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Education in Afghanistan since 2001 Evolutions and Rollbacks





Education in Afghanistan since 2001: Evolutions and Rollbacks

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ABSTRACT

The post-Bonn government of Afghanistan shifted the violence curriculum of the Taliban into a peace curriculum in education. This study's mixed-method approach shows that despite facing security, corruption, resource, and cultural barriers to education, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan made significant progress both in terms of passing theoretical documents and practical achievements. The efforts that had been initiated and introduced began to encounter fragility following the Taliban's return to power in 2021. Banning girls from education above grade six has resulted in negative psychological and emotional effects on them. Continuing to limit academic freedom has started to hit the Afghan society. Ultimately, Taliban-led approaches to curriculum design prepare the way for close-mindedness and neo-Taliban nation-building. Those would convey state ideology and justifications from the classrooms to the homes. The socio-economic consequences of depriving large strata of the population, including though not exclusively, women from qualitative education makes it impossible for Afghanistan to break out of its status as a country of low level of development.

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Introduction

Afghanistan has a long-standing and ample history of educated and intellectual figures throughout its modern history. However, as a result of fluctuating Islamization and de-Islamization educational policies after the establishment of the modern Afghan nation-state, the questions of who should receive education, what kind of education should be provided, why education is necessary, and where it should be obtained, have become prevalent in the social discourse. With that in its modern history, Afghanistan has been dragged into several stages of education progresses and reverses. The not-so-recent intervention of the United States and its allies in 2001 paused the dark era of institutionalizing and the inculcation of violent and hate-filled educational material being fed to Afghan children as a result of the political clash of West versus Soviet. After the intervention, the educational system underwent significant changes as the new democratic government sought to bring an end to the spread of violence and hatred through education. This effort was short-lived, however, as the Taliban regained power on August 15, 2021, and once again imposed restrictive measures on the education sector. The question of the trajectory of education in Afghanistan post-2001 and the impact of the Taliban's second rule on education remains a topic of ongoing discussion and debate.

With the current regressions in Afghanistan's educational system during the second administration of the Taliban, there was a pressing need to research the present situation of education in the nation and unearth new information or analysis. This study's originality comes in its comprehensive approach to examining the different facets of education in Afghanistan during the Islamic Republic and its ability to add new information to the subject within the second rule of the Taliban. A study of education in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan after its collapse has not yet been conducted. Also, this study was done to investigate the Taliban's plan to alter the curriculum during their second administration and the repercussions of doing so for the Afghan nation-building and Afghan generations. Therefore, this study will also give vital insights into what a Taliban-led curriculum would look like and its consequences.

By examining four key topics, this research paper seeks to explore and understand the trajectory of education in post-2001 Afghanistan to present. The first topic as a background provides an overview of the formal and informal educational institutions in Afghanistan. The second topic examines educational progress and challenges under the post-Bonn interim government and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan until the putsch. The third topic focuses on the education of women and girls under the Taliban's second rule and the consequences of the Taliban's restrictive educational policies. This topic encompasses statistics of the 12th graders of 2022, plus the entire cohort of the 2023 secondary school girls who are deprived of education. The last topic examines close-mindedness and the emergence of neo-Taliban nation-building by contemplating the Taliban's ambition of Islamizing school curriculum.

Methodology

The methodology employed in this study is a mixed-method approach with a dominant focus on qualitative analysis. This approach was chosen to comprehensively examine the various aspects of education in Afghanistan, including the perspectives of different stakeholders, educational policies, and the content of textbooks. In order to collect the required information for this research, nine interviews were carried out, consisting of eight anonymous interviews with a school superintendent, teachers, and students, as well as one non-anonymous interview with the Chief Technology Officer of Noon Digital Education. Moreover, two anonymous interviews were conducted with experts. These interviews aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the current and former state of education in the country, the challenges faced by educators and students, and the stories and experiences of students and preceptors (Tulley 1985).

Educational policies were also reviewed as part of this study, including the National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) I, NESP II, NESP III, and the Higher National Education Strategic Plan (HNESP) I, as well as the National Statistics and Information Authority (NSIA)'s Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2020. These documents provided a comprehensive overview of the national policies and goals for education in Afghanistan, as well as the progress made towards these goals with statistics. Another crucial aspect of this study was a minor analysis of the content of textbooks used in the Afghan education system. Articles and news reports were also reviewed as part of this study, providing a broader understanding of the current state of education in Afghanistan and the challenges faced by educators and students. This information was used to complement and provide additional context to the findings of the interviews and policy reviews. The data collected through the interviews, textbook analysis, and review of articles and news reports were analyzed using qualitative methods, including thematic analysis and discourse analysis. The aim of this analysis was to identify patterns and themes in the data and to gain a deeper understanding of the current state of education in Afghanistan and its future prospects (Beerwinkle et al. 2018; Wasburn 1997).

In order to assess the impact of the Taliban's ban on girls' education in Afghanistan and determine the number of girls who were banned from attending 12th grade in 2022 and the total number of females prohibited from pursuing secondary education in 2023, a quantitative analysis of data obtained from the Ministry of Education was conducted. The data for this aspect of the research was sourced from the 34 Provincial Profiles for the year 2019, which corresponds to the Hijri-Shamsi calendar year 1397. The data was adjusted to reflect the number of affected students accurately. The total number of female students was calculated for each grade across all provinces of Afghanistan, and both urban and rural areas of Kabul city. It is important to note that the data report is from the year 2019/1397, which reflects the number of students enrolled in grades one to twelve during that year. As a result, students above the 9th grade have already completed their schooling by 2022. However, students from the 2nd grade to the 8th grade in 2019/1397 are now in 6th grade to 12th grade, respectively, and have been banned from attending school. Through this methodology, the total number of girls affected was presented in a provincial and regional context through the use of charts. While the data used in this paper may differ slightly from that of international organizations, it is believed to be more accurate as it was gathered directly from each and

every school across the country by the Ministry of Education of Afghanistan. Despite these limitations, this paper sheds light on the number of girls affected by the Taliban ban.

