



The Collapse of Women Education in Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Policies, 2021-2025

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Abstract

This research critically examines the women's education crisis in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime from 2021 to 2025. Following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, Afghan girls were systematically banned from secondary and higher education, reversing two decades of educational progress. Using feminist theory particularly radical and intersectional feminism the study analyzes how these restrictions reflect institutionalized patriarchy and ideological control. The research draws on qualitative data, official decrees, testimonies, and reports from international organizations to evaluate the extent and impact of the bans. Findings reveal severe violations of girls' educational rights, leading to psychological trauma, increased child marriage, economic regression, and long-term societal instability. The study also assesses international responses and proposes evidence-based recommendations, including conditional aid policies, support for community-based education, and global advocacy for Afghan women's rights. Ultimately, the thesis underscores that restoring access to education for Afghan girls is not only a human rights obligation but essential for the nation's future development and stability.

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Introduction

Afghanistan, the nation with the highest illiteracy rate globally (UNAMA, 2013), is presently the sole country that prohibits girls from attending school. The closure of girls' schools is not a recent occurrence; it dates back to September 27, 1996, with the establishment of "The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" following the civil war. During the initial Taliban regime, the populace of Afghanistan experienced significant alterations in their everyday lives, particularly as the school system was profoundly affected by the Taliban's educational policies, resulting in a markedly different educational framework compared to prior administrations. In the 1990s, following the Taliban's ascension to power, their initial step was to implement a government structure founded on Sharia, thus eliminating all improvements achieved by the preceding administration. The Taliban eliminated texts that contradicted the Islamic curriculum and subsequently prohibited girls from attending school. Taliban authorities repeatedly stated that girls' schools were shuttered in the 1990s due to insufficient financial resources for establishing separate classes for girls and boys, employing female teachers, and providing transportation for girls (Strick & Kuehn, 2012). In 2001, upon his selection as interim president for a two-year term, Hamid Karzai endorsed the "Declaration of the Essential Rights of Afghan Women," which stipulates that women possess identical rights to men, encompassing legal equality, access to education across all disciplines, freedom of movement, freedom of expression, political engagement, and the choice to wear the 'Burqa' or not. According to SIGAR (2016), at the onset of 2001, merely 29% of boys and 1% of girls were enrolled in school. However, statistics from 2016 reveal a significant increase in student enrollment, rising from 900,000 in 2002 to 8 million in

2013, indicating substantial growth in the sector.

Following their resurgence in August 2021, the Taliban prohibited secondary education for girls. This year, the Taliban imposed an additional limitation on the education of Afghan girls by prohibiting them from selecting specific courses for the national university entrance exam (Yousufzai *et al.*, 2022) ^[20]. Excluding girls from schools can yield numerous adverse effects; the international community and various organizations have urged the Taliban to permit girls' education, recognizing that perpetuating this situation will negatively affect girls, their families, and the nation's future.

Background of the study

Return of the Taliban and Reinstated Suppression (Post-August 2021), In August 2021, the Taliban reasserted dominance over Afghanistan subsequent to the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops. Notwithstanding initial assurances of a more inclusive and moderate approach, the dictatorship swiftly re imposed repressive measures, especially aimed at women and girls.

In most regions, girls' secondary and high schools were shuttered, and by 2022, women were prohibited from enrolling in universities and working in NGOs, signifying a regression to the oppressive conditions of the 1990s. The Ministry of Women's Affairs was abolished and succeeded by the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice.

The situation has elicited worldwide outrage, with the UN and human rights organizations characterizing the prohibitions as a manifestation of gender apartheid and a breach of international law, particularly the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). In spite of the adverse conditions, Afghan women persist in their resistance via clandestine educational networks and public demonstrations, frequently at significant personal peril.

The matter of women's rights in Afghanistan has gained international attention for decades, particularly during prolonged warfare, traditional socio-cultural norms, and religious extremism. Access to education has been one of the most fiercely contested and restricted rights, especially under regimes that reject the principle of gender equality. Historically, Afghan women have fluctuated between phases of relative autonomy and severe subjugation, contingent upon the characteristics of the governing powers. The Taliban's resurgence to power in August 2021 has once more positioned Afghan girls and women at the forefront of a significant human rights crisis globally.

