

Improvements and Setbacks in Women's Access to Education: A Case Study of Afghanistan

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Abstract

Afghanistan has struggled poorly regarding women's education since modern education was brought to the country. Over the last 26 years, women have experienced ups and downs in their access to education in Afghanistan. This study explores women's access to education in Afghanistan across three different regimes. It was found that women across all three rules have had limited access to education given the diverse culture of the country; cultural restrictions, insecurity, lack of adequate school equipment, and distant school locations were identified as the leading causes behind women's reduced access to education. Recently, the country experienced another overthrowing of an established government that had helped get 40 percent of women into learning spheres between 2001 and 2021. Now, Afghan women face immense uncertainty about their education in the future, even though the new Taliban regime promised to provide equal access to education. In this research, alongside other barriers to women's entry to schooling, social and cultural ideologies were also uncovered, which have mainly hindered women's access to education across the country.

Keywords: *women, education, access, school, regime, gender equality*

Introduction

Education in the country across the regimes has been scattered, torn and unimaginable. A land that gave birth to *Mawlana Jalaladin Balkhi* (1207–1273) (known as Rumi in the West), *Abu Nasr Al-Farabi* (872–951), *Gawharshad Begum* (1405–1447), *Rabia Balkhi* (914–943), and the like, now struggles to provide a basic education system for its citizens. Afghanistan has a long history of wars and conflicts; however, the most recent ones have caused a great deal of anxiety regarding

women's access to education. The Taliban took over Afghanistan in 1996 by overthrowing the coalition government (created by several Afghan political parties), and they completely collapsed the fragile education system in the country. According to Khwajamir (2016), from 1996 to 2001, the ruling regime entirely banned women's access to any education, formal or informal.

However, the Taliban later issued an educational law assuring that every Afghan citizen had the right to education. Women would have educational opportunities, but under a special law by the Islamic Sharia. However, that special law was never issued. During the time of the Taliban, only the Kabul medical faculty was allowed to have female staff, who were all doctors, nurses and other medical practitioners, and only to cure and look after female patients. Overall, in their initial regime, the Taliban gave fragmentary attention to education where only boys or males were allowed to attend schools, and girls or females were given zero to a very minimal role (only female doctors were allowed to work), particularly in education. After the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, a transitional government was created to organize and establish a new system for the country to stand on its feet.

After its establishment, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan rolled up its sleeves to eliminate or eradicate barriers in front of girls and boys in their education. Afterwards, a report published by the Afghanistan Ministry of Education in 2012 revealed that 10.5 million students were attending schools and learning centers across the country, among which 38 percent consisted of female students (Khwajamir, 2016). The new constitution of Afghanistan, adopted in 2004, ordered that nine years of education was compulsory for all Afghan children (boys and girls), and public education would be free for all up to the undergraduate level (Samady, 2013). According to article 44 of the constitution the government is responsible for promoting women's education, creating education programs, employing suitable measures for education, and combating illiteracy in the country.

The newly established government's commitments raised a renowned interest of both males and females in education, especially in females who had lagged far behind in education for the previous ten years. A sudden increase was seen in general education enrollment from 2.3 million to 8.6 million, where 3.2 million were female students, with a 19 percent growth in higher education for females. Another key area in education was adult literacy, a major concern for the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan since adult illiteracy had been higher at the end of the twentieth century. To eradicate illiteracy, the Ministry of Education and other governmental and non-governmental agencies implemented programs like the Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE) and Learning for Community Empowerment, among others. These programs gave utmost importance to women and those living in remote areas (Samady, 2013). However, according to Human

Rights Watch (2017), two-thirds of Afghan girls do not attend school. As the country's security has worsened recently, women's education seems to be heading in reverse compared to the Afghanistan Ministry of Education analysis in 2012.

Now that the Taliban have regained control of Afghanistan, overthrowing the Islamic Republic, women's access to education can be seen far from what was imagined ten years back. This time, the Taliban regime has shown some flexibility towards women's access to education. They have allowed females to go to private universities with segregation in place of coeducation. According to local and international media reports, the Taliban have permitted girls' high and secondary schools in some provinces, while schools in others remain closed. In this paper, I explore women's access to secondary and higher education across the Taliban's initial regime, the Islamic Republic, and the current regime of the Taliban, alongside the improvements and future of women's education in the country.