Chart representing the grades impacted by the ban

Grade 1397/2019	Grade 1401-2/2023
G2	G6
G3	G7
G4	G8
G5	G9
G6	G10
G7	G11
G8	G12
G9	1400/2022
G10	1399/2021
G11	1398/2020
G12	1397/2019

An overview of 'formal' and 'informal' education in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has had a long history of cultural richness and education in the past centuries. However, the modern educational system of the country is not that old. Sitting at the crossroads between Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East, its geostrategic location has kept it at war since the 19th century. Great Britain, the Soviet Union, the United States, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organizations (NATO) have been the key international actors involved in wars in Afghanistan. As a result, the country has never experienced linear progress, including its education sector. In some periods, there had been progresses, but the political cessations, regime changes, and conflicts have slowed down, halted, and even reversed progress from time to time.

Afghanistan's education system can be divided into two broad categories: informal (traditional or non-state education system) and formal (modern or state-run education system). The informal system includes the provision of education at home¹, in mosques² and *madrasas*, and the instructors are the religious scholars and clerics (Yazdani 2020). In the past centuries, when Afghanistan had no formal education system, *madrasas*, and mosques, in addition to religious education, had also provided students with the opportunity to learn creative writing, literature, history, philosophy, and ethics (Samady 2001b). However, teaching these subjects had not been common, and *madrasas'* education was and is extensively about Islam. This informal system was practiced widely prior to the establishment of the formal system and it was the only medium of education in the country. Between the 10th to 15th centuries, *madrasas*, as the country's main educational institutions, contributed to Afghanistan's cultural richness (Blumör 2014). Yet, this informal system is still functioning across the country.

In the past, mosques and *madrasas* were solely public institutions. However, several religious scholars have established their own (private) *madrasas* in recent decades, and the number has been growing. Owners of many private *madrasas* are religious scholars who study higher religious education outside Afghanistan, mainly in Pakistan and Iran. Upon their return, they establish their own *madrasas* (Borchgrevink and Harpviken 2010). The cross-border relations between Afghanistan religious figures and scholars of near and far Islamic countries have embedded Afghanistan *madrasas* into a transnational network of *madrasas* stretching from Pakistan to Iran, some Arab countries as well as Egypt, with some of these countries supporting Afghanistan *madrasas* in terms of book donations, funds and training religious instructors (Borchgrevink and Harpviken 2010). In the past, the students of *madrasas* in Afghanistan were predominantly boys and men. However, girls to puberty also attended *madrasas* under

¹ Referred to *Fiq-he Khanagi* for girls (In some cases, it was also common for women to learn how to read the Quran or gain basic reading skills from a female instructor at her home. Often, these instructors were the daughters of religious clerks or intellectuals.)

² *Madrasas* do not adhere to a uniform curriculum. There is no standard curriculum for *madrasas* across the country. Students are taught from various Islamic books and materials, which could differ from one madrasa to another, particularly between Shia and Sunni *madrasas*, and even from region to region or province to province. In a mosque of Herat city, for example, students typically begin by learning the alphabet and phonetic instructions, which are often printed before the start of the sole 30th chapter of the Quran. They then progress to studying the Quran itself, followed by other texts such as *Panj Ketab*, The Divān of Hafez, *Qudri*, and *Shurt-al Salat*, respectively.

a system of ‘co-education’³ in *mosques* to learn Quran and basic reading skills⁴. Nowadays, however, women attend madrasas, especially private ones, in urban areas under a certain age.

The formal or modern education system dates back to the 19th century. The first civil school was established during the reign of Amir Sher Ali Khan (1860-1878) in Kabul. The students came from high-ranking government officials’ families (Yazdani 2020). After Sher Ali Khan’s reign, his successors’ attempts to consolidate their power bases drew attention away from the education sector (Javid 2012). Years later, formal education again received attention, and the first secondary school, Habibia High School, was established in 1903 in Kabul (Samady 2001b). However, during this period, only boys from well-known families and government officials were attending schools, while girls were not able to attend. The first girls’ school was established during Amanullah Khan’s government (1919-1929), and he also established the Ministry of Education (MoE) (Samady 2001b).

Amanullah Khan pushed for further reform and introduced a western-oriented system of education. Between 1919 to 1929, male and female students were sent abroad for higher education, and the girls’ students inside Afghanistan, only in big cities, followed the new dress code introduced by the government, which did not correspond to the traditional clothing of women in Afghanistan. The religiously conservative groups opposed Amanullah’s efforts for the emancipation of women and educational reforms. Resistance was formed against him, and he finally fled the country in 1929 (Doorandesh 2019). After he fled, education faced another downfall under the reign of Habibullah Kalakani for around eight months. From 1930 onward under the reign of Nadir Shah, and during the monarchy of Zahir Shah for around 40 years, educational development gained momentum: the constitutions promulgated in 1931, 1948 and 1964 made primary education compulsory and declared education as the right of the every country citizen.

After the fall of the monarchy and the establishment of the first republic by Mohammad Daud (1973-1978), a new constitution was adopted, providing free general secondary, vocational and higher education as a fundamental goal. Daud was later assassinated, and the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), a communist party supported by the Soviet Union, took power (1979-1992). PDPA established the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA), changed the educational policies of the previous regimes, and adopted a secular approach to education influenced by communist ideology (Sarvarzade and Wotipka 2017). In this era, education became gender-inclusive, and more girls attended schools. However, the reform, which also included reform in the dress code, sparked criticism from conservative religious groups, which contributed to a 10-years war, ultimately leading to the collapse of the last communist government in 1992.

After the collapse of the communist government, the Mujahideen groups who had fought the Soviet troops and PDPA established their government named the Islamic State of Afghanistan. Although it could not develop its own national education policy, the materials that reflected communist ideology were removed, and instead, religious education became the new center of gravity (Sarvarzade and Wotipka

³ The boys and girls were arranged in rows facing each other or in a different configuration, but they were not seated beside each other.

⁴ Participation observation of a male interviewee from Herat, Afghanistan in a recall of memories of a mosque during the first rule of Taliban narrated in the interview, online, 03/01/2023.

2017). After the fall of Mujahideen in 1996, the Taliban established their Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (1996-2001). They pushed religious education further, banned girls from education, and banned textbooks which according to them, were against Islamic principles. Kabul University (established in 1932 and paved the way for a new generation of leaders), the country's top institution of higher education, was turned into a military base and lecture theaters, labs, libraries, and the research culture were destroyed. Internecine warfare and the strict Taliban regime took a heavy toll on higher education institutions, staff, and students, and what was not destroyed was looted and sold (Welch and Wahidyar 2020). Taliban's first rule marked the darkest period for education in modern Afghanistan.