Under the prevailing Taliban dictatorship, Afghan girls have been systematically deprived of their fundamental right to education. This encompasses the cessation of secondary education for girls, prohibitions on female university attendance, and the exclusion of women from teaching and administrative positions within educational institutions. These measurements represent a dramatic regression from the advancements achieved between 2001 and 2021, during when international assistance and Afghan civil society initiatives resulted in considerable enhancements in women's educational access. Millions of girls enrolled in educational institutions, female literacy rates increased, and women took up positions as educators, professors, and administrators. Nonetheless, all these accomplishments are now exposed, endangering an entire generation of Afghan women. The Taliban justifies these restrictions based on their

understanding of Islamic law and Afghan cultural norms. This view is frequently attacked for its selectivity, patriarchal bias, and political motivations. Notwithstanding global denunciation, economic sanctions, and appeals from Muslim-majority nations promoting girls' education, the Taliban have continued their practices of gender apartheid. These actions contravene Afghanistan's constitutional commitments as well as its obligations under international human rights treaties, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

This research seeks to examine the women's educational crisis in Afghanistan, specifically through a case study on the educational crises impacting Afghan girls under the current Taliban administration. This study will examine the historical development of women's education in Afghanistan, the ideological and political motivations behind the Taliban's educational restrictions, and the personal, societal, and national consequences of these policies. This research will offer a thorough understanding of the challenges encountered by Afghan girls and the broader implications for Afghan society and the international community by analyzing primary data from interviews and testimonies, as well as secondary data from reputable international and regional sources.

The proposed study will be a vital initiative to amplify the voices of Afghan girls, highlight a significant human rights issue, and further worldwide efforts to restore dignity, justice, and equal opportunities for Afghan women in school and other domains.

Statement of the problem

Since the Taliban's rebirth in August 2021, Afghan girls have seen drastic limitations on their educational rights, including the shutdown of secondary schools and universities, the termination of female educators, and the imposition of repressive gender norms. These actions are a blatant violation of fundamental human rights and have regressed two decades of advancements in girls' education. Notwithstanding global condemnation, the Taliban persist in implementing measures that exclude Afghan girls from formal education. This study aims to analyze the particular characteristics of these educational constraints, their effects on the lives of Afghan girls, and their broader consequences for women's rights under the present regime.

Research objectives

1. To investigate the specific policies imposed by the Taliban since August 2021 that restricts girl's access to education in Afghanistan.
2. To compare the present and past Taliban regimes neglecting of woman rights.
3. To explore the role of local communities and international organization in responding to girls education crisis under Taliban rule.
4. To assess the impact of these restrictions on the girls education.

Research Gap

While existing studies have broadly examined human rights violation and gender inequality in Afghanistan, there is limited academic research focused specifically on the

educational crisis of Afghan girls under the Taliban regime since August 2021. Most available literature either cover the pre-2001 Taliban era or general human rights concerns without providing an in depth, updated case study on how current Taliban policies limit girls education. This research addresses that gap by offering a focused, contemporary analysis of the educational restrictions imposed on Afghan girls by Taliban's.

Literature Review

Prior to the Taliban's ascendance to power in the mid-1990s, women achieved considerable advancements in education, evidenced by an increase in female school attendance and women's involvement in higher education and the labor field. The Taliban's stringent interpretation of Islamic law has resulted in considerable limitations on women's education and other rights (Engkizar *et al.*, 2021).

A multitude of papers has been authored on education and women. Alongside comprehensive research conducted by scholars and specialists in this domain, the institutions and nations engaged in the Afghan matter regard women's educational access, adherence to fundamental human rights and freedoms, and the protection of minority rights as paramount prerequisites for recognition. Recognizing that this diet has been established The Taliban ascended to power in Afghanistan in 1996 and promptly enforced strict Islamic regulations (Feyyaz, 2016; Ghasemi, 1999; Gupta, 2019; Lo *et al.*, 2023) ^[4].

The Taliban imposed significant limitations on women's education and employment. They held the belief that women must not to have an education and should remain at home to attend to familial responsibilities. The Taliban prohibited women from attending schools, universities, or any educational institutions. The prohibition of women's education under the Taliban administration severely restricted women's access to educational opportunities (Yousufi, 2021) ^[10].

Harsch *et al.* (2021) and Niaz Asadullah *et al.* (2019) report that only 5% of women in Afghanistan are literate, in contrast to 38% of men. The disparity widened throughout the Taliban era.

