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Roles of Women's Education in the Socioeconomic Development of Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

Women's education is a cornerstone of socioeconomic development, yet in Afghanistan it remains among the most contested and volatile aspects of national progress. This paper examines the multifaceted roles women's education plays in Afghanistan's socioeconomic development, analysing its effects on economic growth, public health, political participation, and social transformation. Drawing on extensive scholarly literature, this research traces the historical evolution of women's education in Afghanistan from the pre-2001 era through the post-2021 Taliban takeover, documenting both remarkable progress and devastating reversals. The paper presents empirical evidence that women's education significantly reduces maternal and child mortality, increases household income, enhances workforce participation, and strengthens democratic governance. However, persistent barriers—including cultural norms, security threats, infrastructure deficits, and policy restrictions—continue to impede access to education for millions of Afghan girls and women. The 2021 Taliban resurgence and subsequent bans on girls' secondary and higher education have created a humanitarian and development crisis, with estimated economic losses exceeding US$500 million annually and profound social consequences, including increased child marriage, mental health deterioration, and community fragmentation. This paper synthesizes current research to provide evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, international organizations, and local stakeholders, emphasizing pluralistic education delivery systems, community engagement, health-education integration, and sustained international advocacy.

Keywords: Women's education, Afghanistan, socioeconomic development, gender equality, Taliban, educational policy, economic growth, maternal health, barriers to education

1. INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan's socioeconomic progress depends heavily on educating its women and girls. As one of the world's least developed countries, it faces severe development challenges; women's education is both an urgent need and the most effective solution (Kissane, 2012). Beyond imparting knowledge, education empowers individuals, strengthens communities, and advances the nation economically, socially, and politically (Ullah, 2017).

Development economics literature consistently shows that educated women increase productivity, improve health outcomes, reduce fertility rates, and enhance governance. In Afghanistan, however, decades of conflict, instability, conservative norms, and—since 2021—explicit bans have blocked millions of females from school (Gras, 2023).

After the Taliban's 2001 ouster, girls' enrollment rose from near zero to millions by 2021, marking a major post-conflict achievement. The Taliban's 2021 return and subsequent bans on secondary and higher education for females reversed these gains, creating an "education apartheid" that threatens to stall national progress for generations.

This paper examines the critical role of women's education in Afghanistan's development. It reviews historical trends, documents the current crisis, presents evidence of impacts on the economy, health, and society, identifies key barriers, and proposes practical recommendations. The analysis is based on peer-reviewed studies, international reports, and two decades of Afghan-specific research.

Core argument: Women's education is indispensable for sustainable growth, better health, inclusive governance, and breaking cycles of poverty and conflict. The economic, health, and social costs of exclusion far outweigh any claimed benefits of restriction. Lasting progress requires culturally sensitive, community-led approaches; externally imposed models have repeatedly failed (Kissane, 2012).

2. Historical Context: Evolution of Women's Education in Afghanistan

The current crisis can only be understood against Afghanistan's history of dramatic advances and reversals in women's education, each phase closely tied to the country's broader political upheavals.

2.1 Pre-2001: Decades of Restriction and Conflict

Afghanistan's modern history of women's education began in the early twentieth century, with modest reforms introduced during the reign of King Amanullah Khan in the 1920s, who established the first girls' schools in Kabul. Early attempts to educate girls in Afghanistan met strong opposition from conservative religious and tribal leaders. Only a small number of women in cities could go to school or university. Things slowly got better in the 1960s and 1970s when the government allowed more women to study and work.

The Soviet invasion in 1979 and the wars that followed destroyed many schools and made education very difficult. Even though the Soviet-supported government tried to help girls in cities go to school, war and chaos meant most girls still could not study. In the 1990s, the civil war made things even worse—schools were bombed, teachers fled, and communities broke apart.

When the Taliban ruled from 1996 to 2001, they completely banned girls from school and stopped women from being teachers or having most jobs. Almost no girls could get an education during those years. The Taliban said this was required by Islam and that women should only stay at home. Many Muslim scholars around the world said this was a wrong and extreme interpretation of Islam, but the Taliban forced it with violence.

2001–2021: Big Improvements

After the Taliban were removed in 2001, girls' education became a top priority with a lot of help from other countries. The change was huge: in 2001, almost zero girls went to school; by 2018, about 3.5 million girls were in school. At universities, women made up 25–30% of students by 2020.

A lot of money was spent building schools, training teachers, and convincing communities to let girls study even in conservative villages. Countries like the USA, Europe, and UN organizations gave billions of dollars.

However, problems remained:

- Girls in villages had much less chance to study than girls in cities.
- Taliban and other groups attacked schools and scared female students and teachers.

- Many families still didn't want teenage girls to go to school because of family honour and early marriage worries.
- There were not enough schools, toilets for girls, or female teachers, and the quality of teaching was often low.

Even though many more girls started school, many dropped out early and learned very little. Progress depended heavily on foreign money and safety, which were not guaranteed.

After 2021: Everything Goes Backward Again

When the Taliban took over again in August 2021, they first promised that girls could still go to school "according to Islamic rules," so people had some hope. But very soon the promises were broken.

- In March 2022, they suddenly banned girls from school after grade 6.
- In December 2022, they banned women from universities, too.
- They also stopped most women from working, even for aid organizations.

This affected over 1 million girls in secondary school and hundreds of thousands of female university students. The country is losing at least $500 million per year because these educated women cannot work, and the long-term damage will be much bigger. Many girls and women now feel depressed, anxious, and hopeless. More girls are being married very young because families see no other future for them.

