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Why Afghan Girls Are Out of School?

The agenda of education in Afghanistan got added attention from the international community due to the Taliban's notoriety vis-à-vis girls' education. The extremist group's inclination toward a religious-oriented educational system, and its detrimental policy of excluding girls from getting an education, made them infamous both in the eyes of the Afghan people and the international community. This was the reason that after the overthrow of the group in 2001, the global community paid undivided political and financial attention to girls' education. The campaign to provide educational opportunities for Afghan women received global media attention and technical-cum-financial support from numerous international organizations. The significant enrollment of Afghan girls in schools became one of the key achievements of both the international community and former Afghan President Hamid Karzai. He would boast the achievement regularly via the international forums to appeal for more aid and support.

But the educational project is also experiencing setbacks. Despite financial and technical support from the various international agencies, the number of Afghan girls going to school and completing primary and secondary education is shrinking. It is a disturbing trend which has massive repercussions for women's empowerment, the health of women, political participation of women, and the future of the country. So, what led to this disturbing trend? Why are Afghan girls out of school?

Government Failure

Throughout Afghanistan's modern history, educating the Afghan population has been a challenge for its government. This challenge becomes even more towering when it comes

to educating Afghan girls. All kinds of Afghan governments – under-monarchy, republic, and the so-called democratically elected government that assumed power in the post-Taliban era – have struggled to address the vital agenda of education. None of them have been able to implement a mass literacy program successfully, although the communist governing system of the late 1970s and 1980s made a little headway on education and capacity building. Overall, the benefits of education have not penetrated the Afghan society the way it has penetrated the Turkish and Iranian societies. The ongoing violent conflict that traces its origin to 1979 has made the situation even direr, destroying whatever remained of the education system that was built by governments before the Soviet invasion and after. The current government's resources are mostly spent on the security and defense sectors to tame the tide of insurgency, rather than on the education sector. Most insurgent groups operating in Afghanistan follow an anti-education policy, targeting schools, teachers, and students. Their misogynistic policies have made life for female students extremely risky, forcing their parents to stop their education.

The failure of the Afghan government in educating the population can be attributed to lack of sufficient financial resources to invest in education and build capacity, absence of an industrialized and modern economic system to produce revenues to fund educational projects, a lack of a visionary leadership to articulate a progressive vision for the country in which education takes a central role, limited institutional and administrative capacities, lack of political stability, and the never-ending political rivalry among Afghan elite, sometimes leading to bloodshed and chaos. A successful mass literacy program needs a strong government with technical, financial, administrative and intellectual capacities, and more importantly, political legitimacy. These ingredients have hardly been part and parcel of Afghan government's national education strategy. Thus, much remains to be achieved in relation to education, and specifically with regard to encouraging literacy among young girls. To modern day, the Afghan government continues to perform poorly in the arena of education.

Deteriorating Security

Afghan girls experienced a severe repression under the brutal Taliban regime, creating an insatiable demand for learning and education. The post-Taliban Afghan ministry of education, along with its international partners, made commitments to rebuild the education system and accommodate as many students as possible. The education ministry achieved some success, as millions of children began to attend schools, although concerns about the quality of their education were raised. Still, the most important thing was that the

doors of schools were opened to girls, which were shut for almost five years under the Taliban regime. As far as girls' education is concerned, a new chapter had been opened, with much fanfare and excitement.

The excitement, however, did not last long. The insurgent groups led by the Taliban regrouped in Pakistan, and began their offensives by targeting both Afghan security and US/NATO forces, thus undermining the already fragile security situation in the post-Taliban period. Now there is a full-blown insurgency that has resulted in brazen attacks on major city centers, leading to the destruction of at least two cities. These offensives have had a damaging impact on education, and particularly girls' education.

In its [2017 report](#), Human Rights Watch states that “an estimated two-thirds of Afghan girls do not go school.” According to the Afghan education ministry's [2017](#) statistics, “there are 9.3 million children in school, 39 percent of whom are girls.” These statistics suggest that out of more than three and half million female students more than two million of them do not go to school. The report lists a worsening security situation as one of the major obstacles in preventing girls from attending classes. Worsening security results in school shutdowns, which have forced the female students to rely on home-based schools (HBS) where a trusted teacher from the community is hired to teach them. The aim of HBS is to improve access to education for girls and play a complementary role to compensate for the limited resources of the ministry of education. With the high enrolment from within the country, and the overspill of Afghan refugees who have returned from Pakistan and Iran, the ministry's capacity has been “overstretched.” Now with the deteriorating security situation, HBS might be considered as the only alternative for girls to become literate. My elder sister was a beneficiary of HBS. It is a worthwhile educational initiative, but it can never replace a formal education system, which is needed for an economic upward mobility and a decent livelihood.