After the fall of the Taliban's first reign in 2001, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2001-2021) extensively focused on education with tremendous support from the international community. The republican system reformed education in a bid to modernize it. A new moderate curriculum was adopted with new textbooks printed which extensively embraced liberal norms and Islam. In this era, considerable gains were made, especially in terms of female education. In this period, an increasing number of private schools, colleges and universities were established around the country.

Following the overthrow of the republic government by the Taliban on August 15, 2021, leading to their second rule, the education sector has been experiencing another downfall. Therefore, a glance at the education sector in Afghanistan shows that it has never followed a linear progress but a cyclic one with ups and downs, with both women and girls, as well as men, have been among the victims of these fluctuations. The quick and violent regime changes, usually with radically contradicting ideologies, has politicized education over the past several decades. Violent collapses of political administrations led to radical changes in education curriculums because the different regimes affiliated with different ideologies have always attempted to promote their ideals through education.

Education Reform During the Republic (2001-2021): Progresses vs. Obstructs

Education reform can refer to a range of initiatives aimed at improving, altering, or modernizing the education system while holding various objectives. By definition, it often involves “a move towards student-centered learning and a student-centered classroom,” with the objective of preparing learners for the demands of the evolving 21st century economy (Sitti, Sopeerak, and Sompong 2013, 316). Additionally, education reform is sometimes driven by the need for governments to address social and economic issues (Allmnakrah and Evers 2019). In some cases, education reform is focused on “curbing radical and militant extremism,” as was the case in Afghanistan after the Taliban 1.0⁵ regime was overthrown (Davies 2016, 10). This involved changes in policy, practice, and organization to improve Afghanistan's education system. After 2001, there was a significant influx of support both financially and strategically aimed at restoring and rebuilding the Afghan state, including in the area of education. Afghan Transitional Administration (interim government following the Bonn Agreement) and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, supported by the international community and international organizations, kickstarted substantial progress in education, both in terms of quantity and quality. The post-Bonn government in Afghanistan considered taking the necessary steps to transform the violent curriculum into a peaceful one as a form of education reform. For instance, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) "Back-to-School Campaign" in 2001 was introduced, which was a major contributor to the education system in Afghanistan and resulted in 200% more schools being built and 500% more teachers being hired compared to two years prior. Additionally, enrolment rates, which had declined from 32% to 6.4% during the Taliban's initial takeover of Afghanistan, saw a significant increase in 2004 (Acks, Baughman, and Diabo 2015). Although commendable efforts were made, there were still areas that needed additional attention and support to fully achieve education reform.

An Overview of Progresses in Education (2001-2021)

The first curriculum of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was approved in 2004. It was not a comprehensive education curriculum but was focused on responding to the immediate needs of schools, particularly compiling textbooks and hiring and training teachers. This curriculum was extensively on primary education. The first National Education Strategic Plan (NESP I) was adopted in 2006, in which the fundamental education goals and milestones were laid out. NESP I was, in fact, the first comprehensive national education plan that laid the cornerstone for the new modernized curriculum, including the compilation and publication of new textbooks for public schools, Islamic Education and vocational education, hiring and training teachers, building schools, and inaugurating specific branches within the Ministry of Education for revision of curriculum.

Textbooks for primary school, grade 1-6, was published in 2007 based on the 2004 curriculum. This curriculum was a temporary response to the immediate needs. Based on the national plan in NESP I adopted in 2006, the Ministry of Education started its efforts in compiling textbooks for secondary education (grades 7-9) in 2008. After two years, the new textbooks were compiled and printed in 2010.

⁵ Referring to the first rule of the Taliban over Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001.

The textbooks were distributed in schools in 2011. Again, based on NESP I, new textbooks for high school (grades 10-12) were printed in 2011 and distributed in 2012. This was the first batch of textbooks printed based on a modernized curriculum. And afterwards, the curriculum development and textbook revision became an ongoing process, and the latest textbooks were published as late as 2020.

Aside from the 2004 Constitution of Afghanistan, the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS), the Afghan Millennium Development Goals (AMDG), the National Education Strategic Plans (NESP I, NESP II, NESP III), Education for All (EFA), and Education Law (EL) are some of the most important strategic documents that guided educational reforms including development of a new curriculum and textbooks and teacher training, and initiation of Islamic Education as a new programme, and expansion of Vocational Education. The overarching goals of the ministry of education in terms of curriculum and education development, textbooks production, teacher training, and Islamic Education are defined in these documents, with the following objectives:

1. Imposing compulsory education up to 9th grade and offering free education until completion of a bachelor's degree (in public educational institutions) (*Constitution of Afghanistan* 2004).
2. Providing all children with equal access to quality education, equipping them with the necessary skills and qualifications for personal, familial, and societal success, as well as higher education opportunities.
3. Supplying students with up-to-date textbooks and educational materials that align with Islamic values and national principles and meet the demands of the society.
4. Offering both males and females relevant and high-quality technical and vocational education and training, preparing them for the job market in Afghanistan and the region.
5. Providing older adults of both genders, who are fifty and above, with the opportunity to improve their literacy and participate in their community.
6. Ensuring all students, teachers, and staff have a safe, supportive, and appropriate learning and work environment through the balanced development of educational infrastructure throughout the country.
7. Improving and expanding early childhood education and care.
8. Guaranteeing free and high-quality primary education for all children.
9. Promoting gender equality.
10. Increasing adult literacy.
11. Enhancing the overall quality of education and making it accessible to all children and adults.
12. Printing books in different languages of Afghanistan.
13. Emphasizing the importance of evaluation and monitoring in ensuring the success of the education reform efforts.
14. Implementing effective and transparent management in the education system (NESP I 2006; NESP II 2010; NESP III 2017).

According to the Ministry of Education in Afghanistan, there have been significant improvements made in the education system between 2002 and 2015 in seven key areas.