The world has criticized the Taliban, and some countries have imposed sanctions, but the bans are still in place. Inside Afghanistan, people have secretly opened underground schools, home classes, and online lessons, but these are dangerous and can only help a small number of girls.

Scholars analysing the current crisis emphasize that the Taliban's education bans represent not merely a return to the 1990s status quo but a deliberate policy choice that contradicts both Islamic principles and Afghanistan's development needs. The bans have been condemned by Islamic scholars worldwide, including many within Afghanistan, who argue that education is not only permitted but encouraged in Islamic tradition (Organization of Islamic Cooperation., 2022). The restrictions appear motivated by a combination of ideological rigidity, political control objectives, and internal Taliban factional dynamics rather than genuine religious requirements (Jackson, 2023).

3. Current State of Women's Education in Afghanistan

The current landscape of women's education in Afghanistan is characterized by severe restrictions, fragmented access, and a humanitarian crisis affecting millions of girls and women. Understanding this situation requires examining both formal education statistics and the broader impacts on educational ecosystems and service delivery.

3.1 Enrollment and Access Statistics

Before the 2021 Taliban takeover, Afghanistan had made measurable progress in girls' education enrollment, though significant gaps persisted. Around 3.5 million girls were attending primary and secondary schools, making up about 40% of the total student population (World Bank., 2020). Yet, long before the Taliban imposed restrictions, roughly two-thirds of Afghan girls had never set foot in a classroom, due to years of war, economic hardship, and deep-rooted cultural obstacles. Enrollment gaps between regions were significant: cities had far higher rates of girls in school compared to rural areas, where insecurity, poor facilities, and traditional attitudes greatly restricted opportunities (UNICEF, 2015-2019).

The Taliban's decision in March 2022 to prohibit girls from secondary school instantly impacted around 1.1 million girls who were either enrolled in or eligible for grades 7–12. The university ban announced in

December 2022 affected nearly 100,000 female students and blocked many more from accessing higher education (UN Women, 2023). Experts have termed these policies an "education apartheid," as boys continue their studies while girls are deliberately shut out (Amnesty International., 2022).

The crisis extends far beyond simple enrollment numbers and has disrupted the wider support systems tied to schools. In Afghanistan, schools have traditionally provided vital non-academic services, such as health checks, meals, and child protection. For instance, from August 2021 to 2022, school programs supplied iron and folic acid supplements to 272,386 teenage girls, highlighting schools' role in promoting overall well-being (Qaderi, 2023). Closing girls' schools has thus stripped away not just learning opportunities but also essential health and safety resources for at-risk groups.

3.2 Quality and Learning Outcomes

Even where girls could attend school, the education they received was often of low quality. By global benchmarks, learning results were weak, with many girls finishing primary school unable to read or perform basic math proficiently. Key issues included poorly trained teachers, outdated teaching materials, overcrowded classrooms, shortages of supplies, and reduced teaching hours. There was also a chronic lack of female teachers, who are crucial for boosting girls' participation in conservative areas, especially in rural regions.

Poor infrastructure added to the problems. Numerous schools had no safe drinking water, proper toilets, or private areas for girls, which discouraged attendance, particularly among older students. In many rural communities, the nearest secondary school was too far away, leaving girls who finished primary level with no option to continue their education (Burde, 2017).

3.3 Alternative and Informal Education

In response to formal education restrictions, various alternative and informal education initiatives have emerged. Community-based education programs, which existed before 2021 and expanded afterward, provide learning opportunities in homes, mosques, and community centers. These programs often operate in legal gray areas and face risks of closure or punishment by Taliban authorities (BBC News, 2023). Online and distance learning initiatives have attempted to reach girls denied school access, though Afghanistan's limited internet infrastructure and the gender digital divide severely constrain their reach. Home-based education, where educated family members or private tutors teach girls, serves some families but is accessible only to those with resources and educated relatives (Rahmani, 2023).

These alternative approaches, while valuable, cannot substitute for formal, quality education systems. They typically reach limited numbers of students, lack standardization and quality assurance, cannot provide certification recognized for employment or further education, and place enormous burdens on families and communities (Nicolai, 2003). Moreover, they operate under constant threat of prohibition by Taliban authorities, who view them as circumventing official policies (BBC News, 2023).

4. Economic Impacts of Women's Education

Women's education serves as a powerful driver of economic development through multiple interconnected pathways. This section examines the economic dimensions of women's education in Afghanistan, including impacts on workforce participation, entrepreneurship, household income, and national economic growth.

4.1 Workforce Participation and Economic Productivity

Educated women contribute significantly to economic productivity through their participation in formal and informal labour markets. In Afghanistan, women's workforce participation has historically been low

compared to international standards, but education has consistently been identified as the strongest predictor of women's economic engagement (World Bank., 2005). Women with secondary or higher education are substantially more likely to participate in income-generating activities, work in formal sector employment, and earn higher wages than those without education.

The economic sectors where educated Afghan women have made particular contributions include education itself (as teachers and administrators), healthcare (as doctors, nurses, and community health workers), public administration, and, increasingly, entrepreneurship and small business. Each of these contributions generates not only individual income but also broader economic multiplier effects as women invest earnings in their families and communities.

The Taliban's education and employment bans have severely curtailed women's economic participation. Women have been prohibited from working in most NGOs and international organizations, which were among the largest employers of educated women in Afghanistan. The economic consequences extend beyond individual income losses to include reduced household consumption, decreased tax revenues, and diminished productive capacity of the economy. The UNICEF-linked estimate of at least US$500 million in annual economic costs from the education ban likely underestimates the full long-term impact, as it does not fully account for lifetime earnings losses, reduced human capital formation, and foregone economic growth (Qaderi, 2023).