The educational prohibitions imposed on women during the Taliban era had profound repercussions for society. Women were deprived of the opportunity to cultivate their potential, resulting in the loss of essential skills and knowledge that could have enhanced their lives and benefited their communities. The absence of educated women has exacerbated Afghanistan's economic and social underdevelopment. During the second phase of their governance, the Taliban perpetuated the calamity of the initial time (Sahar & Kaunert, 2021).

Reports indicate that the Taliban instituted limitations on women's education, employment, and activities in the initial days of their governance. Women were prohibited from leaving their homes, engaging in office employment, or enrolling in educational institutions. These impediments have generated apprehensions regarding their enduring effects on women's educational and professional prospects in Afghanistan. Furthermore, subsequent women have instituted additional constraints on women's actions in public spaces. Women must don a veil when exiting the domicile and be accompanied by a sharia mahram. This has generated considerable apprehension regarding women's safety and their capacity to obtain fundamental services, including

healthcare. Following the restrictions enacted by the Taliban, some women in Kabul and other provinces initiated civil protests; however, these rallies were forcefully repressed, resulting in the women enduring the brutality and abuse of the Taliban. This has raised considerable apprehension regarding women's safety and the potential for extensive human rights abuses (Ebadi, A. 2022) ^[12].

The initial phase of Taliban governance commenced following the ousting of the Mujahideen administration in 1996. The ascendance of the Taliban marked the onset of a bleak era for education in Afghanistan, swiftly exposing the group's inhumane policies. Dictatorship and terror prevailed. The utilization of devices like cameras, filmmaking equipment, video recorders, and televisions was prohibited. This era can be characterized as the educational dark age, Particularly, new knowledge was never accommodated under the regime. Throughout this period of authority, educational institutions, particularly those for girls, were shut down. Women and girls were officially prohibited from attending offices or engaging in external employment and were compelled to remain at home (Krzyżanowski, 2022). The Taliban's negative policies profoundly impacted the freedoms and livelihoods of women. Hervey (2023) and Nakanishi (2022) report that on September 28, 1996, the Taliban declared over Radio Sharia that women are entirely forbidden from working abroad and that girls are no longer permitted to attend school. Approximately 250 women in Herat province defied this directive. Consequently, they were violently assaulted by Taliban militants for failing to adhere to Islamic law. During the initial phase of Taliban governance, women were permitted to work solely in the medical sector, particularly at the Kabul Medical School, where they could attend to and care for female patients. The past five years have been markedly detrimental to women's access to education. In 2001, the Taliban said that women may access school following the enactment of a specific law; nevertheless, they failed to apply this law until the final day of their regime (Khwajamir, 2016)

Theoretical Framework

This study on the "The Collapse of Women Education in Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Policies-2021-2025" has a firm foundation in Feminist Theory, employing a comprehensive analytical framework to examine the gender nature of educational exclusion in Afghanistan. Feminist theory critiques patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender inequality and limit women's access to fundamental rights such as education, autonomy, and civic participation. This study examines Radical Feminism to analyze the structural and ideological factors contributing to the educational crises faced by Afghan girls under the Taliban.

Radical Feminism

Radical feminism emphasizes that patriarchy, deeply embedded in social, political, and cultural institutions, is the primary source of women's oppression. The Taliban's post-2021 rule exemplifies a patriarchal regime that systematically excludes girls and women from secondary and higher education, thereby controlling their roles, bodies, and intellectual growth. The enforced educational restrictions embody a broader ideology that see educated women as threats to patriarchal authority rather than as a singular policy.

Core concepts applied

The Taliban rule exemplifies an entrenched gender bias that deprives women of their rights to knowledge and independence.

From a radical feminist perspective, education constitutes not only a fundamental human right but also a mechanism for freedom that contests patriarchal control.

Feminist Theory provides a necessary framework to examine how the post-2021 Taliban regime perpetuates gender inequality through educational exclusion. It facilitates a deeper understanding of the issue, not merely as a consequence of governmental failure, but also as a calculated strategy rooted in patriarchal ideology and systemic oppression. This prism ensures that the examination and pursuit of justice remain focused on the voices and agency of Afghan women and girls.

Research Methodology

The research "The Collapse of Women Education in Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Policies-2021-2025" uses qualitative case studies, based on secondary data.

Data Collection

International Organizations' Reports:

- UNESCO (education statistics, enrollment rates 2001–2025).
- UNICEF (school closures, literacy, community-based education).
- United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) – reports on human rights violations.
- World Bank and USAID – statistics on education financing and gender-based development.