1. The student population had grown to seven million, with 37% of them being girls.
2. The number of teachers had risen to 170,000, with 30% being female.
3. The number of training centers had increased from 4 to 42.
4. The number of technical and vocational schools had grown to 60, with 200,000 students enrolled, including 30% who were female.
5. Over 480 registered *madrasas* had been established.
6. 673 previously closed schools had reopened (Acks, Baughman, and Diabo 2015)

In another narration, according to the 2020 Annual Progress Report from Afghanistan's Ministry of Education, approximately ten million children were enrolled in school in 2020, a tenfold increase since 2001. About 40% of these students were girls. The highest growth was observed in primary education. The number of schools and teachers has also seen a significant increase, with the number of schools rising from 6,000 in 2001 to nearly 18,000 in 2018 and the number of teachers increasing from 27,000 in 2003 to almost 226,000 in 2020, according to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (Wang 2021). Also, co-education was amplified in primary public schools of a few provinces and in some private schools in Kabul, both for primary and secondary students, until the collapse of the Islamic Republic to the Taliban. McGraw-Hill Education, among other foreign educational curricula, started to get implemented in private international schools in Kabul during the Islamic Republic.

With regard to higher education, the Ministry of Higher Education in Afghanistan initiated a program for staff development, rehabilitation, and reconstruction in 2002 as means of education reform. In addition to the significant toll on lives lost during the conflict that raged in Afghanistan from nearly three decades until 2001, one of the major challenges was a high rate of post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health issues that affected more than half of the student body (Hayward and Babury 2015). With the assistance of UNESCO-IIEP, a strategic development plan was created and published in 2005. By 2009, the most severe damage to educational institutions had been sufficiently repaired, making it possible to prepare for rehabilitation and transformation (Hayward and Babury 2015). Given that studying is free to all students who qualify and because public universities are seen as the truly prominent academic institutions in Afghan society, public universities had continued to dominate higher education in Afghanistan and remained the first option for all qualifying students (Berger and Thoma 2015).

The Ministry then finalized the National Higher Education Strategic Plan for 2010-2014 in 2009. The plan aimed to:

1. Educate and train skilled graduates to meet the socio-economic development needs of Afghanistan, enhance teaching, research, and learning, and encourage service to the community and nation.
2. Lead and manage a coordinated system of higher education comprising universities, institutes, and community colleges dedicated to providing high-quality tertiary education.
3. Shift towards greater independence for public higher education institutions, moving away from a centralized system (Samady 2013; Berger and Thoma 2015).

In 2012, the World Bank made research funds accessible to faculty members for the first time in decades (Hayward and Babury 2015). By 2014, the higher education curriculum had undergone a comprehensive evaluation and upgrade process. For the first time ever, over half of the curriculum at public higher education institutions was evaluated, updated, and improved (Hayward and Babury 2015). By 2018, it was deemed that there were enough higher education institutions, and the emphasis moved to raise the quality of education (Welch and Wahidyar 2020; Hayward and Babury 2015). Additionally, the collaboration between Afghan universities and universities from the US and Europe has played a major role in improving the quality of higher education. This partnership has supported training and research, introduced new technologies, and contributed to the development of curriculum and teaching materials, with a focus on scientific and technological fields (Samady 2013).

The Ministry of Higher Education in Afghanistan has undertaken several measures, albeit modest ones, to improve the quality of higher education and address barriers to female student enrollment. To address the shortage of safe and adequate housing, the Ministry initiated the construction of three women's dormitories. Such efforts were vital since, many Afghan women pursue higher education for a variety of reasons, including their desire for independence, the significance of finishing their education to compensate for the sacrifices made by their families, the need to demonstrate that women can succeed in education and the workplace, a desire to learn about women's rights, and an effort to increase their employment prospects (Burridge, Maree Payne, and Rahmani 2016). Additionally, the ministry established accreditation, invested in teacher development, revised and upgraded curricula, and ensured to an extent that hiring and promotion are based on merit, among other measures. As one of the largest employers in the Afghan government, the education sector plays a crucial role in the development of the country. However, the sector still had faced challenges, including inadequate funding, corruption, and political interference (Hayward and Babury 2015). Also, the Ministry of Higher Education faced challenges in enforcing standards in the private sector, which was largely unregulated and underdeveloped due to the lack of political and financial resources at its disposal (Berger and Thoma 2015).

As of 2020, Afghanistan had 167 public and private universities and higher education institutions, with 39 of these being public and 128 being private. In the same year, the student population was 429,790, with the majority being male (71.01%) and a smaller portion being female (28.99%). In 2020, the total number of students enrolled in public institutions was 205,480, and among these, Kabul University had the highest enrollment, with 23,722 students. (National Statistics and Information Authority 2021). In 2021, the number of private educational institutes in Afghanistan increased to 129 after one more institute registered with the Ministry of Higher Education (Akhtar and Ranjan 2021). So, between 2001 and 2021, the higher education system in Afghanistan underwent significant improvement, including the following developments:

1. Establishment of numerous public and private universities and higher education institutions with co-education.
2. A significant increase in the number of students enrolled in higher education.
3. Opportunities for university lecturers to receive training and scholarships.
4. Reform of the university entrance examination, also known as the Kankor exam.
5. Improvements were made to the physical infrastructure of selected Afghan universities.

6. A noticeable growth in the number of faculties in both public and private universities (Baha n.d.).

An Overview of Obstructs in Education (2001-2021)

In the early years, the Ministry of Education was facing multiple challenges, mainly a lack of professional teachers, textbooks, classrooms, and Teacher Training Colleges (TTC). The lack of teachers who could meet the qualification requirements was one of the key problems. The criteria set for teachers by the ministry was that TTC graduates could teach for four years (grade one to four), and graduates of universities (bachelor) could teach for eight years (grade five to twelve) (NESP I 2006). Based on the ministry's statistics, in late 2001, there were only 21,000 teachers, and this number increased to 140,000 in 2005, with 29% of them having completed fewer than 12 years of education, 49% were graduates of high school (12th grade), and the remaining 22% met the minimum requirement most of whom were graduates of TTCs in the past decades. Of this number, only 28% were female, predominantly located in urban areas (NESP I 2006). To address the problem, the ministry launched a two-year pre-service and in-service teacher training to enhance the teachers' capacity. The ministry also committed to establishing one Teacher Resource Center (TRC) in each of the 364 districts by 2010, training 2,184 teacher educators for the TRCs, building 34 TTCs, one in each of the 34 provinces by 2007 with dormitories for males and females, and increase the number of female teachers for primary and secondary school to 50% by 2010 (NESP I 2006). TRCs were designed for pre and in-service training for teachers.

