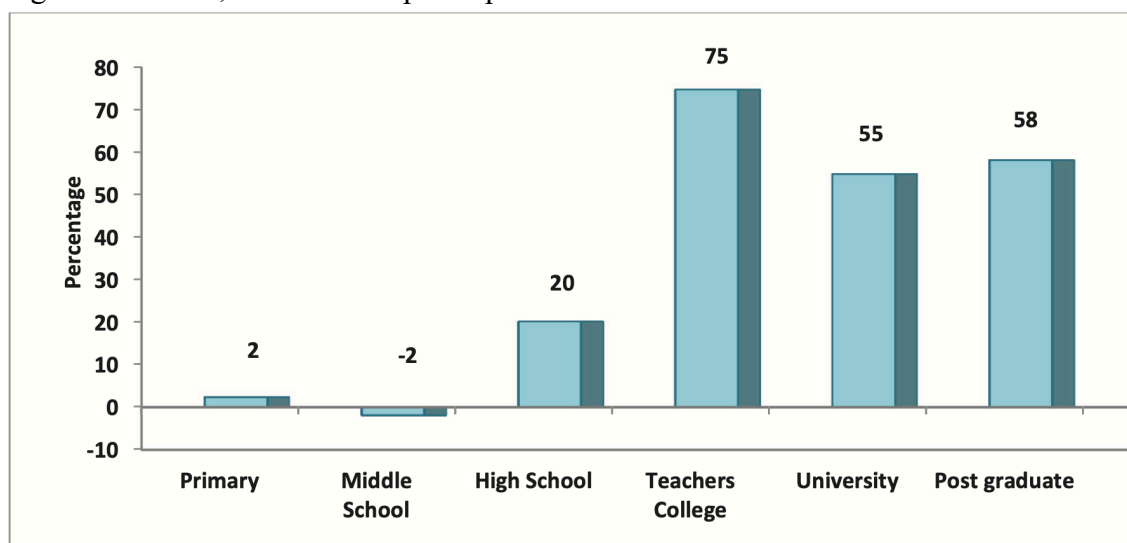


Figure 3: Impact of Education on Female Workforce Participation in Urban Areas of Afghanistan: Source: The World Bank 2013

In terms of socio-cultural impacts, the World Bank (2013) highlights the critical role of higher education in fostering democracy and forging a unified national identity. Considering the diversity of the ethnic and social landscape of the country, the report emphasizes how higher education institutions provide one of the few spaces to demonstrate collaboration and foster shared values among the diverse citizenry.

Despite the recent development in enrolment in education and higher education, the reports show that the higher education enrollment in Afghanistan is one of the lowest in the world (GER= about 5 percent) in 2011. The report recommends the quality of university education to be one of the foremost priorities for the future development of higher education. According to the report, one of the areas that need to be focused on is the quality of adequate qualified human resources. ‘Fostering the quality assurance and enhancement, ‘governance’, ‘academic and administrative autonomy’, ‘accountability’, ‘staff-development’, ‘regulating and supporting privatization of higher education’, ‘institutional and program accreditation’, ‘more public investment on higher education than current 0.5% of GDP’, ‘diversifying sources of revenue’, are other recommendations of the World Bank report (2013).

The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) (2022) analysis of the economic return for education in Afghanistan (Figure 3, below) using the observable wage differences between workers with different education levels in the labor market shows a clear significant and positive effect between the years of education and average wage outcomes. The UNICEF estimates show an effect size of education is 3.9 percent, which means that each further year of education at school increases wages, on average, by 3.9 percent. This estimation does not account for the non-financial benefits of education such as improvements in health, family planning, etc.