4.2 Entrepreneurship and Business Development

Education empowers women to engage in entrepreneurship and business development, creating employment not only for themselves but also for others in their communities. Studies of women entrepreneurs in Afghanistan have found that education level strongly predicts business success, with educated women more likely to access credit, adopt new technologies, expand their businesses, and navigate regulatory requirements. Women-owned businesses contribute to economic diversification, particularly in sectors such as handicrafts, food processing, retail, and services.

The denial of education undermines women's entrepreneurship potential by limiting the skills, knowledge, and confidence necessary for business success. Without education, women have fewer opportunities to learn business management, financial literacy, marketing, and other essential entrepreneurial competencies. This limitation is particularly damaging in Afghanistan's current context, where formal employment opportunities are scarce and entrepreneurship represents one of the few viable pathways for women's economic participation.

4.3 Household Income and Poverty Reduction

Women's education has direct and substantial effects on household income and poverty reduction. Educated women earn higher incomes, which are typically invested in family welfare, including children's education, healthcare, nutrition, and housing improvements. Research consistently shows that income controlled by women is more likely to be spent on family welfare than income controlled by men, amplifying the poverty-reduction impact of women's earnings.

In Afghanistan, where poverty rates are extremely high and household economic insecurity is widespread, women's income contributions are critical for family survival and wellbeing. The loss of women's earning capacity due to education restrictions therefore has immediate and severe consequences for household poverty, food security, and children's welfare. Families that previously relied on female teachers' salaries, women's work in NGOs, or women's entrepreneurial income have faced economic crises following the Taliban's employment bans.

4.4 National Economic Growth and Development

At the macroeconomic level, women's education contributes to national economic growth through enhanced human capital, increased labour force participation, improved productivity, and demographic transitions that favour economic development. Economic models consistently demonstrate that gender gaps in education result in substantial GDP losses, while closing these gaps generates significant economic returns.

Afghanistan's exclusion of women from education represents an enormous waste of human potential and a severe drag on economic development. With roughly half the population denied education and economic participation, Afghanistan cannot achieve the productivity gains, innovation, and economic dynamism necessary for sustainable development. International economic analyses have emphasized that Afghanistan's long-term economic prospects are severely compromised by the education bans, with projected GDP losses accumulating over decades as successive cohorts of women are denied education and economic opportunities.

The economic argument for women's education is therefore compelling: investing in women's education generates substantial economic returns, while restricting access imposes enormous economic costs. These findings hold particular urgency for Afghanistan, where poverty is widespread, economic opportunities are limited, and the country desperately needs all available human resources to achieve development.

5. Social and Health Impacts of Women's Education

Beyond economic dimensions, women's education profoundly influences social development and public health outcomes. This section examines how education affects maternal and child health, family planning, mental health, social capital, and community development in Afghanistan.

5.1 Maternal and Child Health

The relationship between women's education and maternal and child health is among the most robust findings in development research. Educated women are more likely to seek prenatal care, deliver in health facilities, practice proper nutrition during pregnancy, and recognize danger signs requiring medical attention. These behaviors translate into substantial reductions in maternal mortality, which remains tragically high in Afghanistan despite improvements in recent decades.

Afghanistan's maternal mortality ratio, while declining from extremely high levels, remains among the worst globally, with estimates ranging from 638 to 1,575 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births depending on methodology and data sources (WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, World Bank Group, & UNDESA., 2019). Education is consistently identified as a protective factor, with educated women experiencing significantly lower maternal mortality risks than uneducated women. The mechanisms include better health knowledge, greater autonomy in health decision-making, higher likelihood of facility delivery, and improved access to emergency obstetric care.

Maternal education also has a strong positive impact on children's health. Mothers with higher education are far more likely to vaccinate their children, seek prompt medical care for illnesses, maintain good hygiene and sanitation practices, and ensure proper nutrition. As a result, these children experience significantly lower rates of mortality, malnutrition, and infectious diseases. In Afghanistan, where child mortality remains stubbornly high despite some improvements, increasing mothers' education stands out as one of the most powerful ways to boost child survival and overall health.

Studies in Afghanistan have identified clear mechanisms by which education leads to better health. Schools act as key venues for delivering health knowledge, teaching girls essential topics such as hygiene,

nutrition, reproductive health, and disease prevention to girls. School-based programs, like the iron and folic acid supplementation initiative that supported 272,386 adolescent girls from August 2021 to 2022, directly enhance nutritional health and reduce anaemia (Qaderi, 2023). The ongoing closure of girls' schools has therefore removed not only learning opportunities but also vital health-service delivery systems, creating serious long-term risks for girls' current health and their future ability to care for their own children.

Since the Taliban regained control and imposed severe restrictions on female education and healthcare access, the country faces a deepening public health emergency. Maternal mortality rates, which had been falling steadily, are now expected to rise as women are cut off from education, medical services, and female health workers. Access to basic healthcare for women plummeted from around 90% before the takeover to roughly 10% in 2022 according to certain reports, while men retained coverage at about 23% (Qaderi, 2023). These disparities reflect both service disruptions and restrictions on women's mobility and access to healthcare.