Furthermore, schools started facing various challenges during the Islamic Republic such as inadequate construction, bribery for securing school admission, good exam results, or obtaining certificates. During the time of the Islamic Republic, the funding allocated for schools was also misused by the principals who diverted it for their personal gain, and teachers were often forced to pay third-party individuals with connections to the principals in exchange for preparation of the "*Jadwale Natayej*" result charts⁶. Teachers also encountered obstacles such as demanded bribes or mistreatment in order to transfer from one school to another by ministry staff or principals and being forced by principals to teach subjects outside of their field of expertise⁷. Furthermore, the lack of proper drinking water facilities and equipped toilets as well as the absence of places for physiological, health, and hygiene advice and equipment in schools, particularly in a war-torn country, added to the challenges faced by students and teachers alike⁸.

Besides, several significant barriers prevented Afghans, especially girls, from accessing education, including physical, geographical, and financial obstacles, harassment and abuse, a lack of support from their families, and early marriage during the Islamic Republic⁹. In addition, several other factors contribute to the barriers to education in Afghanistan. Some of these include:

⁶ Interview with high school teachers, Herat, Afghanistan, December 05, 2022.

⁷ Interview with a high school teacher, Kabul, Afghanistan, July 03, 2021.

⁸ Interview with multiple teachers from Herat and Kabul, 2021.

⁹ Interview with students and teachers from Herat and Kabul, February 2023.

Cultural barriers [to education]

The war in Afghanistan has caused the loss of many primary breadwinners, leaving families without their main source of income. According to cultural traditions, the eldest brother is expected to take care of the family if the father is absent, which often leads to many adults giving up their education to support their families. Many young children were deprived of the opportunity to focus on their education as they were forced to work in shops and other forms of employment with their fathers and brothers due to the severe economic circumstances of their families. Additionally, it is a cultural norm for families to allocate more financial resources towards the education of boys rather than girls, as it is believed that the boys will remain with their parents after marriage, whereas the girls will leave home.

In another narrative, scholars argue that the cultural barrier of "*Pashtunwali*"¹⁰, "an unwritten tribal code among the Pashtun community in the south and southeastern regions of Afghanistan, had posed a hindrance to the education of female members, besides rigid religious interpretations. Despite the persistence of cultural barriers in Afghanistan vis-à-vis education, opinions among residents varied. Non-Pashtun respondents were found to have viewed cultural obstacles as less of a hindrance to women's education, as their social code was less rigid, and they held a more enlightened understanding of women's independence and rights. On the other hand, the Pashtun community was observed to have a far more rigid cultural dynamic (Inayatullah 2022; Jamal 2014). To avoid any biased perspectives on the topic of female education and the "*Pashtunwali*" guidelines, it would be essential to take an ethnographic approach to comprehending the cultural norms and practices of this system.

Resource barriers [to education]

A shortage of human and material resources, particularly in regard to the availability of public schools and teachers in them, is a contributing factor to the decreased enrollment of girls in schools. The proximity of schools to women's homes had a direct impact on their educational opportunities. Higher enrollment rates were observed in schools that were located closer to the homes of female students. Living away from one's community increases the risk of gender-based violence, hindering women's motivation for further education. The issue of safe travel distance also presented a barrier to women's education (Center for Strategic and Regional Studies 2020a).

Security barriers [to education]

The instability in Afghanistan has severely impacted its education system, with armed insurgent attacks and widespread fear causing many parents to hesitate to send their children to school (NESP I 2006). The re-emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan between 2004 and 2005 posed a significant threat to the development of education in the country, particularly in rural areas (EFSAS 2022). As an insurgent group opposing the government, the Taliban directed hostilities towards schools, objecting to the curriculum

¹⁰ So-called "the ethical principles and social norms followed by the Pashtun community."

being taught and accusing education personnel of being agents of foreign influence. Upon its re-emergence, the Taliban released its "*Layeha*" or code of conduct in 2006, instructing field commanders to target schools that implemented the post-2001 curriculum, with a particular emphasis on girls' schools. The Ministry of Education reported that over 500 schools, predominantly located in the south and east of the country, were closed due to threats and direct attacks by the Taliban in 2006 (Rubin and Rudeforth 2016). The threat posed by the Taliban continued to be a major concern for the education sector throughout the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. In addition, the nexus of ISIS-K-Taliban led to deadly attacks on educational institutions like the American University of Afghanistan, Kabul University, and those of the Hazara Community during the Islamic Republic (Mohammadi and Askary 2021; The Washington Post 2020; Johns Hopkins University 2021).

Corruption barriers [to education]

Despite efforts to improve the abilities of the education sector workforce, the competency of executives at both the capital and province levels had remained lacking, primarily due to a shortage of qualified professionals who were unwilling to work for the low salaries offered by the Ministry of Education. The lack of appropriate workplace resources and equipment, particularly in the area of information technology, further had exacerbated the problem of ineffective management within the Ministry of Education (Center for Strategic and Regional Studies 2020a). The corruption within the Ministry of Education is notable for several malpractices, including the presence of 40,880 fraudulent teachers on the payroll, 1,033 fictitious schools, 1,400 school construction projects executed without adhering to proper procurement regulations, embezzlement of over 20 million USD in textbook printing contracts, the loss of 64 containers containing various school supplies (such as notebooks, boxes, pens, and food items), and various other instances of theft and looting that is not yet disclosed (Center for Strategic and Regional Studies 2020b). For higher education, corrupt practices by both local individuals and foreign contractors, along with long-standing traditions of patronage networks influenced by personal relationships and favoritism, were reported (Welch and Wahidyar 2020).

Between 2001 and 2021, Afghanistan faced numerous difficulties in the realm of higher education. These issues included low-quality education, shortage of competent faculty and staff, inadequate administration and management, scarce learning resources such as no access to e-libraries and academic databases, limited opportunities for further education and career growth for graduates, and low employment prospects for those who completed their studies (Baha n.d.). Due to security concerns and budget constraints, higher education institutions were unable to invite guest lecturers from foreign universities or institutions (Welch and Wahidyar 2020). The low salaries in the public sector caused many academic staff members to take up additional work in the private sector, which in turn weakened the teaching and research culture in both public and private higher education institutions (Welch and Wahidyar 2020). Regarding female students, verbal harassment while commuting to university was cited as a concern and demean by several female students (Burridge, Maree Payne, and Rahmani 2016).