Education Level	Annual Returns (Significance)
All education	3.9%***
Primary education	5.0%***
Secondary education	3.3%***
Tertiary education	4.7%***

Figure 4: Estimated Returns to Education for Afghanistan. Source: (United Nations Children’s Fund-UNICEF, 2022)

The State of Women’s Access to Education

Modern education has a fluctuating history in Afghanistan trapped between the dilemma of modernization and conservative/traditional reactions. Women’s access to and participation in education was one of the controversial topics and conflicting areas from the beginning of formal modern education in the early 20th century in Afghanistan. Although the first modern schools in Afghanistan can be traced back to Shir Ali Khan’s reign (1868-1878), it took almost half a century when the first girl’s school (*Masturat*) was

established in Kabul in 1921 during King Amanullah who was known as the “father of female education” in the country (Mashriqi, 2013). King Amanullah was the first king and political leader of the country who tried to modernize Afghanistan in various fields with a special focus on education and the introduction of female education in the country. This radical reform and modernization project did not continue long and the conservative and tribal reaction against King Amanullah and the political leaders supported women’s access to education. Then, female access to education was gradually introduced beginning in Kabul and then in major provincial centers in mid-King Zahir’s reign (1933-1973). Women and girls’ access to education and higher education was improved during the 1970s and 1980s, under Daud Khan’s (1973-1978) Republic and Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) (1978-1992), especially in Kabul and other main provincial centers, and the ruling political leaders and their ideology supported female’s access to education (Samady, 2001a). However, in the majority of rural areas of the country, girls did not have access to education and higher education due to unavailability, unwillingness, and continued conflict. During the 1990s, access to education, especially for women was very limited all over the country due to the continued war between Mujahideen factions (1992 – 1995) and later on between Mujahideen and the Taliban (1996-2001). When the Taliban came to power for the first time in 1996 and controlled the majority of the country until 2001, access to education and higher education was formally banned for female students, however, later on, some female students could enter some medical faculties because female patients could only be examined by female physicians. There is no detailed data on the state of education, especially higher education and females’ access to education prior to 2001. However, since 2002 and the reopening of schools and universities for girls and major investment in education there are official statistics on the number of schools and universities and their students based on gender, public and private, etc. both on the statistical yearbooks as well as the ministry of education and higher education’s annual reports.

Afghanistan is currently the only country in the world where girls are denied education beyond primary level (1-6 grades). This very bitter fact tells us the entire current story and the state of female’s access to education in the country. Afghanistan has had one of the lowest literacy rates in the region and globally for the past 5 decades. However, the literacy rate has increased significantly in the last decade after the Taliban were disposed of in 2001 and education was accessible for both male and female students almost all over the country. Based on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization-UNESCO data, the literacy rate in Afghanistan increased from 18 to 37 between 1979 and 2021. While the literacy rate for Afghan male adults was 30 in 1979, it was 5 for female adults. In 2021, the male adult literacy rate increased to 52 and the female adults to 23 (World Bank, 2024).