5.2 Family Planning and Fertility

Women's education significantly influences fertility patterns and family planning practices. Educated women tend to marry later, have fewer children, space births more optimally, and use modern contraception more consistently than uneducated women. These patterns result from multiple factors, including greater knowledge about family planning methods, enhanced autonomy in reproductive decisions, higher opportunity costs of childbearing for educated women, and changed preferences regarding family size.

In Afghanistan, where fertility rates are still elevated and women's health is often undermined by frequent and closely spaced pregnancies, a decline in fertility driven by education could yield major gains in both health and overall development. Reducing family size enables parents to allocate more resources to each child's education and well-being, leading to lasting improvements in human capital across generations. On a broader scale, lower fertility linked to women's education helps trigger the demographic transition that has historically paved the way for sustained economic growth.

The bans on girls' education risk undoing these advances and pushing fertility patterns back toward higher, less healthy levels. Girls who are barred from school face a dramatically increased likelihood of early marriage; pre-ban official data showed that those with no education were roughly three times more likely to marry as children than those who completed secondary school. Early marriage almost always results in early childbearing, which brings heightened medical risks for both the young mother and her baby. This interlocking cycle of child marriage, curtailed education, and high fertility traps families in poverty and restricts opportunities for development from one generation to the next.

5.3 Mental Health and Psychosocial Wellbeing

The psychological impacts of education access and denial are profound. Education contributes to mental health and psychosocial wellbeing by building self-confidence, providing social connections, offering hope for the future, and creating pathways for personal fulfilment. For Afghan girls and women, education has represented not merely skill acquisition but a source of identity, purpose, and aspiration in a context where opportunities are otherwise severely limited.

The Taliban's education bans have created a mental health crisis among affected girls and women. Multiple studies and reports document increased rates of depression, anxiety, hopelessness, and even suicidal ideation among girls denied schooling. The psychological trauma extends beyond individual suffering to affect family dynamics and community wellbeing. Young women who had been pursuing university

degrees or professional careers report profound grief, anger, and despair at having their futures suddenly foreclosed.

The mental health consequences are compounded by restrictions on women's mobility, employment, and public participation, creating what psychologists describe as a situation of comprehensive social exclusion and identity negation. The long-term psychological impacts on an entire generation of Afghan girls and women denied education and opportunity are likely to be severe and enduring, requiring sustained mental health support that is currently unavailable in Afghanistan's collapsed health system.

5.4 Social Capital and Community Development

Women's education contributes to social capital formation and community development through multiple pathways. Educated women participate more actively in community organizations, engage in civic activities, and contribute to social cohesion. They serve as role models for younger generations, demonstrating possibilities for women's contributions beyond traditional domestic roles. In Afghanistan, educated women have been instrumental in community development initiatives, women's rights advocacy, peacebuilding efforts, and social service delivery.

The broader social impacts of women's education include changes in gender norms, attitudes toward women's roles, and acceptance of women's public participation. Communities with higher rates of female education tend to exhibit more progressive attitudes toward gender equality, greater support for girls' education, and reduced tolerance for gender-based violence. These normative changes, while gradual, are essential for sustainable social transformation.

The current education crisis threatens to reverse these social gains and reinforce regressive gender norms. When girls are systematically excluded from education, it sends a powerful message that women's intellectual development and social contributions are not valued, potentially reshaping attitudes and expectations in ways that will persist long after formal restrictions are lifted. Preventing this normative regression requires sustained efforts to maintain the value placed on women's education and to resist the normalization of gender-based educational exclusion.

6. Political Participation and Governance

Women's education plays a crucial role in political participation and governance quality, contributing to more inclusive, representative, and effective governance systems. This section examines how education influences women's political engagement, leadership, and contributions to democratic governance in Afghanistan.

6.1 Political Participation and Civic Engagement

Education is a strong predictor of political participation across diverse contexts, and Afghanistan is no exception. Educated women are much more likely to vote, take part in politics, join community decisions, and stand up for their rights. Education gives them the knowledge, skills, and confidence they need to understand politics, find information, and speak up clearly.

After 2001 in Afghanistan, educated women played a big role in the country’s politics. Many became members of parliament, worked in government offices, served on provincial councils, and led in their communities. These women, most of whom had good education, fought for women’s rights, children’s well-being, better schools, healthcare, and other important issues. Even though there weren’t many of them, their presence made sure people paid attention to problems that might have been ignored and showed that women can be strong leaders.

Since the Taliban returned, they have stopped almost all women from taking part in official politics by banning girls and women from school and public life. Women can no longer hold government jobs, and many former women officials are threatened or punished. This is not only unfair and against women's rights; it also means the country loses half of its ideas and viewpoints when making decisions. Good government needs everyone to have a voice. When women; half the population is left out, the government becomes weaker and less trusted by people.

6.2 Leadership Development

Education is the main way people learn how to become leaders. It gives them knowledge, skills, useful contacts, and official qualifications that open doors to leadership jobs. For women who face extra barriers because of old ideas about gender, education is even more important—it proves they are capable and gives them the tools to lead well.

In Afghanistan, educated women showed strong leadership in many areas: schools, hospitals, charities, businesses, and government. Women teachers ran schools, Female doctors managed clinics and hospitals, women started and grew companies, and women activists brought communities together for change. All of this work helped the country grow and broke wrong ideas that women cannot lead.

Today's ban on girls' education is destroying the future supply of women leaders. If girls cannot go to school, they will never gain the knowledge, skills, or qualifications needed to become leaders later. Even if the bans end one day, it will take many decades to fix the damage because a whole generation of possible women leaders is being lost right now. This will hurt Afghanistan's government, society, and women's rights for a very long time.