Education of women and girls in Afghanistan since the Taliban's return to power

The Taliban swept again to power on August 15, 2021. With the subsequent fall of other provinces and eventually Kabul, the prospects for the rights of Afghan women and girls to education seemed bleak. Despite the Taliban's assurances of having a moderate interpretation of Islam during the Doha agreement negotiations vis-à-vis girl education (Afghan Embassy - Canberra 2022), in practice, their policies against women and girls indicate a return to their 1990s ideology, the time when they took power for the first time in Afghanistan.

The education sector, due to chaos, for around one month after the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban, shut. Then the Taliban announced the reopening of schools but prevented girls beyond grade six from resuming their education (Reuters 2021; Al Jazeera 2022b). In a statement, the Taliban's Ministry of Education referred to restrictions on girls to the culture, social norms, and security in the country, further mentioning that people do not want schools for their female children (BBC Persian 2022).

In their second month of domination, universities reopened but under the condition of observing the policy of gender segregation (Al Jazeera 2022a). Public and private universities, lacking proper facilities to separate classes for male and female students, resorted to using a curtain as a division. Female university students were subjected to unbearable restrictions when attending classes. They were forced to cover their faces not only in public areas of the university but in classes as well (BBC Dari 2022). Male teachers were also not allowed to teach female students.

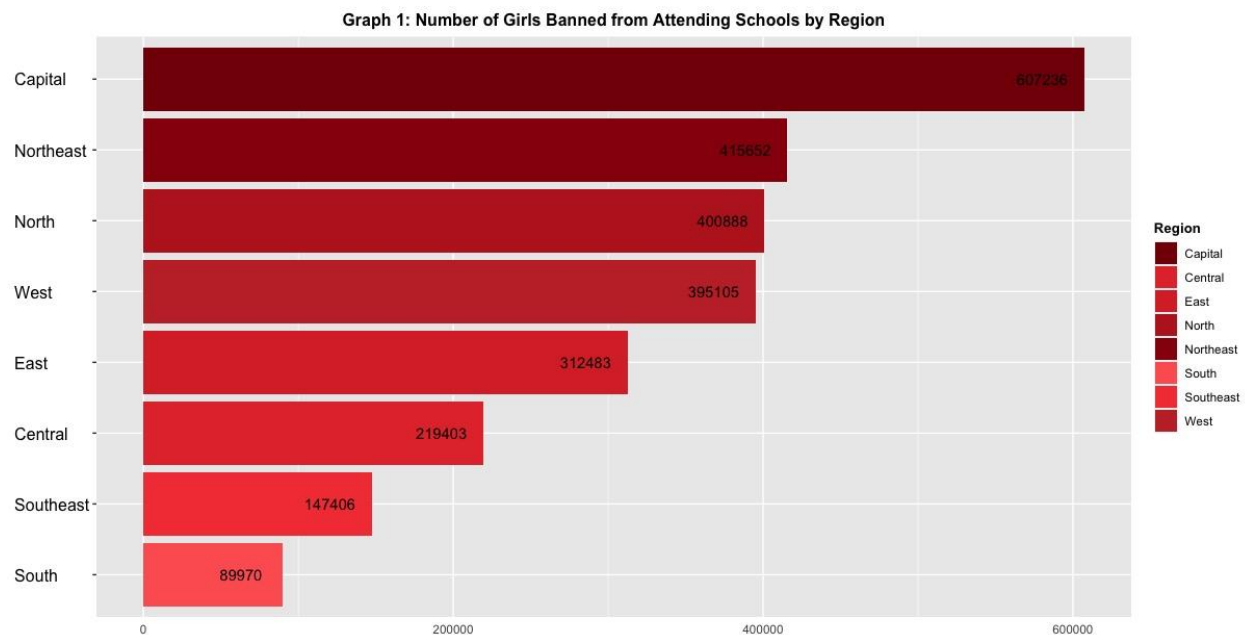
Despite the restrictions, the prospects to open universities and higher education for girls were short-lived. After debates arose among Taliban senior officials regarding girls' education, the Ministry of Higher Education ordered the closure of universities for females, claiming that the university environment was incompatible with Sharia law and Afghan traditions (Noori 2022).

Women's rights activists have protested such a decision and the discriminatory policy of the Taliban, but they were suppressed. The protests were not accompanied by anti-Taliban slogans, but instead demanded their rights to work, education, freedom of movement without a *Mahram* (male family member as a chaperone), and to dress as they wish and not based on the Taliban's interpretation (Human Rights Watch 2021). All protests were met with violence. The Taliban violated their rights to freedom of expression, association, and assembly. They have used severe hate speech against women protestors, whipped, and beaten a few with batons. The Taliban mostly targeted the organizers and those who were filming the protests and demanded that they do not disseminate footage of the violence inflicted against the protesters on social media (BBC News 2021). Women protesters and organizers were subjected to harassment, abuse, beating, detention, enforced disappearance, torture, and ill-treatment (Amnesty International 2022).

Following the downfall of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the Taliban's oppression of women has intensified. The ban on girls from attending universities and secondary schools^{11 12}, as well as recently being prohibited from taking the *Kankor* university entrance exam¹³, has drawn international criticism and created hopelessness among the young Afghan girl population. The Taliban are confining women and girls to their homes, permitting only necessary outings, and preventing them from accessing education at secondary schools and universities (BBC News 2022).

A Statistic of the Ban on Girls' Schooling for 12th Graders in 2022 and Secondary Education in 2023

Graph 1 shows that the ban on girls' education predominantly affects the Capital, Northeastern, Northern, and Western regions, respectively. The number of girls banned from attending schools for 12th Graders in 2022 and the entire Secondary education in 2023 in the Capital, Northeastern, Northern, Western, Eastern, Central, Southeastern, and Southern regions is 607,236; 415,652; 400,888; 395,105; 312,483; 219,403; 147,406; and 89,970 respectively, totaling approximately to 2.6 million girls across Afghanistan.