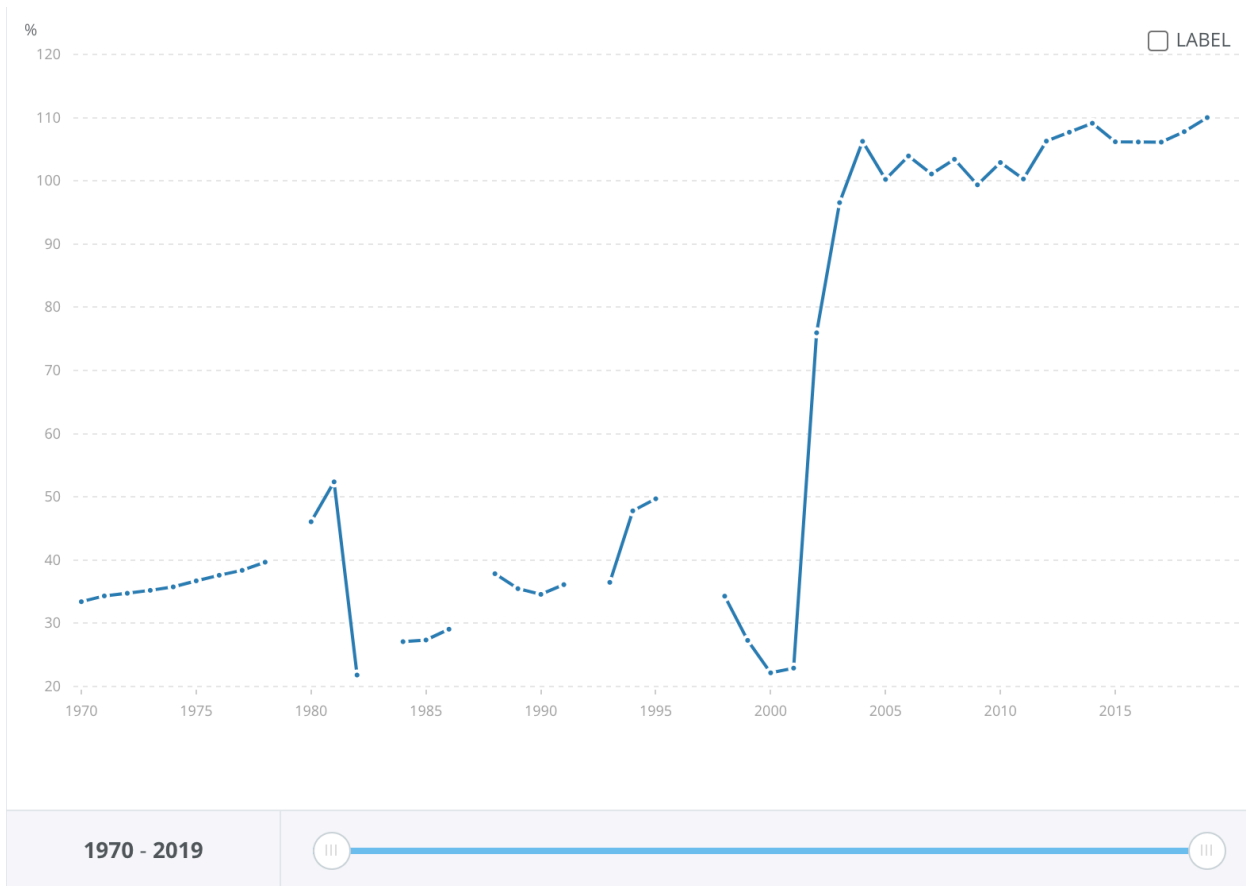


Figure 3: Gross School Enrolment in Primary Education in Afghanistan between 1970 and 2019. Source: The World Bank Data (2024)

After the overthrow of the Taliban in late 2001, the new constitution granted both men and women equal rights including rights to education. With the financial and technical support of the international community, the new government invested billions of dollars into the education and higher education sector in Afghanistan. Schools and universities were open and admitted new male and female students. The expansion of primary and tertiary education was called ‘the biggest success story’ of the post-Taliban era (2001-2021). In 2002, when the primary and secondary schools were (re)-opened for Afghan boys and girls, nearly 3.7 million students were back to school with almost one-third of them (27.5) being girls (Kaveh, 2020). In 2019, this number increased to over 9.6 million students, 38.8 percent of which were female. In Higher Education, the number of students increased from less than 23,000 in 2002 to 424,621 in 2019 (310,369/73.2% male – 114,252/26.7% female) (National Statistics and Information Authority (NSIA), 2020)