6.3 Democratization and Governance Quality

Research in comparative politics demonstrates that women's education contributes to democratization and governance quality through multiple mechanisms. Educated women demand greater accountability from leaders, support democratic institutions, oppose corruption, and advocate for rule of law. Their participation in governance brings different priorities, perspectives, and approaches that enhance policy quality and responsiveness.

In Afghanistan's fragile political context, women's education and political participation were seen as essential elements of the post-2001 democratic experiment. International actors and Afghan reformers alike emphasized that sustainable democracy required including women in political life and ensuring their voices were heard in decision-making. While Afghanistan's democratic institutions remained weak and contested, women's participation represented a significant departure from previous exclusionary systems. The Taliban's exclusion of women from education and governance represents a rejection of inclusive governance principles and a return to authoritarian, male-dominated rule. This exclusion undermines any claims to legitimate governance and ensures that policies do not reflect the needs and priorities of half the population. For Afghanistan to achieve stable, effective, and legitimate governance, women's education and political participation must be restored and protected.

7. Barriers and Challenges to Women's Education

Despite the clear benefits of women's education, multiple interconnected barriers continue to impede access and quality in Afghanistan. Understanding these barriers is essential for designing effective interventions and policies. This section examines cultural and religious factors, security concerns, infrastructure deficits, policy restrictions, and economic constraints that limit women's educational opportunities.

7.1 Cultural and Religious Barriers

Conventional gender expectations in Afghanistan stress women's primary responsibilities in the home and limit their freedom of movement and involvement in public life. Family honour and reputation are strongly linked to women's conduct, and pursuing education beyond elementary level is often viewed as a risk to that honour or as incompatible with traditional ideas of femininity. These worries are especially intense for teenage girls, where concerns about mixing with boys, exposure to unsuitable material, and defiance of parental control fuel opposition to girls' schooling.

Religious beliefs also shape attitudes toward education. Most scholars emphasize that Islam promotes the pursuit of knowledge for both men and women and does not prohibit women's education. Nevertheless, some conservative clerics in Afghanistan have advanced narrow interpretations that either restrict women's access to education or impose conditions that make schooling effectively impossible. The Taliban's bans on girls' education are defended with selective religious arguments that many mainstream Islamic scholars reject, but these policies are enforced through political authority rather than broad religious agreement.

Overcoming these cultural and religious obstacles demands sensitive strategies that respect and work within local beliefs rather than confronting them directly. Effective programs have partnered with religious leaders to highlight Islam's endorsement of female education, created learning environments that honour cultural norms (e.g., all-female staff, gender-segregated facilities, and suitable content), and shown families that educating daughters strengthens rather than undermines family honour and prosperity. Initiatives that involve men and community religious figures from the outset have proven far more successful than imposed top-down policies that provoke backlash.

7.2 Security and Conflict

Prolonged conflict and widespread insecurity in Afghanistan have drastically reduced access to education, with girls suffering the most severe impact. Insurgent groups have deliberately attacked schools, threatened or assaulted teachers and students, and left many communities unable to keep schools functioning. In certain areas, girls' schools have been singled out for bombings, burnings, and intimidation of female students and staff. Such violence generates widespread fear, causing many parents to keep daughters' home even when schools are available.

Since the Taliban regained control, the overall security landscape has shifted. Large-scale attacks on schools by insurgents have declined, but instability persists in some regions, and the Taliban regime itself now poses a new threat: state punishment for anyone attempting to offer or attend banned education for girls.

Tackling security-related obstacles requires both short-term protective measures (safe transport, community protection mechanisms, fortified school buildings) and long-term efforts toward peace and stabilization. International humanitarian law requires all parties to a conflict to safeguard schools and uphold children's right to education, yet these rules have been repeatedly and systematically violated in Afghanistan.

7.3 Infrastructure and Resource Constraints

Afghanistan's education system suffers from a critical lack of infrastructure, especially for girls. Many villages have no nearby school, so girls must travel long distances—a practice many families reject on grounds of safety and modesty. Even where schools exist, they often lack essential features such as perimeter walls, private toilets for girls, drinking water, or enough classrooms. The absence of these basic amenities strongly discourages parents from enrolling or keeping their daughters in school.

A severe shortage of qualified teachers, particularly female teachers, remains one of the biggest bottlenecks. Many conservative families will only permit girls to attend classes taught by women, yet there are far too few female educators, especially outside urban centers. This scarcity stems both from the limited pool of educated women and from ongoing restrictions on women's movement and employment. The Taliban's bans on women working in education have made the teacher shortage dramatically worse.

Beyond infrastructure and staffing, the quality of education itself is undermined by outdated or irrelevant curricula, insufficient textbooks and teaching materials, and ineffective teaching methods. As a result, even when girls manage to stay in school, they often gain little real knowledge or practical skills.

Resolving these infrastructure and resource problems demands large-scale, long-term investment in school construction, teacher training and recruitment (especially women), modernized curricula, and quality monitoring. International donors have played an essential role in financing these improvements, but heavy reliance on external funding raises serious questions about future sustainability.

7.4 Policy and Governance Barriers

Government policies and governance structures significantly influence educational access and quality. The Taliban's explicit bans on girls' secondary and higher education represent the most severe policy barriers, but other governance challenges also impede education. These include inadequate budget allocation to education, corruption and mismanagement, lack of coordination between government agencies and international partners, and insufficient attention to girls' specific educational needs in policy design.