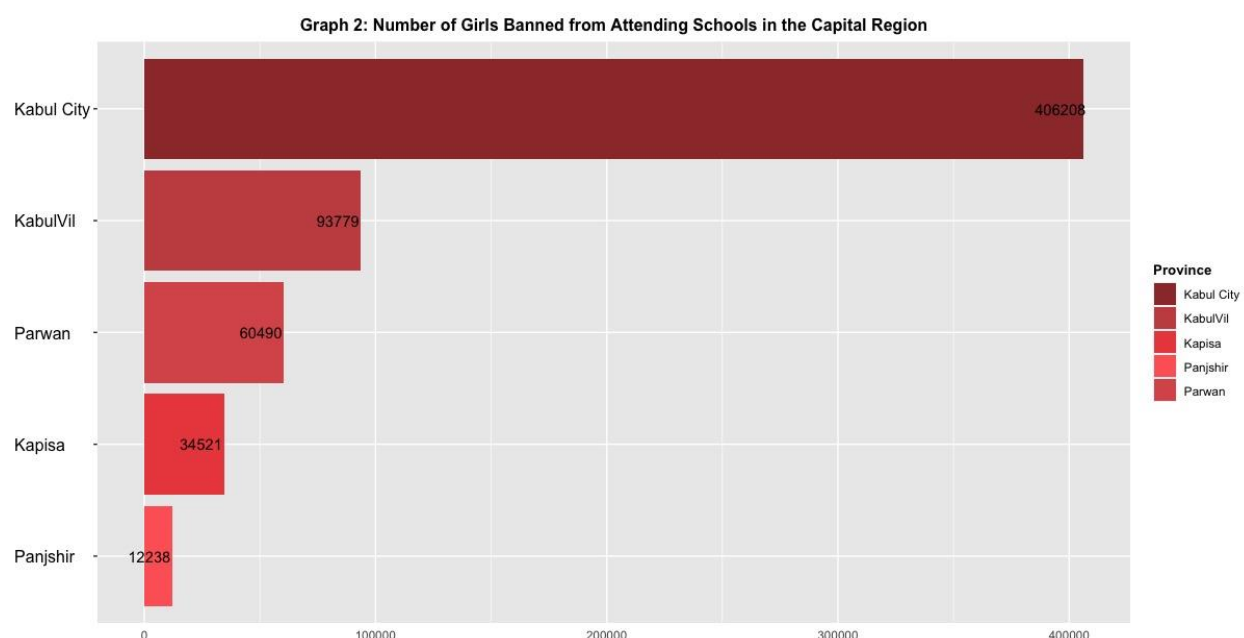
(Co-authors' analysis from Ministry of Education Provincial Report of 2019)

¹¹ The female students who were in 12th grade in 2021 had already completed their semi-final exam before the Taliban took over the government. Instead of taking a final exam, they were simply graduated and asked to pay for their transcripts and diplomas. This promotion process was also applied to other grades, promoting them one year higher. However, on December 7, 2022, a final exam was scheduled for state-promoted 12th grade students, and the girls were only informed a few days in advance with inadequate information. As a result, many were unable to attend the exam, unaware of the scheduled date. Some students who arrived two days later were upset and crying, and one student's hands were shaking with sadness as she asked for guidance on what to do. Those who failed to attend the exam were not offered place for graduation. Those who missed the exam were not allowed to graduate.

¹² Interview with a high school teacher located in Herat, Afghanistan, Online, March 01, 2023.

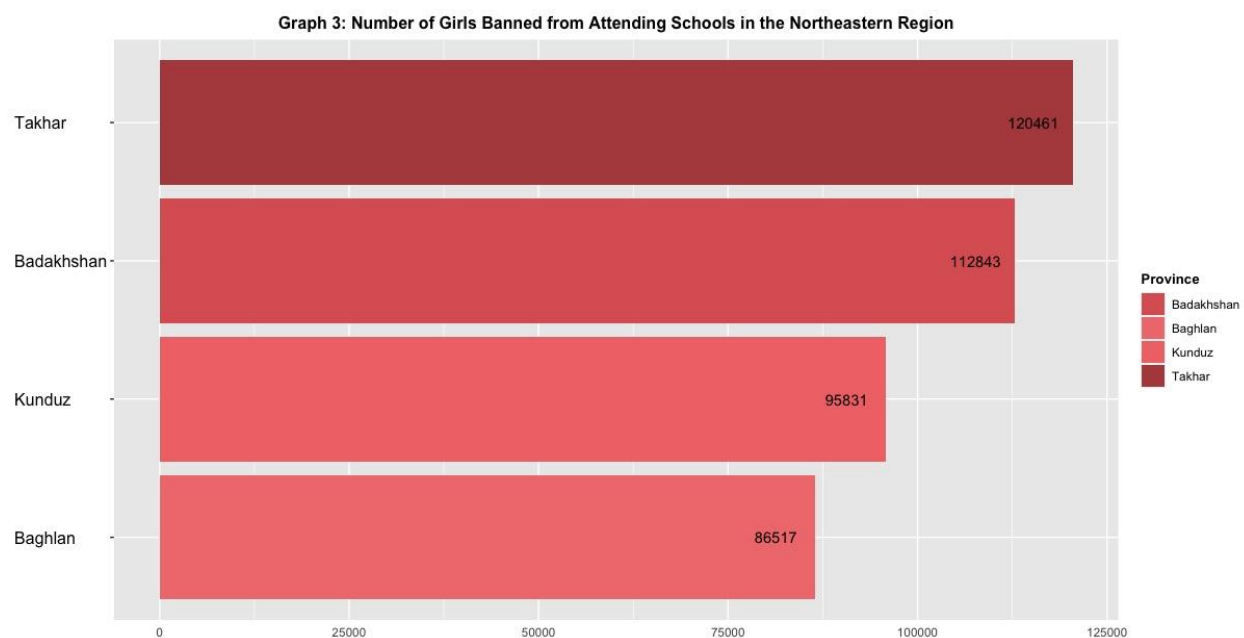
¹³ Effective from 01/28/2023

The Capital region, with 607,236 female students, is the hardest hit by the ban. Historically, school enrollment in Capital (mainly Kabul province), North Eastern, Northern, Western (mainly Herat province) and Central provinces has been high over the two decades from 2001 to 2021 due to the open culture and support for female education in both schools and universities. The highest enrollment rate of girls in Afghanistan is in the capital city of Kabul, which attracts students from other regions who reside in Kabul and attend schools there. Kabul province, including both Kabul city and its rural areas, has the highest number of out-of-school female students, with a total of approximately half a million, of which 406,260 are in the city and 93,779 are in rural areas. Overall, more than 600,000 12th graders of 2022 and entire cohort of 2023 secondary school girls cannot attend schools in the Capital region as shown in Graph 2.