This research intends to examine the options and drawbacks women's education has experienced during the three regimes in Afghanistan. Most of the research (Khwajamir, 2016; Kissane, 2012; Mashriqi, 2016; Mashwani, 2017; Samady, 2013; Shayan, 2015; Zirack, 2021) conducted in women's education has only explored gender equality, women's education in general, and ways to tackle the challenges women face in terms of education in Afghanistan, while the most severe challenges women face to their education are somehow not addressed to the extent needed for the sake of Afghan women and girls. Apart from this, researchers haven't given enough voice to the social and cultural means of easing women's access to education in Afghanistan. Islam as a religion has never prevented women from getting an education the same as men. "In Islam, knowledge, its acquisition and application are a fundamental requirement for all Muslims to enable them to believe, think, and act according to the principles of the religion" (Abukari, 2014, p. 1). Yet, the Taliban prevented women from getting an education. Islam provides equal learning opportunities to males and females without any gender consideration; only cultural and social perceptions have forced people to prevent women from getting an education.

Women's Education Under the Taliban First Regime (1996–2001)

After ousting the Mujahedeen-led Coalition government, the Taliban took complete control of the country in 1996. Once entirely in power the Taliban enforced a total ban on women's education across the country, only allowing them to get Islamic education at home. Instead of opening schools and learning centers, the Taliban emphasized madrasas and Islamic learning centers. The school curriculum for boys was filled with Islamic or religious matters, neglecting modern or science learning. Thus, all learning places and schools were converted to madrasas of some

form. The Taliban's policy of restricted Islamic society had appreciable effects on women's liberties and lives. According to Emadi (2002), the Taliban announced an order from their Amir-ul-Muminin on September 28, 1996, through Radio Sharia, that women were entirely forbidden from working outside, and girls could not go to schools anymore. Around 250 women in Herat province defied the order. As a result, they were beaten savagely by Taliban forces for not observing the Islamic rule.

Women were only allowed to work in the medical sector, particularly in the Kabul medical faculty, where they could treat and look after female patients. These five years have been counted as completely dark regarding women's access to education. In 2001, the Taliban announced that females would be able to get an education once they implemented a particular law, but until the last day of their rule, they hadn't implemented such a law (Khawajamir, 2016).

During the Taliban's first regime, schools were more like madrasas and only permitted males to receive an education. Females were entirely excluded from the country's educational, social and political spheres. Girls could only get Islamic education such as Quranic recitation, *Tajweed* and *Hefaz* by attending it inside their house or going to a nearby female *Hafiza*. According to a British Broadcasting Corporation news report (BBC, 2014), around one million students, only boys, attended school in 2001. The ban on girls' and women's education significantly destroyed the hopes and plans of girls who lived in rural areas because, in Afghanistan, 80 to 90 percent of the population resides in a rural setting, and women in the cities mostly fled the country as the Taliban unleashed their strict anti-women policy (Karlsson & Mansory, 2008).

Such harsh marginalization of women resulted in many educated women fleeing the country. Most of them settled in Pakistan with the hope of reawakening women to defend women's rights to education, work and the like, but soon they faced severe restrictions in Pakistan in their demands for such rights. The emergence of the new Islamic Republic of Afghanistan provided a sudden breakthrough for women across Afghanistan where they could see the light at the other end of the tunnel. Still, they didn't know what would happen once this new regime had its stronghold in the country.

Women's Access to Education During the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2001–2021)

When the Taliban regime collapsed in late 2001, the new government and the US coalition were challenged by two critical issues in rebuilding education in Afghanistan; first, how could they re-create an educational system in a country desperately poor, and second, how could they bring back girls and women who had

been excluded from getting education under the Taliban rule (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