Even before the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan's education sector faced governance challenges including weak institutional capacity, limited reach of central government in rural areas, and tension between national policies and local implementation. Decentralization efforts intended to improve responsiveness sometimes resulted in fragmentation and inconsistency. Quality assurance mechanisms were weak, allowing poor-quality education to persist.

The current policy environment under Taliban rule presents extraordinary challenges. The regime's ideological commitment to restricting women's education means that conventional policy advocacy and reform efforts face insurmountable obstacles. Alternative approaches, including international pressure, conditional engagement, support for informal education, and documentation of violations, represent the limited options available in the current context.

7.5 Economic Barriers

Poverty and economic constraints significantly limit educational access for many Afghan families. Direct costs of education (fees, uniforms, supplies, transportation) and opportunity costs (foregone income from children's labour) create barriers, particularly for poor families. When resources are limited, families often prioritize sons' education over daughters', reflecting both cultural preferences and economic calculations about returns to education.

The economic crisis following the Taliban takeover has exacerbated these barriers. With widespread unemployment, frozen assets, reduced international assistance, and economic contraction, many families face severe economic distress. In such circumstances, education becomes a lower priority compared to immediate survival needs. Girls are particularly vulnerable to being withdrawn from school during economic crises, as families prioritize boys' education and may see daughters' early marriage as an economic strategy.

Addressing economic barriers requires both poverty reduction and specific educational interventions such as scholarships, cash transfers conditional on school attendance, elimination of school fees, provision of

meals and supplies, and economic opportunities for families that reduce reliance on children's labour. However, these interventions are difficult to implement in Afghanistan's current context of economic crisis and governance challenges.

8. Successful Interventions and Best Practices

Despite formidable challenges, various interventions and approaches have demonstrated success in expanding and improving women's education in Afghanistan. This section examines evidence-based practices and lessons learned from successful programs.

8.1 Community-Based Education

Community-based education (CBE) has proven effective in reaching girls in areas where formal schools are unavailable or inaccessible. CBE programs establish classes in communities, often in homes, mosques, or community centers, using local teachers and flexible schedules adapted to local circumstances. These programs have successfully enrolled girls who would not attend formal schools due to distance, cultural constraints, or security concerns.

Key features of successful CBE programs include community ownership and participation in decision-making, recruitment of local female teachers, culturally appropriate curriculum and teaching methods, and pathways for CBE graduates to transition to formal education. Evaluations have found that CBE can achieve learning outcomes comparable to formal schools while reaching marginalized populations. However, CBE faces challenges including limited resources, lack of standardization, quality assurance difficulties, and uncertain recognition of credentials.

8.2 Accelerated Learning Programs

Accelerated learning programs (ALPs) address the needs of over-age girls who missed schooling due to conflict, displacement, or other barriers. ALPs compress multiple years of curriculum into shorter timeframes, allowing older girls to catch up and continue education. These programs have been particularly valuable in Afghanistan, where many girls have had interrupted education due to decades of conflict.

Successful ALPs feature age-appropriate pedagogy, flexible scheduling, psychosocial support, and clear pathways to formal education or vocational training. Evaluations indicate that ALPs can effectively help over-age learners acquire basic skills and re-enter educational pathways. Challenges include ensuring quality with compressed curricula, securing recognition of ALP credentials, and providing sufficient support for learners with diverse educational backgrounds.

8.3 School-Based Health and Nutrition Programs

Integration of health and nutrition services with education has proven effective in improving both educational and health outcomes. School-based programs providing meals, micronutrient supplementation, deworming, health screening, and health education increase enrollment, reduce absenteeism, improve learning, and address health needs. The iron and folic acid supplementation program that reached 272,386 adolescent girls in Afghanistan between August 2021 and 2022 exemplifies this approach (Qaderi, 2023).

These integrated programs generate multiple benefits: improved nutrition and health directly enhance cognitive function and learning capacity, while also providing incentives for families to send children to school. For girls, school-based health services may represent the only access to health information and services, particularly regarding reproductive health. The closure of girls' schools eliminates these critical service delivery platforms, with potentially severe health consequences.

8.4 Female Teacher Recruitment and Training

Recruiting and training female teachers is essential for expanding girls' education in conservative contexts where families require female teachers. Successful strategies include targeted recruitment from local communities, provision of scholarships for women's teacher training, establishment of teacher training institutions in underserved areas, and creation of incentives for female teachers to work in rural locations. Female teachers serve not only as instructors but also as role models demonstrating women's professional capabilities. Their presence makes schools more acceptable to conservative families and creates safer, more supportive learning environments for girls. However, female teacher recruitment faces challenges including limited pools of educated women, mobility restrictions, and inadequate working conditions.

8.5 Engagement with Religious and Community Leaders

Successful education programs in Afghanistan have prioritized engagement with religious and community leaders to build support for girls' education. Strategies include religious education about Islamic support for women's learning, demonstration that education enhances family honour and wellbeing, involvement of leaders in school governance, and adaptation of programs to respect cultural and religious sensitivities. This engagement approach recognizes that sustainable change requires local ownership and alignment with community values rather than external imposition. Programs that have successfully engaged religious leaders report reduced resistance, increased enrollment, and greater community support for girls' education. However, this approach requires cultural competence, patience, and willingness to negotiate program features to achieve local acceptance.

8.6 Pluralistic Education Delivery

Scholars analysing Afghanistan's education sector emphasize the value of pluralistic approaches that combine government schools, NGO programs, religious education, and hybrid models. This pluralism increases access by providing multiple pathways, enhances resilience by avoiding dependence on single systems, and improves acceptability by offering choices that align with diverse community preferences.