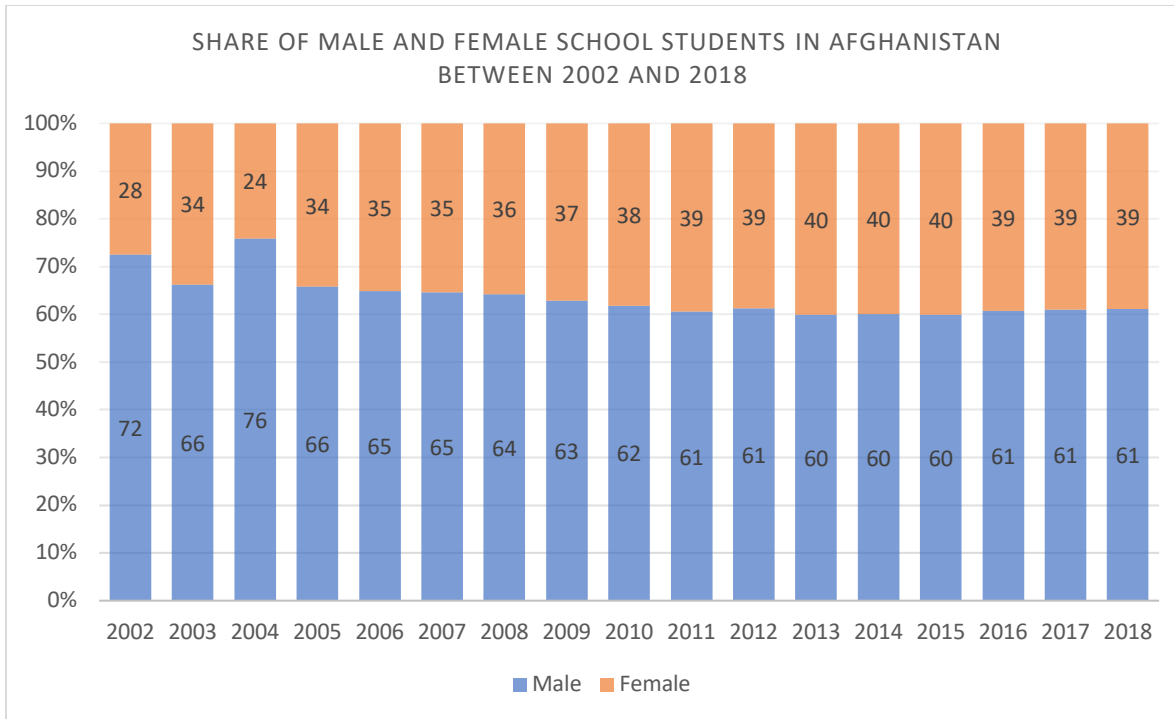


Figure 4: Share of male and female school students between 2002 and 2018. Source: (Kaveh, 2020)

In 2002, when schools and universities were reopened for female students, almost one-third of school students (27.52%) and close to a quarter (24%) of university students were female. By 2019, females' percentage in primary and secondary education increased to 38.85%, however, their percentage in higher education did not increase and remained around a quarter (around 26%) considering all investments during the past 16 years between 2002 and 2018. We can even see a further decrease of this share to 20 and even 17% during these years. Among other reasons, this can be linked to the unavailability of higher education institutions except to the main provincial centers, co-education in higher education institutions opposite to school education, girl's marriage age, and the unwillingness of families to let them pursue further education beyond grade 1-12, the low acceptance rate of free public higher education institutions and the high fee of private institutions, etc. (Kaveh, 2020).