What the HRW highlights in its 2017 report is the “donor disengagement,” which is the direct result of insecurity. The Afghan education ministry needs the continuous support of donors to keep the schools running, pay and train its teachers, and build more schools. A prolonged donor disengagement might seriously undermine the education sector, as Afghanistan does not have a self-sufficient economy to foot the bills. Insecurity might put additional limitations on the education ministry. Its financial and human resources will be targeted, resulting in a loss of teachers and money.

Preference for a Boy Child

In a male-dominated Afghan society, there is an explicit preference among mothers and fathers for boy children. This way of thinking has an adverse impact on girls' education and their prospects for completing high school, or in rare cases completing a college degree. I was personally witness to this tragic culture. I was brought up in a family where I, as a son, had an advantageous position. The priority was given to my education. The financial resources of my family largely went toward my schooling and development. I was sent to a good school and had good teachers with an up-to-date curriculum. I never faced a shortage of funds in my English language training courses but my elder sisters faced significant limitations. Their education was not taken seriously and they had to resort to an accelerated education model where they would complete two grades in one academic year, putting added pressures on themselves. Attending language classes to pick up English was not looked upon favorably. As a result, my eldest sister secretly attended English language and computer skills classes. So, the path to education for my sisters was laid with thorns. And this happens almost to all Afghan families. Investing in girl's education does not constitute a priority for Afghanistan, although there are educated Afghan families that don't discriminate against their daughters, providing full support to their educational endeavor.

Even if we assume that the first hurdle of enrolling one's daughter in a school is passed, she is at constant risk for a variety of reasons. Security for these women is one major concern. They constantly face physical risks, in addition to struggling to balance between their school commitments and domestic chores. For example, I vividly remember that my sisters were reminded regularly that family came first and they ought to show more commitment toward domestic obligations. In contrast, I was at liberty to focus on my education without worrying about who washed my clothes and who cooked my food.

As long as the cultural preference for a boy child persists in Afghan families, the number of girls going to school is unlikely to increase significantly, and may even see a decline if violence against women intensifies. Moreover, a significant number of Afghan parents indoctrinate their daughters with the notion that their primary role in a society is rearing children and taking care of homes. This indoctrination robs girls of their confidence. The idea of achieving independence, and becoming free-thinking individuals with their own financial agency, become alien to them. One of the strategies that I can think of to address these two challenges is launching a country-wide awareness campaign to educate Afghan families about the importance of girls' education. The campaign's message could be

linked to the Holy Koran's directive, where Muslims are obligated to educate both their daughters and sons with an equal attention. The campaign would be a long-term project.

Lack of Adequate Facilities

Resource-wise, the Afghan ministry of education is overstretched. Institutionally, financially and administratively, it cannot cope up with increasing public demand. On the top of it, the ministry suffers from rampant corruption. The already limited financial resources are pocketed by the corrupt officials, leaving even lesser resources for schools and teachers. The pervasive corruption, coupled with budgetary constraints have resulted in a poor education infrastructure. According to one [HRW report](#), 41 percent of the schools don't have an actual building. Classes are held in tents, UNICEF plastic shelters, under the trees, under makeshift roofs, and in open spaces/deserts. Inadequate infrastructure is the biggest obstacle for girl's education, and a leading cause for the burgeoning dropouts. It is very hard to retain female students in these kinds of setups. One big motivator for the parents is to be sure that the school has at least a functional physical structure. Teaching girls in tents and open spaces will put them at the risk of weather and hygiene-related health problems. Nor will they feel secure.

Those schools that have buildings often lack other facilities such as a heating system in the winter and air conditioning in the summer. The students might consider themselves lucky if the building has a toilet facility – a fundamental requirement for girls considering the cultural sensitivities of Afghan society toward females. Most of the time the infrastructure for indoor plumbing is there, but buildings are not fully furnished, misused or not properly maintained. In 2013, I visited a boy's school in Kabul and the toilet facility was not maintained properly making its use almost impossible for the students. If a girl student complains about the toilet facility to her parents, the likelihood of dropping out for her is high. In addition, the distance between a girl's home and her school is a barrier, too. If the school is far from home, the enrollment might not take place in the first place. If she is admitted, the possibility of dropping out is stronger.