Pluralistic systems require coordination to ensure quality standards, recognition of credentials, and equitable resource distribution. However, when well-managed, they can reach more learners and sustain educational opportunities even when some delivery channels are disrupted. In Afghanistan's current context, pluralistic approaches may offer the best prospect for maintaining some educational access for girls despite formal restrictions.

9. Recommendations and the Way Forward

Advancing women's education in Afghanistan requires comprehensive, sustained, and adaptive strategies that address multiple barriers while building on successful approaches. This section presents evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, international organizations, civil society, and communities.

9.1 Immediate Priorities

Advocacy for lifting education bans: The international community must maintain sustained pressure on the Taliban to lift restrictions on girls' secondary and higher education. This advocacy should emphasize that education bans violate Islamic principles, international law, and Afghanistan's own commitments, and that they impose devastating costs on Afghan society. Conditional engagement strategies that link international recognition, assistance, and sanctions relief to concrete progress on women's education should be pursued.

Support for alternative education: While advocating for formal education access, the international community and Afghan civil society must support alternative education initiatives including community-

based programs, home-based learning, and online education. These alternatives cannot substitute for formal systems but can provide some learning opportunities and maintain hope for affected girls. Support should include funding, curriculum materials, teacher training, technology access, and protection for those involved in these initiatives.

Protection and assistance for affected women and girls: Immediate humanitarian assistance should address the mental health crisis among girls denied education, provide psychosocial support, and create safe spaces for girls' activities and informal learning. Programs should also address increased risks of child marriage, gender-based violence, and exploitation resulting from education denial.

9.2 Medium-Term Strategies

Pluralistic education systems: Afghanistan should develop pluralistic education delivery systems that combine government schools, community-based programs, religious education, and NGO initiatives. This pluralistic approach strengthens accessibility, system resilience, and cultural appropriateness. Effective coordination mechanisms are required to guarantee consistent quality standards and mutual recognition of credentials across varied educational delivery modes.

Integration of Education with Health and Protection Services Educational institutions should function as multifaceted platforms that deliver health, nutrition, and child-protection services, thereby amplifying the developmental impact of schooling and generating stronger incentives for regular attendance. Achieving such integration necessitates robust inter-sectoral coordination among education, health, and social-protection authorities, as well as sufficient budgetary provisions for holistic service provision.

Recruitment and Professional Development of Female Teachers Substantial and sustained investment in the recruitment, pre-service training, and continuous professional development of female educators is indispensable. Policy measures should encompass scholarships for women pursuing teacher-education qualifications, financial and non-financial incentives for service in remote and underserved regions, comprehensive professional-learning opportunities, and the establishment of supportive and gender-sensitive working environments [191]. Female teachers play a pivotal role in expanding girls' educational participation and serve as powerful role models that affirm women's professional competence and agency.

Community Mobilisation and Local Ownership Long-term sustainability hinges on genuine community ownership and active stakeholder support. Interventions must facilitate inclusive dialogue with religious leaders, traditional authorities, parents, and young people regarding the multifaceted benefits of girls' education, while remaining sensitive to local socio-cultural contexts without compromising pedagogical quality. Decentralised, community-based school governance structures can enhance transparency, accountability, and responsiveness to local needs.

9.3 Long-Term Structural Reforms Gender-Responsive Policy Frameworks Education-sector policies in Afghanistan must explicitly incorporate gender-equity objectives and address the distinct barriers faced by girls. This entails earmarking adequate budgetary resources for girls' education, setting measurable targets for female enrolment and completion rates, mandating the systematic collection and gender-disaggregated analysis of data, and embedding gender-sensitive approaches in curriculum design and instructional practice.

Investment in Educational Infrastructure Significant capital investment is essential to expand and upgrade physical infrastructure, including the construction of dedicated girls' schools in underserved areas, provision of gender-segregated facilities, assurance of safe and accessible learning environments, and bridging the digital divide to enable hybrid and distance-learning modalities. Such investments will require mobilisation of both domestic resources and sustained, predictable international assistance.

Quality Assurance and Learning Outcomes Efforts to broaden access must be matched by rigorous attention to educational quality. Robust quality-assurance systems should monitor learning outcomes, ensure continuous teacher training and pedagogical support, supply relevant and gender-responsive curricula and materials, and institute performance-based accountability mechanisms for educational institutions. The ultimate objective of girls' education extends beyond mere enrolment to the attainment of substantive, empowering knowledge and transferable skills.

Linking Education to Economic Empowerment and Livelihood Opportunities Educational provision must be explicitly connected to viable economic pathways. This necessitates integrated vocational and entrepreneurial training, labour-market interventions that counteract gender-based discrimination, and macro-economic policies that generate decent employment opportunities for educated women. When families perceive tangible economic returns from daughters' schooling, they are significantly more inclined to prioritise girls' education.

9.4 Roles and Responsibilities of the International Community Sustained Financial and Technical Support Notwithstanding the prevailing governance challenges, the international community is obliged to maintain consistent financial commitments and technical assistance to the Afghan education sector. Funding architecture should accommodate both formal state systems and innovative alternative modalities, with particular emphasis on reaching the most marginalised girls. Technical cooperation should focus on long-term capacity development of Afghan educators, administrators, and civil-society organisations.