Human Rights and NGO Publications:

- Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports on Taliban restrictions.
- Amnesty International assessments of women's rights violations.
- Afghan civil society organizations documenting underground schools and resistance movements.

Academic and Scholarly Literature:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles on Afghan women's education.
- Studies on feminist theory, patriarchy, and the socio-political context of Afghanistan.
- Theses and dissertations focusing on Afghanistan's education system post-2001.

Media and News Outlets:

- BBC, Al Jazeera, The Guardian, New York Times, Tolo News, and Deutsche Welle for firsthand testimonies, interviews, and recent developments.
- These outlets provide up-to-date information that supplements official statistics.

Government and Taliban Statements:

- Taliban decrees, Ministry of Education announcements, and official communiqués regarding policies on female education.

Secondary data is collected by reviewing current and historical publications, books, and research papers on women's rights in Afghanistan, with a focus on girls'

educational rights.

- Reports from UNESCO, UN Women, and World Bank offer statistical insights on education and gender equality in Afghanistan post-2021.
- Reports explore the effects of Taliban education bans on girls and the efforts of international organizations and activists to address them.

Analyzing Data

A theme analysis is performed to analyzing the data.

Educational Status of Women in Afghanistan (2001–2021)

The two decades between the fall of the first Taliban regime in 2001 and their resurgence in August 2021 marked a transformative period for women's education in Afghanistan. Backed by international intervention, state-building projects, and global advocacy for human rights, women's education witnessed unprecedented growth. The expansion of schooling opportunities for girls, the introduction of gender-sensitive educational reforms, and international aid programs facilitated significant increases in female literacy and enrollment across all levels of education. However, these gains remained fragile, unevenly distributed, and heavily reliant on international financial and security support.

Expansion of Access to Education (2001–2021)

- In 2001, under Taliban rule, fewer than 5,000 girls were enrolled in primary schools nationwide, and virtually none attended secondary schools or universities (UNICEF, 2002).
- By 2010, nearly 2.4 million girls were enrolled in schools, constituting 35% of total enrollment (World Bank, 2012).
- By 2020, about 3.5 million Afghan girls were in schools, accounting for 39% of total enrollment (UNESCO, 2020).
- University education also expanded: in 2001, there were no female students at Kabul University. By 2020, over 90,000 women were enrolled in higher education institutions across the country (Ministry of Higher Education, 2020).

This growth was largely facilitated by foreign funding, reconstruction of schools, teacher training programs, and advocacy for gender equality.

Literacy Improvements

- In 2001, the female literacy rate was estimated at 12% nationally, with rural literacy often below 5% (UNESCO, 2002).
- By 2018, literacy among young women (ages 15–24) had increased to 30%, while urban female literacy reached nearly 47% (UNICEF, 2019).
- Progress was most significant in Kabul, Herat, and Balkh, while provinces such as Uruzgan and Zabul still reported female literacy rates below 10% (Asia Foundation, 2019).

Regional and Rural–Urban Disparities

Despite progress, educational opportunities for Afghan women varied significantly:

- **Urban areas:** Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif, and Herat had

higher female enrollment rates, exceeding 60% at the primary level by 2019.

- **Rural areas:** In provinces such as Helmand, Paktika, and Uruzgan, fewer than 15% of girls attended school due to insecurity, poverty, and cultural conservatism (HRW, 2017).
- Ethnic and sectarian divides also influenced access: Hazara-dominated regions such as Bamyan witnessed higher female participation compared to Pashtun-majority provinces where Taliban influence remained strong.

Role of International Support

The surge in women's education was directly tied to international intervention:

- **USAID** invested over \$1 billion in Afghan education programs between 2002–2020, building thousands of schools and funding teacher training.
- **UNICEF and UNESCO** supported over 18,000 community-based education classes in rural areas, benefiting 500,000 girls.
- **Scholarships abroad** were expanded, with hundreds of Afghan women studying in countries such as India, Turkey, and Iran.

Data Analysis and Findings

This data examines the collapse of women's education under Taliban rule since August 2021. Using secondary sources including UN and UNESCO reports, Human Rights Watch (HRW), Amnesty International, and Afghan civil society data—alongside testimonies from Afghan women and educators, the analysis illustrates the extent of rights violations and their broader socio-economic and psychological implications.