Girls face the additional burden of transportation. Boys can go to school on foot, even if it is far. For girls, the option of walking is limited. Parents may not allow it, fearing for the security of their daughters and the sexual harassments they might face. Sexual harassment is the most common form of discrimination that Afghan girls face on the streets.

And the problems do not stop there, as schools also complain about [lack of books](#)– the basic building blocks of an education. The absence of books can drastically impact learning. Reading skills will take longer to develop and it is hard to imagine a student and

a school without books. Lack of desks, tables, and stationery have also been reported, further impeding the process of learning.

Lack of Qualified Teachers

One of the greatest advantages of Afghanistan's education system is its free primary and secondary education. Students are not required to pay any remittance. A privatized model threatens to restrict educational opportunities for students from lower economic strata. It would be particularly detrimental for girls, as parents would surely prefer to pay the school fees of their sons only. In a privatized model, girls would be the scapegoats – sacrificing for their brothers. For a poor country like Afghanistan, public education appears to be the only viable option. However, it has created problems in terms of training, supervision, and appraisal of teachers. The ministry of education is a big institution with a national mandate of managing funds, developing policy, designing curriculum, evaluation, and providing training to teachers. In addition, it has to oversee the 34 provincial departments of education.

In terms of efficient management, the ministry has always struggled – doing a poor job in implementing its mandates. Teacher training has not been a success story either. And the paucity of trained teachers is a vital factor in dissuading girls to call it quits. The newly recruited teachers either do not undergo training at all or are not trained adequately to prepare them for the job. Due to corruption and nepotism, the official requirements to be a qualified teacher are hardly met. For example, a number of hired teachers posted in remote rural areas usually do not require higher education degrees. Applicants are offered jobs after completing their high school diploma. According to the ministry of [education](#), “80 percent of the country's 165,000 teachers have achieved only the equivalent of a high school education or did not complete their post-secondary studies.”

The frustrating part for the students is the lack of preparation on the part of untrained teachers. They struggle to explain academic concepts to students. They often do not encourage new ideas, creativity and, curiosity or critical thinking. As a result, many students fail to develop critical thinking skill or to think outside the box. Their approach is usually exam-based, where students are prepared for the tests rather than preparing them for the bigger responsibilities such as leadership, personal development, navigating job market challenges, living a peaceful and productive life, cultivation of a spirited citizenry, and understanding and fulfilling civic responsibilities. Limiting education to passing exams is not a visionary approach to teaching. It becomes monotonous and uninteresting, and makes it difficult to keep the students engaged.

High teacher to student ratios represent another problem that deters girls from going to school. Due to an overflow of Afghan refugees from neighboring countries, the ministry is facing a shortage of teachers. There are not enough trained and qualified teachers to meet the increasing demand. Some of the schools don't have full-time committed teachers. In other schools, the number of students is so large that teachers are unable to effectively manage classes, thereby limiting the available attention to cater to students' educational, developmental and, cognitive needs. Female teachers are in short supply, too. In a religiously conservative country like Afghanistan, the lack of female teachers for girls' school is a rigid obstacle for girls to access education.

The above-mentioned obstacles can be addressed through long-term planning. With the right policy intervention, their damage can be mitigated and the retention rate of girls in school can be improved. What Afghanistan badly needs is a strong commitment on the funding front. The ministry of education is still dependent on foreign aid. To address the obstacles and to stop girls from dropping out, regular and reliable sources of funding are needed. With the poor leadership and unsatisfactory performance of the ministry of education, securing funding commitments from international organizations and the international community are a challenge. Except for the preference for boy children, all the other obstacles are directly/indirectly linked to widespread corruption in the education ministry. Endemic corruption has very badly tarnished Afghanistan's image. Any proposal for funding might not receive a positive welcome from funders and donors. Hence, by starting to curb the menace of corruption, the ministry can help funnel funds toward addressing various obstacles to facilitate the learning process and to keep girls in the school. Reliable and regular funding might depend on the success of the fight against corruption in the education ministry. Establishing the credibility of the ministry might lead to success, and to the reduction of barriers to girl's education.

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