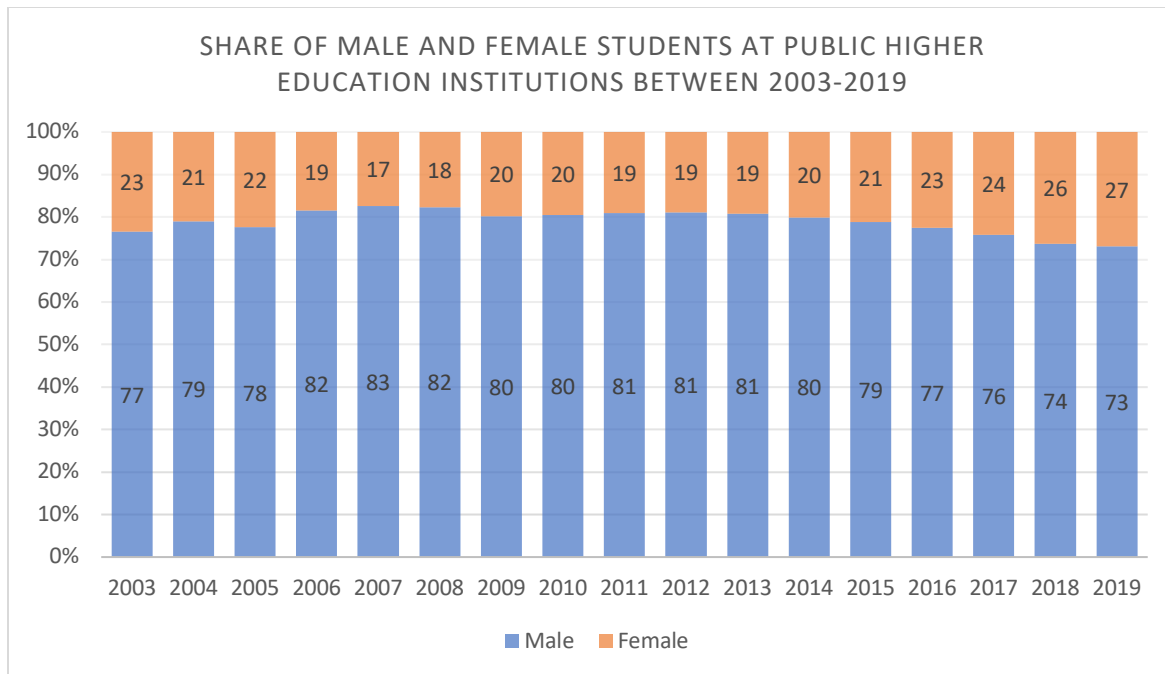
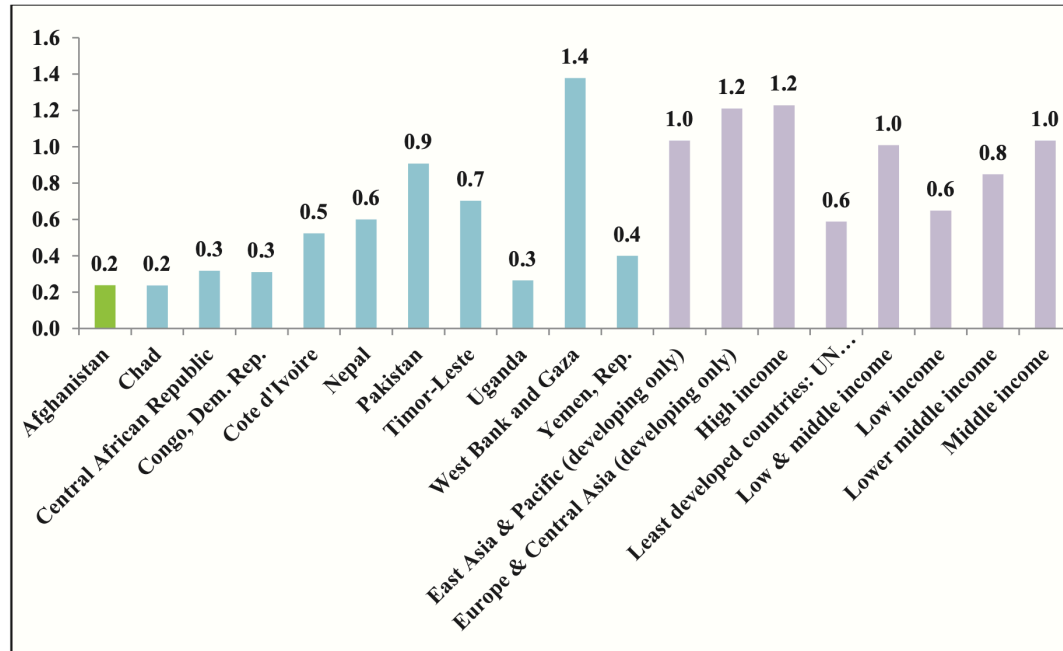


Figure 5: Shared of male and female students at public higher education institutions between 2003 and 2019. Source: (Kaveh, 2020)

The Afghan government in cooperation with the international community and national/international organizations developed and implemented several national strategic and action plans since 2002 to improve women and girls' access to primary and tertiary education nationwide. Some of these strategic and action plans were 'The National Development Strategic Plan', 'National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (2007-2017)', Ministries of Education and Higher Education's Strategic Plans, etc. All these plans had specific measures and objectives for gender equality and increasing women's access to their basic rights including education and employment and wider participation in the socio-economic and political life of the country. Despite all these plans and investments, the participation of women and girls in education and higher education has always been one of the lowest globally. The World Bank data (2024) shows that the gender parity index (GPI) of Afghanistan has always been one of the lowest in the world and never rose more than 0.4 (the highest score in 2020). As the following graph shows, based on the World Bank data of 2011 Afghanistan's GPI was 0.2, the lowest score in the region and the world, despite the 10 years after the Taliban regime and billions of investments in education and higher education and endeavors to increase female participation in the education sector (The World Bank, 2013)