Once the interim government was established in 2001, a new hope in women and girls erupted to pursue education. From the intentions of the Karzai-led government, it was crystal clear that education was their utmost priority, with international organizations playing their role in bringing education back to Afghan women across the country. As stipulated in the 2004 Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, article 43, education is the right of all citizens and shall be provided up to the level of undergraduate free of charge. Samady (2013) states that the last part of the twentieth century had deprived many school goers of receiving an education; in this regard, the government initiated a campaign called “back to school”, which prompted a passionate response, millions of males and females showed eagerness for education. After 2001, the new Afghan government and its international partners, mostly NGOs and international donors, rolled up their sleeves to rebuild the education system by building schools, hiring and training teachers, supporting children, and encouraging families to permit their daughters to get an education (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

In regard to higher education, Afghan women were entitled to higher education in the 1950s, with plenty of them going to universities and higher education institutions. However, at the beginning of the 1990s, around 40 percent of women attended universities (Giustozzi, 2010). Greater responsibility laid ahead of the Islamic Republic government to support and build primary and secondary schools and higher education. Somehow the government managed to provide women and men with quality education by opening some public universities across the country. From 2002 onwards, roughly 52,200 students studied in higher education institutions (Roof, 2015). The past two decades have been full of progress regarding women's access to education. Zirack (2021) states that the number of females in the national university entrance exam (Kankor) has dramatically increased in the last 20 years, with 31 percent of females taking the university entrance exam.

Although the new phase of education for women in Afghanistan made an impressive contribution to encouraging women back to schools and universities, it severely faced challenges from two main areas; namely, security concerns and limited financial resources, alongside minor issues such as the limited number of schools, lack of teachers and the like (Samady, 2013).

Women's Education Under the Taliban's Second Regime (2021-2022)

On August 15, 2021, the Taliban took over the Islamic Republic government of Afghanistan, leading to an uncertain future for Afghans, especially women. After taking control of the entire country, the Taliban announced their interim government, including an all-male cabinet. The Taliban issued a statement demanding women stay home until further instruction from them; however, several protests erupted around the country to demand women's rights and their access to education because the Taliban had replaced the Ministry of Women's Affairs with their Ministry of the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. On the other hand, the Taliban Minister of Education, in an announcement, declared the reopening of boys' schools from grade six to twelve, but no comment was made regarding the fate of girls' schools. However, the Taliban Minister of Higher Education said that girls would be given equal access to education, albeit in gender-segregated classes (Gannon,2021). In addition, only private higher education institutions and universities are currently running under the new segregation policy. Public universities are closed now; the Taliban have stated logistics and financial reasons behind the closure of public learning spaces. According to a report of Aljazeera, girls' schools have now been opened in some provinces like Mazar-e-Sharif, Herat and others. However, there is still a long way to go for Afghan women and girls to have equal access to education because the Taliban keeps talking, rather than acting, about providing access to education for all. In this new chapter of uncertainty for women's education, some still hope to see school gates reopen for girls and women allowed to pursue higher education. For now, the only thing the new Taliban government doesn't approve of is gender equality. They believe that men and women are created differently, and thus should remain different, and primarily consider women as homemakers rather than someone active in the social spheres of the community. After taking over the country, the Taliban abolished the Ministry of Women's Affairs, and the acting cabinet the Taliban introduced had no female members.

Gender Equality in Education

According to UNESCO (2014, p. 11), "Gender equality refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys. It implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are considered, recognizing the diversity of different groups of women and men". According to gender statistics, geographical distance, underdevelopment, minority status, underage marriage and pregnancy, impairment, gender-related violence,

and traditionally developed perceptions about the role and status of women are the most significant barriers that prevent girls and women from exercising their legal rights to receive and complete education, and benefit to the fullest extent possible from it. Afghanistan remains the focus of gender inequality (Shayan, 2015). On the other hand, the UNESCO Country Program Document (2011) outlines that gender and geographical disparities have largely blocked access to education in Afghanistan; in this regard, the country remains one of the more deprived and less educated in the world. To achieve substantive gender equality, it is necessary to acknowledge that discrimination stems from the unequal evaluation of what men and women contribute to society, which leads to unequal investments in women and men, unequal rewards paid to women and men, and unequal resources allocated to women and men. Girls' academic achievement is undervalued in the larger economy in nations where they are barred from education, compared to boys, due to the devaluation of their socially imposed responsibilities as carers (Subrahmanian, 2005).