4.1 Overview of Collected Data

- **Pre-Taliban (2001–2021) gains:** By 2020, more than 3.8 million Afghan girls were enrolled in schools, compared to virtually none under the Taliban's first regime (1996–2001) (UNESCO, 2021). Women constituted 40% of all university students (World Bank, 2020).
- **Immediate decline post-2021:** Within one year of Taliban control, 1.1–1.5 million girls were excluded from secondary schools (UNESCO, 2023).
- **University collapse:** Amnesty International (2024) reports a 90% drop in female enrollment in higher education after the December 2022 university ban.
- **Overall exclusion:** UNICEF (2024) estimates over 80% of Afghan girls of school age are now out of school, the highest rate globally.

These figures confirm a sharp regression, with nearly two decades of educational progress effectively erased in less than three years.

4.2 Trends in School Closures and Restrictions

- **Secondary Education Ban:** Announced in September 2021, barring girls beyond Grade 6. As of 2023, this has denied 1.5 million girls access to education.
- **University Ban:** On December 20, 2022, the Taliban barred women from universities, affecting over 100,000 female students across public and private institutions.

- **Vocational/NGO bans:** In April 2023, women were prohibited from working in national and international NGOs, dismantling many education support programs.
- **Primary level decline:** Primary school enrollment dropped from 6.8 million (2019) to 5.7 million (2022), reflecting systemic barriers (UNESCO, 2023).
- **School closures:** An estimated 12,000 secondary schools that previously accepted female students have either closed or transitioned to boys-only schools.
- **Teacher losses:** By 2024, 60% of female educators in rural provinces lost jobs due to Taliban restrictions (HRW, 2024).

4.3 Personal Narratives and Testimonies

- **Farzana (17, Kabul):** "I was dismissed in tears, despite my earnest attempts to don my uniform." I have not accessed my books since then.
- **Niloofar, a former biology professor:** "I was informed that I could not teach because women are meant to remain in the domestic sphere." I have served as an educator for two decades.
- **Herat underground school instructor:** "Girls are currently educated in basements." They are enthusiastic to acquire knowledge, notwithstanding the danger. Afghan young females have reported experiencing psychological discomfort, including feelings of hopelessness and depressed. A girl stated to the BBC, "I feel mentally dead" after being expelled from school for nearly 900 days.
- **Coerced Migration for Education:** Numerous Afghan women have pursued educational opportunities elsewhere. A 24-year-old medical student, Hasina, sought refuge in Iran to pursue her education after being prohibited from enrolling in an Afghan institution. She is presently enrolled at Iran University of Medical Sciences in Tehran. In September 2021, a female demonstrator advocating for the right to education was apprehended and alleged to have been subjected to abuse and intimidation.

Activist groups report that widowed mothers, who were the supporter for their families, experienced significant grief due to their daughters' lack of educational opportunities in Kabul, which is home to over 30,000 widows. Families in Kabul and Herat said that they had relocated or planned to relocate exclusively for the education of girls; some even liquidated assets to finance the journey.

These testimonies highlight not only systemic exclusion but also the resilience of Afghan girls and educators in the face of repression.

4.4 Regional Disparities in Access to Education

- **Urban vs. Rural:** By 2023, 70% of urban girls were still enrolled in primary school compared to only 40% in rural areas.
- **Kandahar (Taliban stronghold):** 95% of female schools remain shut.
- **Bamyan Province:** Despite restrictions, 30% of secondary schools for girls operate covertly (UNESCO, 2023).
- **Badakhshan & Bamyan:** Underground networks sustain learning, often with diaspora funding.
- **UNICEF (2024):** Reports 18,000 community-based

classrooms serving 361,000 children, 60% of whom are girls.

- **Digital Access:** In provinces with smartphones, girls' online learning participation increased by 60% between 2022–2024 (BBC Monitoring, 2024).

4.5 Role of Family, Community, and Resistance Movements

- **Families:** Urban families, particularly in Kabul and Herat, sell assets or relocate to sustain girls' education.
- **Resistance Movements:** Groups like PenPath and the Afghan Women's Education Coalition operate underground classes and provide digital resources. Collectively, they have mobilized millions of dollars for alternative education (HRW, 2024).
- **Community Schools:** UNICEF-supported initiatives now represent one of the few remaining lifelines, though constantly threatened by Taliban crackdowns.
- **Protests:** On September 25, 2021, women in Kabul and Herat staged rallies demanding education rights, met with violence, arrests, and aerial gunfire.