Source: World Bank, Education Statistics (EdStats) database
 Note: Data is for 2011 or nearest available year

Figure 6: Higher Education Gender Parity Index (GPI) in Comparable Countries & Regions. Source: The World Bank, 2013

When the Taliban took over Afghanistan for the second time in August 2021, they began enforcing their harsh and fundamentalist interpretation of Islam linked to their tribal codes which brought severe restrictions on women's rights including their access to education and employment. In September 2021, the Taliban banned secondary school education for girls beyond 6th grade. In December 2022, they officially banned higher education for all girls in both public and private higher education institutions and also worked in NGOs and later on UN organizations (Special Inspector General for Reconstruction of Afghanistan-SIGAR, 2023). Millions of girls in middle and secondary schools and over 100 thousand female students at higher education institutions have been deprived of access to education and employment and are forced to remain at home.

Depriving girls and women of access to education and employment has short and long-term socio-economic as well as mental health impacts on women, their families, and the overall country. According to a recent report by United Nations Development Program-UNDP report (2022), female restriction from education led to a GDP loss of USD 1 billion (or 5% of the Afghan GDP) per year in a country that heavily relies on external support. UNICEF (2022) estimates a direct loss of \$5.4 billion from the Afghan economy as a result of school closure for 3 million girls who may not be able to complete their secondary education and participate in the job market. This is only a calculation of the losses from the current cohort of secondary school-going girls. The estimation did not take into consideration the losses from the policy

knock-on effect on reduced enthusiasm for primary education, the higher benefits from university education, and the negative impacts of the relationships between educational attainment, child marriage, and early childbearing.

UN Women, in a report titled: “Out of job, into poverty” studied and reported the impact of the ban on Afghan women working in NGOs explaining how Afghan women’s further exclusion from the workforce commensurately negates their economic potential, degrades their skills learned, and – combined with the acute effects risks, causing psychological impacts which may feed an intergenerational spiral of trauma (UN Women, 2023).

Factors contributing to female access to education in Afghanistan

Women's access to education in Afghanistan faces several sociocultural and political challenges, reflecting deep-rooted norms, historical factors, and ongoing political dynamics. These factors are not necessarily applied in all contexts and communities alike, as we see different behaviors and trends in terms of rural/urban, North/South, Pashtun, and non-Pashtun ethnic groups. For example, while in some Southern provinces with the majority of Pashtun, female participation in higher education was a minimum of around 15-20 percent, in other Central, Northern, and Western provinces such as Kabul, Badakhshan, and Herat, female participation in education (both schools and universities) increased to more than 50%, and in some years, even exceeded males (Kaveh, 2020).

Some of the barriers preventing Afghan girls from attending school and getting an education are the following: “insecurity, poverty, child labor, lack of infrastructure, the existence of gender-discriminatory traditions from the community and government, lack of qualified female teachers, administrative barriers that do not support the reality of Afghans’ lives, and corruption (Isaqzai, 2021). The gender strategy of the Ministry of Higher Education identified the following barriers as the main factors contributing to the sharp gender disparity in higher education in Afghanistan: ‘Gender disparity in secondary education enrollment’, ‘long distance and lack of transportation’, ‘lack of security, ‘inadequate physical facilities’, and ‘cultural norms and constraints’. Below is a brief description of the factors contributing to female’s lower participation in education and higher education in Afghanistan.