However, the last decade in Afghanistan has seen an impressive bounce in women's access to education. The Education Management Information System data, 2018, (as stated in UN Women, 2021) gives some interesting figures about women's access to education in Afghanistan, where 38 percent of girls attend schools around the country. The main objective of the present study is to explore women's access to education through the voices of women and girls across the three regimes in terms of improvements and setbacks.

Critical Gender Theory

Feminist youth studies and the study of social change, dubbed "critical modernization studies" by Madeleine Arnot and Dillabough (Dillabough & Arnot, 2001), are two connected and ongoing research areas in gender education. Because its main objectives include tracking societal change and its impact on male and female teenagers, this work is firmly entrenched in more traditional sociological themes (Dillabough, 2006). The concept of gender or gender equality has been very appealing in defending varying gender-related issues, but the concept fails to take into account the cultural barriers from the past in Afghanistan, which have led to difficulty in bringing gender equality. In this study, the critical theory of gender revolves around the idea that gender division is a social construct and that such a division was constructed to subjugate women, in addition to other reasons. Critical gender theory reflects the social constructionist (Berger & Lukman, 1966) concept in which identity categories are the product of specific historical and cultural developments. Indeed, according to Burr (2003), our identity is derived from the social realm rather than from within the person. Individuals are socialized through

significant others who mediate the objective reality of society, making it meaningful and internalizing it in this way (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). The concept of women being entirely considered as housewives is the product of social construction in Afghanistan, which has evolved over time in the country.

Method

Case study research is a qualitative study in which a researcher focuses on a unit of analysis (Gay et al., 2012). My goal in using qualitative case study research was to explore women's access to education from the participants' views and to see how participants construct meaning when it comes to women's access to education, along with improvements made in two decades for women's access to education. International media and organizations have produced several reports. Several investigative studies have been conducted on women's access to education in Afghanistan. Still, I wanted to go for a different case and integrate or give voice to participants' worldviews and how they see the phenomenon of women's access to education, similar to what Creswell and Creswell (2018) have proposed, that the qualitative researcher struggles to create meaning of a phenomenon from the participants' views. For this reason, I selected to conduct case study research on women's access to education in Afghanistan.

An unstructured or in-depth interview provides a life history or holistic understanding of the interviewee's point of view (Dawson, 2002). In this regard, the data was collected through unstructured or in-depth interviews to understand the living experience in discussions regarding women's access to education in the country. The purpose of this case study was to see and hear from women educators, principals and students about women's access to education in the country in a descriptive manner. In regard to the interview sessions, Gay et al. (2012) state that in unstructured interviews taking notes and expanding them after discussions are critical steps in interview data collection. In this qualitative case study research, I have looked into the women's access to education in Afghanistan across schools and learning spheres; However, I had minimal access to collecting first-hand data due to security concerns and the closure of girls' schools and universities.

I conducted interviews with a few key players such as women educators, principals and students involved in women's education, particularly with female students. During the interviews, participants were asked to feel comfortable in sharing their views or thoughts about a particular point. Later, interview notes were expanded where the identified responses were organized, and specific themes were found, which will be presented later in the paper. On the other hand, through desk study, data was collected after consulting several secondary sources like international organizations' reports, media reports, journal articles and

publications, among other sources. National outlets and government websites are currently non-operational due to the recent dramatic collapse of the Islamic Republic government, so that I couldn't access their reports and documents, especially those of the Ministry of Women's Affairs.

Research Questions

This study was conducted to find answers to the following questions.

1. What are the improvements in women's education from 2001 to 2021?
2. What barriers lay in front of women's access to education?
3. What is the future of women's education?

Case Study

This qualitative case study research explores women's access to education in Afghanistan. In typical case studies, unity of analysis is the defining factor (Yin, 2014). I have mainly focused on the improvements, barriers and future of women's education, which also serve as the research questions of this case study, as units of analysis. Here, I have explored women's access to secondary and higher education across three different regimes. Women have gone through a lot of ups and downs in terms of accessing equal and quality education. In this sense, the main descriptive picture of this case study lies in women's access to education in the country where the research questions contribute pieces to describe or explore the entire case, so the unit of analysis here is the women's situation in terms of education in Afghanistan, shaped as the research questions of this case study.