4.6 Impact on Economic, Social, and Psychological Well-being

- **Psychological Crisis:** UNICEF (2024) reports 68% of Afghan girls (aged 13–19) feel hopeless about the future. HRW documents rising cases of depression and suicide among adolescent girls in Herat and Kabul.
- **Child Marriage:** Rates of early marriage have risen by 25% since 2021, as families see no future for girls in education.
- **Economic Loss:** The World Bank (2023) estimates Afghanistan loses \$5.4 billion annually (2.5% of GDP) due to women's exclusion from education and work.
- **Household Poverty:** Families reliant on female teachers' income plunged into poverty after tens of thousands lost jobs by 2023.
- **Generational Effect:** UNESCO (2023) warns that denying education to girls will perpetuate cycles of illiteracy and poverty, undermining Afghanistan's recovery for decades.

The data demonstrates that since August 2021, Taliban policies have systematically dismantled women's education in Afghanistan. Girls' secondary and higher education has been effectively eliminated, female teachers removed, and community initiatives suppressed. The bans are not only regressive but catastrophic in their long-term implications: worsening poverty, brain drain, and intergenerational disempowerment. The collapse of women's education in Afghanistan post-2021 is thus not merely a policy decision but a deliberate violation of human rights, with profound consequences for Afghan society and global development goals.

Discussion

The Collapse of Women Education in Afghanistan: Post-2021 Taliban Policies

This section critically evaluates the findings of the study by situating them within international human rights frameworks, feminist theory, and Afghanistan's socio-political landscape from 2021 onward. It explores how Taliban restrictions have reinforced patriarchal power structures, the contradictions

between Taliban ideology and global rights-based standards, the role of international actors, and the long-term societal consequences of denying education to half the population.

Analysis of Results through the Lens of Feminist Theory

The Taliban's systematic exclusion of Afghan girls from education since August 2021 directly aligns with feminist theoretical understandings of patriarchy as a mechanism of male dominance and control. Feminist theory emphasizes that education is a site of empowerment for women, providing access to social mobility, independence, and civic participation. By dismantling women's access to education, the Taliban deliberately reinforce a patriarchal system that confines women to domestic roles and ensures male hegemony in both public and private spheres.

This resonates with radical feminist arguments that patriarchy is embedded within institutional and cultural practices. The Taliban's decrees — banning girls beyond Grade 6 in September 2021 and prohibiting women's university education in December 2022 — reflect a conscious attempt to limit female intellectual autonomy and economic independence.

Intersectional feminism further enriches this analysis. While all Afghan women suffer under these policies, the effects are uneven: ethnic minorities such as the Hazaras, Tajiks, and Uzbeks, who historically valued female education, face an even sharper disjuncture between cultural traditions and Taliban-imposed restrictions. For Hazara girls in Bamyan, for instance, clandestine schools have become acts of both resistance and survival, demonstrating agency against intersecting oppressions of gender, ethnicity, and religion.

Women-led protests, such as the “Bread, Work, Freedom” demonstrations of 2021–22, illustrate feminist principles of resistance against gendered oppression. Despite violent suppression, Afghan women exercised agency by reclaiming public space and voicing their rights. From a feminist lens, the Taliban's educational restrictions are not simply regressive cultural policies but deliberate tools of gender-based oppression and control.

Taliban's Ideological Justifications vs. Rights-Based Standards

The Taliban justify restrictions on women's education by invoking a rigid interpretation of Deobandi Islamic jurisprudence combined with Pashtunwali tribal codes. Leaders claim that female education beyond puberty violates Islamic modesty, that co-education is “un-Islamic,” and that Western curricula undermine Afghan values. They also argue that women's “primary role” lies in the home, echoing earlier Taliban rhetoric from 1996–2001.

Yet these justifications directly conflict with international human rights norms. Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) — all to which Afghanistan has historically been a signatory — affirm education as a fundamental right without discrimination. The 2004 Afghan Constitution (Article 22) explicitly guaranteed gender equality in education and public life, which the Taliban have effectively nullified.

Thus, the Taliban's ideological narrative frames education as a cultural and religious battleground, while global human rights frameworks recognize it as a universal entitlement.

This clash exposes the irreconcilable tension between Afghanistan's current regime and international norms. While Taliban leaders position restrictions as safeguarding Afghan honor and culture, in reality, these policies weaponize religion to institutionalize systemic gender discrimination.