- *Cultural Norms Surrounding Traditional Gender Roles and Expectations:* In Afghanistan, societal expectations often prescribe traditional gender roles, limiting the perceived role of women and girls to domestic responsibilities. This resulted in resistance to the idea of women pursuing education, especially higher education. This is particularly true in some Southern parts of the country among Pashtun tribes where “Pashtunwali” (the cultural codes of Pashtun) is more powerful than religion and the law. According to Pashtunwali, “a woman’s life is centered with some predefined roles and responsibilities: homemaking, food preparation, and childbearing, which do not support her education” (Jamal, 2016). A Pashto proverb that says; “for women, there is either house (*Koor*) or the grave (*Goor*)” can show clearly the expectation of society from women to stay home (Mashwani, 2017). This is what the mainly Pashtun Taliban are trying to

impose on all people of the country. Although these social norms and gender-based division of roles are not limited to Pashtuns, they are more inclined to it and the data on school enrolment and literacy rates among females in the Southern provinces support that too. Official data from the Ministry of Education in 2018 shows while the female share was close to 50% in several provinces in the North, Center, and West, it was between 10% to 20% in some Southern provinces with the majority of Pashtun residents (Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook of 2018)¹.

- *Early Marriages:* Cultural practices, including early marriages, can interrupt girls' education, especially higher education. Families may prioritize marriage over continuing education, which led to a decrease in the share of females in higher education. Although the law has defined a minimum marriage age (16 for girls and 18 for boys), child marriage, especially among girls, has been a common practice, especially in rural areas. Some reports even indicated as much as 50% of girls get married by the age of 18 in Afghanistan (Shayan, 2015). The absence of adequate childcare facilities such as crèches and nurseries is also an important constraint to female enrolment in higher education, as some girls eligible to enter universities are mothers and have one or more kids to look after (The World Bank, 2013).
- *Conservative Interpretations of Islam:* Conservative interpretations of Islamic teachings, often influenced by local cultural practices, may be used to justify restrictions on women's education. The ruling power (Taliban) usually refers to both Islamic Sharia Law and also Afghan cultural values (mainly referring to Pashtun culture and Pashtunwali-tribal codes of Pashtuns) to prevent women from accessing secondary and higher education. The minister of Higher Education of the Taliban government brought 4 reasons for banning higher education for girls: girls' hostels which were against Sharia and Afghan culture; not wearing Hijab/Burka by female students; coeducation; and girls pursuing disciplines that are not fit for girls based on Islam and Afghan culture (BBC, 2022).
- *Security Concerns and Violence:* Conflict and security concerns have posed direct threats to girls and women attending schools for the last 4 decades. Anti-government oppositions such as the Mujahideen and the Taliban in the 1980s and 1990s, and then the Taliban for the last two decades have always targeted female students and teachers to prevent them from going to schools. Attacks on educational institutions, especially girls' schools created an atmosphere of fear, discouraging families from sending their daughters to school. Only in the first half of 2021, insecurity forced the closure of over 920 schools in Afghanistan and, along with other socio-economic factors, kept nearly 3.7 million children out of school, the majority of whom were girls (Global Coalition to Protect Education, 2021).
- *Shortage of Female Teachers:* A shortage of female teachers, especially in rural areas, makes it challenging to provide a supportive environment for girls in schools. Several reports indicated lack of female teachers was one of the main barriers to girls' education, especially in rural areas most

¹ Due to the sanctions over the Taliban in Afghanistan, all the governmental websites under the '.af domain', including the National Statistics and Information Authority (NSIA) websites are not currently accessible. The author uses the data from the downloaded PDF version of the Statistical Yearbooks.

of which suffer from a shortage of qualified female teachers (Samady, 2013). The shortage of female teachers was a severe problem, particularly in the Southern province with a very low rate of female enrolment and literacy. According to an official report in 2013, while the percentage of female school teachers reached to 32% nationally, it was below 5% in some rural areas of some Southern provinces with the majority of Pashtun residents (Mashwani, 2017). The shortage of qualified female teachers and educators was also a challenge and barrier to girls' access to education in some urban areas and higher education institutions with coeducation systems, where some families did not allow their daughters to go to schools with male educators.