Sampling

In this case study, I have used the screening procedure consisting of three steps by Yin (as stated in Gay et al., 2012). First, I have gone through documents of international and women's rights organizations to see that women's access to education cases is appropriate enough to be investigated. Next, to see whether the participants were willing to participate and supply me with research-related information, I have conducted some informal interviews with some female students in the educational sector, both in public and private learning spheres, to gauge whether I could get hands-on valid and experience-based data, and to test the interview question to be relevant and appropriate for the interviewees to feel comfortable to provide me with cutting-edge data in the form of a pilot study.

After that, I came to see whether the participants had enough experience or had been permitted to participate in an interview session since, in Afghanistan, most female students wouldn't come to an interview session because of family restrictions. On the other hand, I didn't want to select someone who hadn't experienced a lack of access to education due to being a woman. Thus, I needed female students, principals, educators and people who know well about women's

access to education, and their stories would help a lot with collecting relevant and accurate information.

Data Collection

According to Gay et al. (2018), to achieve the aim of a case study, the researcher needs to consider the case under investigation to choose a suitable data collection tool. Assuming the same point, I have gone through reports from media, journal articles, human rights organizations, and other documents as document analysis. At the same time, I also interviewed five participants who were knowledgeable on the topic after going through the Yin screening procedure.

Data Analysis

Individual interviews were conducted with key players such as educators and principals in the women's education sector alongside female students. Later, a thematic analysis was performed to look for repeated patterns in the interviewees' responses. Braun and Clark (2006) have identified that in thematic analysis, researchers must go back and forth through the data several times to familiarize themselves with the data, assign codes for the repeated patterns, and produce reports. I have taken a similar approach for the thematic analysis. First, I collected the responses, went back and forth through the data, assigned codes, or found repeated patterns. Due to a lack of permission to record the interviews using a voice recorder or type recorder, I only managed to take notes and record interviewees' responses on the interview sheets. As a result of the analysis and after going through the codes (codes were in the form of highlighting and coloring participants' feelings and exciting points), I came up with these themes as a result of combining codes to generate them: *women's education, barriers to women's education, improvements and setbacks, and the future of women's education.*

Results

Women's Education

Almost all interviewees responded that on the one hand, women's education had been given piecemeal attention. In contrast, on the other hand, women's interest in education remains high in this uncertain system. One of the female interviewees said:

Although girls like me have a passion for education, most of the time, we have been neglected in providing equal learning opportunities.

When asked who neglected her rights to education, she mentioned the government, especially the Ministry of Education. This has become a significant problem for girls in Afghanistan since most are desperate to get an education but can't achieve their dreams of education. A female school principal who had occupied

this position for more than nine years shared her thoughts on women's education as follows:

In terms of women's education, the Islamic Republic government of Afghanistan, especially the Ministry of Education, worked hard on papers and policies to facilitate every sort of access for girls to get an education, but on the practical ground, we still need a lot to help bring girls to school. Laws and policies alone cannot guarantee girls access to education; rather, concrete steps need to be taken to convince families and eliminate every other barrier to help girls get their dreams of education.

She cried as she talked to me about women's education. She wanted to challenge the passiveness of the system in response to women's lack of access to education in the country. Afghanistan committed to providing equal access to education as a part of the Educational for All initiative. To give every girl access to education, the Islamic Republic government and United Nations International Children Emergency Fund developed a new community-based education policy aimed at facilitating every girl's education (Ministry of Education, 2018) but failed to implement the policy in its proper manner. In response, women's education has always been left behind regarding politics and armed conflicts in the country. In the past 26 years, none of the political systems which functioned in Afghanistan supported women's education in terms of encouraging families to allow their daughters, or reduce the barriers to, education.

Barriers to women's education

Women's education has always been hampered by barriers, as said by one of the respondents:

We have always sacrificed our dreams of education. In Afghanistan, if you are a girl, you are never told to go and get an education; rather, you must fight your way out. Girls in Afghanistan have been killed, brutally injured, prevented from education, and taken out of schools for no apparent reason. In response, the government only promised to take care of everything, but no action was taken until this time. Now with the Taliban, you no more have a government that could at least promise women access to education.