Role of International Actors, NGOs, and Donor Agencies

The international community has consistently condemned the Taliban's restrictions on women's education. The UN Secretary-General has described Afghanistan as the "most repressive country in the world for women's rights." Following August 2021, international donors withheld or restructured billions of dollars in aid, attempting to pressure the Taliban into compliance with international norms.

- **UNICEF and UNESCO** have spearheaded alternative education initiatives, such as 18,000 community-based classrooms in 2023, serving more than 361,000 children, including over 200,000 girls.
- **UNESCO literacy programs** have trained over 1,000 women facilitators, reaching 55,000 Afghans in rural areas by 2024.
- NGOs such as PenPath, the Afghan Women's Education Coalition, and diaspora groups have organized underground schools and digital learning platforms, often risking violent reprisals.

However, these efforts remain limited. The Taliban's December 2022 ban on women working for NGOs further crippled humanitarian programs, forcing organizations like Save the Children and CARE International to suspend operations. Donors have struggled to balance humanitarian aid with conditionality, fearing that aid could indirectly legitimize or strengthen the Taliban regime.

The crisis thus represents a litmus test for global engagement: while rights-based conditional aid is demanded by activists, humanitarian imperatives often push international actors to compromise, leaving Afghan women in a precarious position.

Long-Term Consequences for Afghan Society

The systematic exclusion of women from education has devastating long-term implications for Afghanistan's development and stability.

1. Economic Impact:

- The World Bank (2023) estimates Afghanistan loses \$5.4 billion annually, or 2.5% of GDP, due to women's exclusion from education and employment.
- Educated women contribute 3.9% annual income gains per year of schooling, and 4.7% for higher education. Denying this undermines the nation's productivity for decades.

2. Brain Drain and Professional Deficit:

Afghanistan faces a looming shortage of qualified professionals' doctors, teachers, engineers, and administrators as women constituted a growing share of these sectors by 2020. The collapse of female participation will devastate healthcare, education, and governance systems.

3. Social and Cultural Consequences:

- Reinforcement of patriarchy and normalization of

gender-based violence.

- Rising child marriages up 25% since 2021 as families perceive no alternative future for girls.
- Increased social isolation and suppression of women's voices in civic life.

4. Psychological Effects:

- In **Herat province (2023)**, 90% of reported mental health cases came from women.
- UNICEF (2024) found 68% of adolescent girls expressed hopelessness about their futures.
- Rising rates of female suicides, particularly among educated young women in Kabul and Herat.

These consequences extend beyond women: Afghanistan's broader economic, social, and political future is being undermined by policies that marginalize half the population.

Future Prospects and Reforms

The future of Afghan women's education remains uncertain. Unless Taliban policies change, the country risks an intergenerational cycle of illiteracy and poverty, crippling national development for decades. Yet several avenues of hope persist:

- **Community Resistance:** Local underground schools, online learning initiatives, and community-based education show resilience and determination.
- **International Pressure:** Global actors continue to press for women's rights as a precondition for recognition and aid.
- **Diaspora Engagement:** Afghan exiles are funding secret schools and offering remote education, keeping alive pathways for learning.

For genuine reform, however, sustained diplomatic pressure, conditional aid, and community-led initiatives must converge. Education should remain the central demand of international negotiations with the Taliban, alongside humanitarian concerns. The empowerment of Afghan women through education is not merely a domestic issue — it is a global imperative for peace, stability, and human dignity.

Conclusion

This study has analyzed the significant educational obstacles encountered by Afghan women and girls under the Taliban regime that assumed power in 2021, situating the issue within a comprehensive socio-political, ideological, and human rights context. The deliberate exclusion of girls from secondary and higher education via decrees, enforced closures, and ideological constraints has entrenched a gender-based apartheid policy in the educational sector since the Taliban regained power in August 2021, reversing decades of progress. Data gathered from global publications, scholarly research, and primary accounts indicate that more than 1.4 million girls have been deprived of education, while the general rate of female university enrolment has declined. These restrictions are a calculated strategy by the Taliban to maintain patriarchal control, grounded in a stringent Deobandi worldview that merges cultural conservatism with religious orthodoxy.