- *Economic Barriers:* Although education is free in public schools and public higher education institutions in Afghanistan, economic challenges and poverty contribute to obstacles for families to afford educational expenses, such as uniforms, textbooks, and transportation, especially at higher education levels with higher expenses. Under such circumstances, families may prioritize the education of boys over girls, especially tertiary education which is more costly and requires higher investment. Families usually prefer to invest in their male children for their future rather than their daughters who will soon get married and will be in someone else's home and parents cannot rely on them for support in their aging period. Families may perceive the opportunity costs of educating girls as higher, especially if they can contribute to household income through labor or domestic work. This can be true for boys too as they work outside and sometimes on the streets to earn and support their family's expenses.
- *Inadequate Educational Infrastructure and limited facilities:* In some regions, the lack of schools, especially girls' schools (or far distance to schools in rural areas with a lack of transportation system), and the absence of basic facilities, such as sanitation, impact girls' access to education. Low female enrollment in higher education institutions is partly due to the smaller number of girls compared to boys in the secondary school system, which reduces the pool of women available to move on to higher education. However, it is also partly due to the lack of sufficient transport services, sanitation, and residential facilities on campuses, for young women to attend university. (The World Bank, 2013).
- *Resistance to Coeducation:* Sociocultural norms may discourage or resist coeducation, leading to a preference for gender-segregated schools. In areas where such facilities are lacking, this can limit girls' access to education (Naqibullah & Niazi, 2022). Although the grade 1-12 school system in Afghanistan was gender segregated, most private and public higher education institutions had coeducation systems which prevented some families from sending their daughters to those institutions.
- *Stigmatization of Educated Women:* Women and girls who pursue education, particularly higher education, may face stigmatization and discrimination, especially in rural areas. This can discourage girls and women from pursuing education, and academic or professional careers. Some people believe it is shameful for a girl to sit in a class with boys (coeducation) which was in most of higher education before the Taliban took over Afghanistan. Some research and surveys even showed that cultural norms expect men not to allow their female family members to pursue

education and work outside the home for being “*bi-ghairati*” (dishonor) for the male family members (Azarbaijani Moqaddam, 2012).

- *Lack of Awareness, Advocacy, and Family Support*: Lack of awareness about the importance of girls' education and the potential benefits for communities can contribute to low enrollment rates among girls. The absence of strong advocacy for gender-inclusive educational policies and practices may result in less emphasis on addressing the specific challenges faced by women and girls. Family support plays a very crucial role in children's ability to pursue education, especially among girls whose access to education is fundamentally determined by family and male support and permission. A survey of more than 1,600 girls, parents, and teachers in 17 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces by Oxfam in 2011 showed how lack of family support, due to various socio-economic challenges, hinders female's access to education in Afghanistan.

Concluding Reflections

This working paper aimed to explore three interrelated topics, the crisis, state of higher education and female's access to education in Afghanistan. The current political crisis in Afghanistan is rooted to many internal and external and historical factors which have escalated for the last half of the century since the pro-Soviet party's coup and the USSR's invasion of the country in 1979. The paper briefly discusses the one century of the ups and downs of the higher education in Afghanistan since the early 1030s when the first higher education institution (Faculty of Medicine) was established in 1932. The development of higher education was very slow during the 4 decades of the last kingdom of the country (1930-1970s). When the higher education institutions began to grow a little rapidly during the republic (1970s), the invasion of the country by the former USSR and the following two decades of civil war destroyed most of the infrastructures and led to internal and external forced displacement of millions of Afghans until the beginning of the 21s century and the removal of the Taliban regime by the US-led NATO forces in 2001.

Between 2001 and 2021, billions of US dollars have been invested to reconstruct the infrastructures for development of education and higher education and make it accessible for both male and female students across the country. The paper then briefly discussed the economic and social importance of higher education in Afghanistan to demonstrate how education, and especially higher education can contribute to the economic and social development of the country. The last part of the paper is dedicated to the state of women's access to education in Afghanistan. Despite the vast investment of the past two decades to reduce the barriers for the girl's education in Afghanistan, the gender disparity index (GDI) of Afghanistan remained one of the lowest in the region and worldwide. And finally, when the Taliban banned women's access to education in 2021 and 2022, Afghanistan became the only country in the world where half of its population are not allowed to pursue their education beyond primary level (6 grade). The paper also shows the economic loss of the deprivation of girls from education (1 billion USD annually) in a country relies heavily on external support, foreign aid and private sector.

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