Indeed, in a third-world country like Afghanistan, girls and women have been restricted from getting an education. Among other things, respondents have described some common barriers that lay in front of women's education.

First, women in Afghanistan have continuously faced cultural restrictions, which has been regarded as the most challenging issue regarding women's access to education. Families, mainly from the outer areas, see women's education as a total waste of time and energy because they possess strict, conservative and fixed ideologies that women either belong in the house or grave, meaning no other

spheres of the community are appropriate for women. As uttered by a female teacher:

In our community, women are considered only as housewives since the entire Afghan society is patriarchal, and men decide what women are supposed to do. I have become a teacher with the help of my older brother, who studied a Master's degree in Law in a foreign nation, but women, especially girls, don't get brothers like mine; thus, the dreams of getting an education remain untrue. The community ideologies need to change if we want girls to return to school.

This clearly demonstrates that most communities have a gender bias against women's education.

Second, women have been challenged by more significant security concerns. It is not just an issue of women's education. Still, the entire system of education in the country has been attacked on various occasions; for example, teachers targeted, schools burned down, night letters, verbal threats, and killings of educational personnel. A female principal shared her experience of security concerns:

Our school is altogether a girls' school, we don't even have any male staff members, but still our school received threat letters from unknown groups forcing us not to come to school and inform girls to remain home; otherwise, they will be targeted both outside and inside the school. For the last five months, we didn't receive any letters, but we received many letters before that.

In the same connection, the facts that women have been bombed on their way to school or university, suffered acid attacks, and verbal threats are joint forces preventing women from attaining education.

Third, there is a lack of learning facilities and distant schools and learning places. According to a report by Human Rights Watch (2017), two-thirds of Afghan women find it hard to get an education, or lack complete access to education, due to a lack of school facilities. The situation found in this study is similar; most women's learning places lack essential learning equipment, qualified female teachers, and school buildings, among other things. The distance between school and home is another issue forcing women to leave education as it has led to most of the security-related cases occurring in places where girls or women have to walk a great distance to school.

Improvements and Setbacks in Women's Education

Women's education has improved a lot compared to Afghanistan 20 years back; nonetheless, women's education has also had some setbacks, from the very beginning, which have not been addressed. Since 2002, Afghanistan has become full of international donors and NGOs assisting in humanitarian, education and other

areas. In the broad spectrum of education, building schools, training and hiring teachers, and reaching out to every child and woman by encouraging their families to permit them to receive education were all dominant activities in the education sector. Conversely, one of the most significant setbacks was that over those 20 years, with all the international support, national governance managed to enroll 40 percent of women in various educational sectors but failed to bring the remaining 60 percent of women into education (UN Women, 2021). Millions are passionate about getting an education but cannot, due to family or security concerns. The girls and women the government managed to bring back to education was a very impressive beginning, but not a task that was completed. In plain words, millions of girls today don't have access to education.

Future of Women's Education

The current political unfolding in the country, which resulted in the Taliban taking complete control of the country, led people to have an unimaginable prediction about women's education. Most of the respondents in the interviews said that as far as they can think, women's education won't flourish in the country. The previous Islamic Republic failed to bring women back to schooling in a complete sense despite all the international support. With this new system, girls and women can't see education as a possibility for themselves in the future. Although, the Taliban have promised to provide equal access to both males and females. In a recent interview, Abdul Baqi Haqqani, the Minister of Higher Education of the Taliban, promised that equal access to education would be provided to the young Afghan generation, but in separate classes or gender-segregated ones. As stated by one of the respondents:

The Taliban needs international support to bring education back on track for males and females. For now, the biggest challenges lay in front of the Taliban to reopen public universities and girls' schools all over the country, which would be a positive step to receive international attention and assistance unless they continue with the same mindset of 1996. Women in Afghanistan must bury their dreams of education. For now, only hope has made us strong enough that we would have the opportunity to get education again.

Participant Story

In Afghanistan, we women are treated as servants of our males. They never give us an equal chance when it comes to education. My father believed I would still be a housewife no matter how far I got an education. With my mother's support, I was able to start university, but now I am anxious for the future of my studies as the Taliban has taken control over the country.