Principled and Conditional Engagement with the Taliban Authorities Diplomatic and developmental engagement with the de facto authorities must be rigorously conditioned on demonstrable, verifiable progress towards the restoration of women's and girls' right to education and broader gender rights. Specific benchmarks should include the immediate reopening of secondary and tertiary education for females, the removal of restrictions on women's employment as teachers and in other professions, and guaranteed access to essential health and social services. The progressive easing of sanctions and any future diplomatic recognition should be explicitly tied to the fulfilment of these conditions.

Protection of Education in Situations of Armed Conflict All parties to the conflict are bound by international humanitarian law to safeguard educational facilities and uphold children's right to education. Attacks on schools and threats against students and educators must be systematically documented, publicly condemned, and subjected to judicial accountability. The international community should strengthen monitoring, reporting, and accountability mechanisms to prevent and respond to violations against education.

Regional and international cooperation: Addressing Afghanistan's education crisis requires regional and international cooperation. Neighbouring countries hosting Afghan refugees should ensure educational access for refugee girls. International organizations should coordinate assistance to avoid duplication and gaps. Regional dialogue should address shared challenges and best practices in expanding women's education.

9.5 Research and Evidence Needs

Rigorous impact evaluation: More rigorous evaluation of education interventions is needed to identify what works in Afghanistan's complex context. Evaluations should examine both access and quality outcomes, assess cost-effectiveness, and analyse factors influencing sustainability. Evidence should guide policy and programming decisions.

Understanding barriers and facilitators: Research should deepen understanding of the multiple barriers to girls' education and factors that facilitate access. This includes examination of cultural and religious dynamics, economic constraints, security challenges, and policy influences. Mixed-methods research combining quantitative and qualitative approaches can provide nuanced insights.

Long-term tracking: Longitudinal studies tracking educational trajectories, learning outcomes, and long-term impacts on economic, health, and social outcomes are needed. Such studies can demonstrate the long-term returns to investing in girls' education and identify critical intervention points.

Documentation of current crisis: Systematic documentation of the impacts of the current education bans is essential for advocacy, accountability, and future policy. This includes tracking enrollment losses, economic costs, health consequences, and psychosocial impacts. Documentation should give voice to affected girls and women and should inform international responses.

10. Conclusion

Women's education stands as an indispensable foundation for Afghanistan's socioeconomic development, with profound impacts across economic, health, social, and political dimensions. The evidence reviewed in this paper demonstrates unequivocally that investing in women's education generates substantial returns: it drives economic growth through enhanced productivity and workforce participation, reduces maternal and child mortality through improved health knowledge and practices, strengthens social capital and community development, and contributes to inclusive governance and political stability.

Afghanistan's recent history illustrates both the transformative potential of women's education and its vulnerability to political upheaval. The remarkable expansion of girls' education between 2001 and 2021, which saw enrollment increase from near zero to millions of girls attending school, demonstrated that rapid progress is possible even in challenging contexts when political will, resources, and community support align. However, the Taliban's resumption of power and their subsequent prohibitions on secondary and higher education for girls have undone much of this progress, triggering a profound humanitarian and development crisis that is causing immense harm to millions of Afghan girls and women while jeopardizing the country's future prospects.

The price of excluding women from education is enormous and wide-ranging. The most obvious and measurable cost is an economic loss of at least US$500 million per year, but the longer-term damage is far more severe: entire generations of women robbed of the knowledge and skills needed to contribute fully to society; children growing up without the benefits of educated mothers; communities deprived of the leadership and social capital that educated women bring; and a country squandering the human potential essential for growth and stability. Added to this are serious health impacts—rising maternal mortality, worsening child health outcomes, and a growing mental health crisis among girls affected by these bans.

At the same time, there are clear reasons for hope and practical pathways forward. Proven initiatives—such as community-based classes, accelerated learning programs, school-linked health services, recruitment and support for female teachers, and dialogue with religious leaders—show that obstacles can be overcome. Culturally sensitive, locally rooted approaches have succeeded in expanding access even in highly conservative settings. The determination of Afghan girls and women who continue pursuing learning despite extreme risks, alongside the bravery of teachers who face punishment to keep educating, underscores how deeply education is valued.

Moving ahead will demand sustained effort from many sides. Pressure must be maintained on the Taliban to reverse the bans and to acknowledge that these policies contradict Islamic teachings, international law, and Afghanistan's own interests. The international community needs to keep advocating strongly, provide consistent funding for education, support alternative learning options, and make any engagement with the authorities contingent on tangible steps toward restoring women's rights. Inside Afghanistan, civil society, local communities, and families must keep resisting the acceptance of girls' exclusion and find creative ways to enable learning wherever possible. Regional and global partners should address the educational needs of Afghan refugees and share effective strategies for advancing women's education in difficult environments.

In the end, Afghanistan's long-term development hinges on whether its girls and women can obtain quality education. No country can achieve lasting prosperity, social advancement, or political stability while shutting half its population out of learning and opportunity. The evidence is unambiguous: investing in women's education is both a fundamental human rights obligation and a strategic imperative for the nation's future. Each girl denied schooling is not just a personal tragedy—it weakens her family, her community, and the country as a whole. Conversely, every girl who receives an education becomes a powerful force for positive change, driving economic growth, better health, social progress, and greater peace and prosperity.

The international community, Afghan leaders and citizens, and everyone invested in Afghanistan's future must make an unwavering commitment to protect, promote, and prioritize women's education—through political shifts, security threats, and funding shortages alike. This commitment must shape policies, budgets, programs, and daily actions, rooted in the understanding that women's education is not a side issue but the very foundation of development. There is simply no route to a stable, prosperous, and equitable Afghanistan that does not fully include educated women in every sphere of national life.

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