Comprehending the Taliban's actions as manifestations of a larger patriarchal framework aimed at controlling and subjugating women, rather than as discrete choices,

necessitates the use of feminist theory, namely radical and intersectional feminism. Feminist research indicates that these rules disproportionately disadvantage women based on their geographic location, race, and socioeconomic status, marginalizing both metropolitan activists and rural girls lacking access to alternatives. The prohibition of female education constitutes a blatant infringement of international human rights law, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), as well as Afghanistan's constitutional and ethical responsibilities. The Taliban's ideological rationalizations, which claim religious and cultural legitimacy, sharply diverge from commonly accepted rights-based norms. The historical context of other Muslim-majority nations, including previous Afghan administrations, demonstrates that Islamic ideals and women's education are not inherently contradictory, despite the government's claims that girls' education contravenes Afghan customs or Islamic tenets. The existing policies seem to be politically driven efforts to reinstate gender restrictions under the pretence of Christian conservatism. International entities such as the UN, UNESCO, and various NGOs have issued robust denunciations and implemented conditional assistance policies. Notwithstanding these endeavors, external pressure has diminished in efficacy owing to the Taliban's obstinacy against reform. Nonetheless, when Afghan women orchestrate public demonstrations, create clandestine educational institutions, and participate in digital learning platforms, grassroots opposition persists. These programs exemplify the resiliency of Afghan society and its steadfast dedication to rights, dignity, and educational access.

The ramifications of this educational catastrophe are vast and significant. Afghanistan is expected to have a substantial decline in its future workforce; GDP losses are projected to be considerable. Women are more susceptible to social and psychological isolation, child marriage, mental health disorders, and diminishing hope. Afghanistan risks enduring instability and international isolation if it fails to acknowledge the essential role of women in development, governance, and social cohesion. The Taliban's educational aims for 2021–2025 endanger both women's rights and the nation's future. Resolving this situation necessitates sustained, internationally endorsed campaigning with domestic social mobilization. The basis for any sustainable progress must be the reinstatement of girls' right to education as an inalienable principle, not a negotiable privilege. Restoring female education in Afghanistan is not only a policy issue but also a moral imperative essential for the nation's healing, peace, and dignity.

Recommendation

Based on the findings and discussion of this research, the following recommendations are proposed to address the current crisis of women's education in Afghanistan. These recommendations are structured to guide domestic policymakers (where possible), international organizations, civil society actors, and academic stakeholders.

1. International Conditionality and Diplomacy

- **Make aid conditional on educational rights:** International governments and donors must condition all non-humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan on tangible improvements in girls' access to secondary and higher

education. This includes tying diplomatic recognition and economic support to the reopening of schools and universities for women.

- **Strengthen international pressure:** UN agencies, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and neighboring countries must take a unified and vocal stance against the Taliban's educational restrictions, framing them as violations of both Islamic principles and universal human rights.
- **Facilitate regional religious dialogue:** Encourage dialogue between Afghan scholars and Islamic scholars from other Muslim-majority countries (e.g., Indonesia, Pakistan, Egypt, Malaysia) to counter the Taliban's narrative that bans on girls' education are religiously mandated.

2. Expansion of Community-Based and Alternative Education

- **Support underground and home-based schooling:** Provide financial, technical, and security support to local women's groups, educators, and NGOs running informal and community-based education initiatives in urban and rural areas.
- **Promote digital and remote learning:** Invest in and expand digital education platforms accessible via mobile phones, radio, and satellite, especially in remote areas. Provide girls with devices, internet access, and secure digital classrooms.
- **Train female educators discreetly:** Support teacher training programs for women, even if they operate informally, to ensure a ready workforce when policies change and schools reopen.

3. Protection and Empowerment of Women's Rights Defenders

- **Safeguard female activists and teachers:** International bodies should create safe reporting mechanisms and protection programs for Afghan women educators and rights defenders facing threats, imprisonment, or torture for protesting the bans.
- **Document violations:** Encourage Afghan civil society and international NGOs to continue documenting educational rights violations with verifiable data to be used in international advocacy and future justice mechanisms.

4. Humanitarian and Mental Health Support

- **Expand psychosocial support services:** Donors and NGOs should prioritize mental health programs targeting adolescent girls who have been deprived of education, with particular attention to regions reporting high rates of depression and suicide.
- **Integrate education with basic services:** In humanitarian responses (e.g., food aid, healthcare), integrate informal education and life skills training for women and girls.

5. Leverage Cultural and Religious Resources

- **Engage local religious leaders:** Collaborate with moderate Afghan clerics and tribal elders who support girls' education to influence public opinion and challenge Taliban orthodoxy at the grassroots level.
- **Dispel religious misinformation:** Disseminate Islamic

scholarship, fatwas, and interpretations that support girls' education, countering the Taliban's narrative using culturally resonant arguments.

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