During the time of this interview, the respondent was a junior year student in a medical faculty at a public university in Afghanistan. Her story is a real example of women's access to education in this third-world country. Although she managed to complete her secondary school, now she is going through immense fear and anxiety in the hopes of completing her medical studies.

Discussion

Education has always been a concern in the country with ups and downs; somehow, the education system survived after 2001; before the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, women's education was zero, with only some religious or Islamic education at home, because women weren't allowed to leave home without a male, a blood-related companion. The Islamic Republic brought some hope to the women of Afghanistan. With the establishment of the education system, millions of children and women joined schools and universities. Although women and girls faced several barriers like cultural restrictions, security concerns, distance, lack of facilities and others, with many improvements like building schools in every village, the number of women and girls increased day by day, and families were encouraged to permit women to enter education among other things.

Until the last day of the previous government, four out of ten students in primary education were girls, and women in higher education had increased from 5,000 in 2001 to 90,000 in 2018, with a higher interest in going abroad to study (UNESCO, 2021). According to UNESCO (2021), the female literacy rate nearly doubled (17% to 30%) in the past eight years. In general, the past 20 years have been challenging for women's education yet fruitful for most of them as they have found educational opportunities. The important thing worth mentioning here is the cultural force preventing girls from education. Although the past 20 years have been fruitful in terms of access to education, government policies didn't include anything concrete to change the perception and mindsets of Afghan people toward women's education. Urban people have always tried to pave the way for girls and women to access education. In contrast, the rural people have a strict and conservative mindset where they only see women as housewives rather than people who need to be an active part of the social sphere of a community.

Now that the Taliban have overthrown the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, after 20 years of building women's education, women's education remains a critical issue for the Taliban to tackle. The Taliban enforced gender-segregated classes in their first policies for women's education. Although they promised equal access to education, they failed to reopen girls' schools in the country. One crucial thing can be seen if you compare the Taliban of 1996 and the Taliban of today; they have changed. Today, they have allowed women into private universities, but in

segregation. In the period from 1996, they banned girls' schools or women's education. Not only this, but some of the provinces, according to the Aljazeera report, have reopened schools for all-female school goers. The Taliban have reportedly stated that they cannot open public universities and girls' schools due to financial and logistical issues. On the other hand, people involved in education and female students believe that nothing will happen. The Taliban won't allow girls to get an education as their government lacks international recognition. Women feel hopeless about their education under the Taliban's rule.

Conclusion

This paper has explored women's access to education in Afghanistan across three regimes looking for improvements and setbacks. First, I looked at the Taliban's initial rule, where a total ban was enforced on women's education from primary to higher levels. Only women in the medical sector were given opportunities to work and treat female patients. On the other hand, with the US-led invasion of Afghanistan and the establishment of a new Islamic Republic regime, the interest in getting an education was seen all across Afghanistan. With the international community's help, the new government planned and carried out education programs to bring males and females back to education. International donors and organizations like UNICEF, the Aga Khan Foundation, Save the Children, and the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan have conducted research, planned outreach and awareness programs, and provided children with school equipment. All these efforts resulted in around a 40 percent enrollment rate for the female gender across the primary level of education (UNESCO, 2021).

The sudden and unbelievable collapse of the Islamic Republic and the rise of the Taliban have taken women back to 1996. Although they have been promised equal access to education, some educators and female students believe that the Taliban would only open schools and universities for females once they are recognized internationally. Still, there is a long way to go before women can regain access to education across the country. In this regard, women in Afghanistan now live in a state of an unpredictable future.

During this study, the participants highlighted concerns about women's access to education in Afghanistan. From their responses, women's education seems to have taken a back seat throughout the country. Main forces like cultural restrictions, security concerns, distant schools, and lack of school equipment drive the entire system of women's education in Afghanistan. Most of the people involved in this study felt heartbroken for the future of women's education. They assume that women's education would perish if the international community doesn't intervene and find common ground with the Taliban. Thus, the international community and

every Afghan are desperately observing the Taliban's movements toward women's rights and education in the country. For now, only promises and hope have bound Afghan women together in looking for a future full of opportunities, primarily in education. Gender-segregated classes at university is the only option the Taliban see as a way forward with women's education.

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