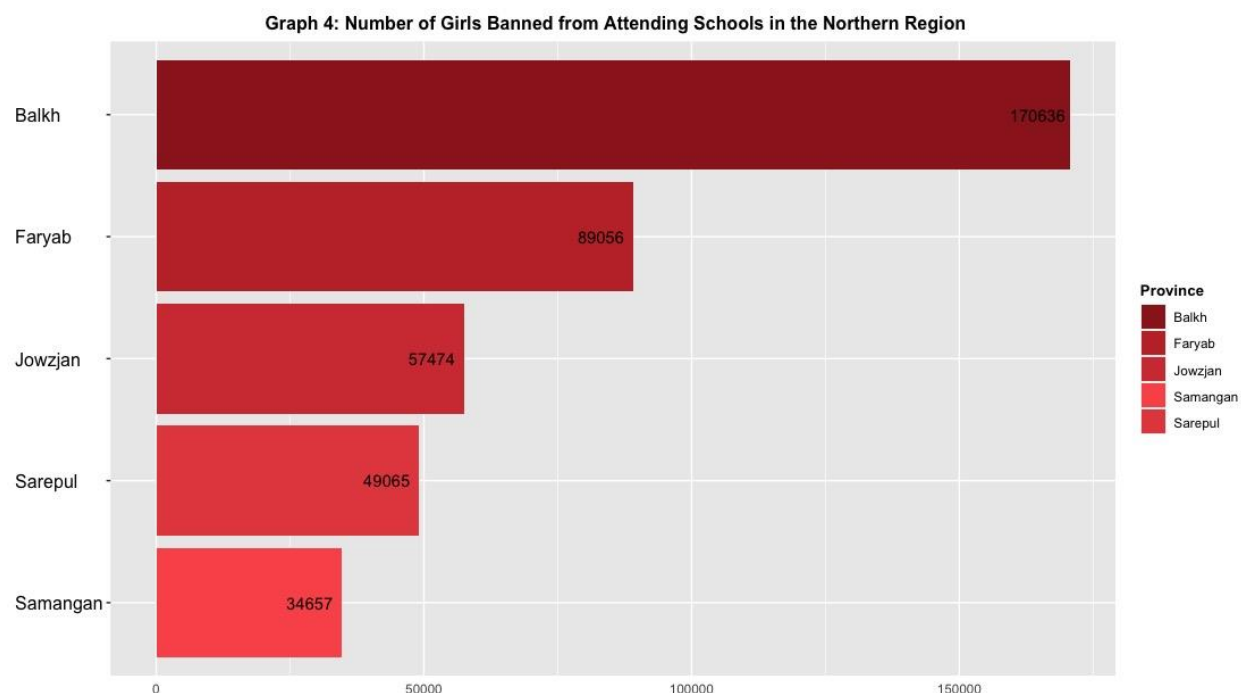
(Co-authors' analysis from Ministry of Education Provincial Report of 2019)

Following the Capital region, the second highest affected region is the Northeastern region, with 415,652 girls unable to attend schools. The number of students who cannot attend schools in the provinces of Takhar, Badakhshan, Kunduz, and Baghlan is 120,461; 112,843; 95,831; and 86,517, respectively. Since enrollment in this region has been high, it is one of the most affected regions, as shown in Graph 3.



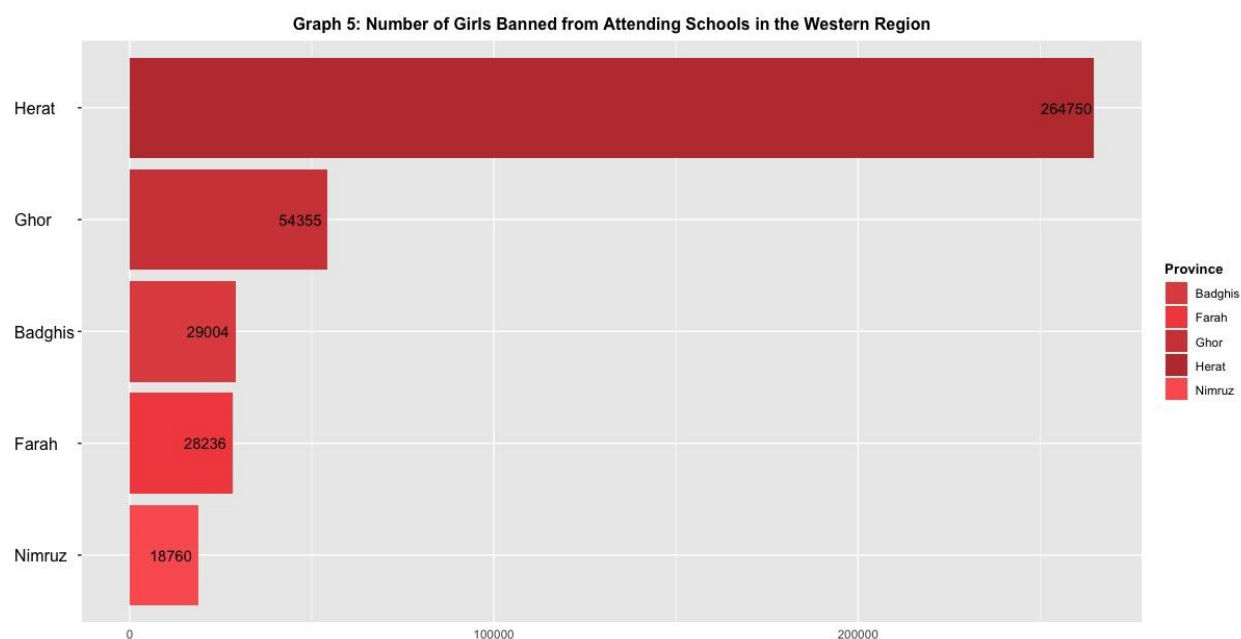
(Co-authors' analysis from Ministry of Education Provincial Report of 2019)

The third region with the most female students unable to attend schools is the Northern region, with 400,888 students. Balkh province, with 170,636 female students, has the highest number of girls banned from school in this region. Following Balkh, Faryab, and Jowzjan have the most female students who cannot attend school. Sarepul and Samangan provinces have the lowest number of affected female students, with 49,065 and 34,657, respectively. Graph 4 provides a more detailed visualization of the number of banned students in the Northern provinces.



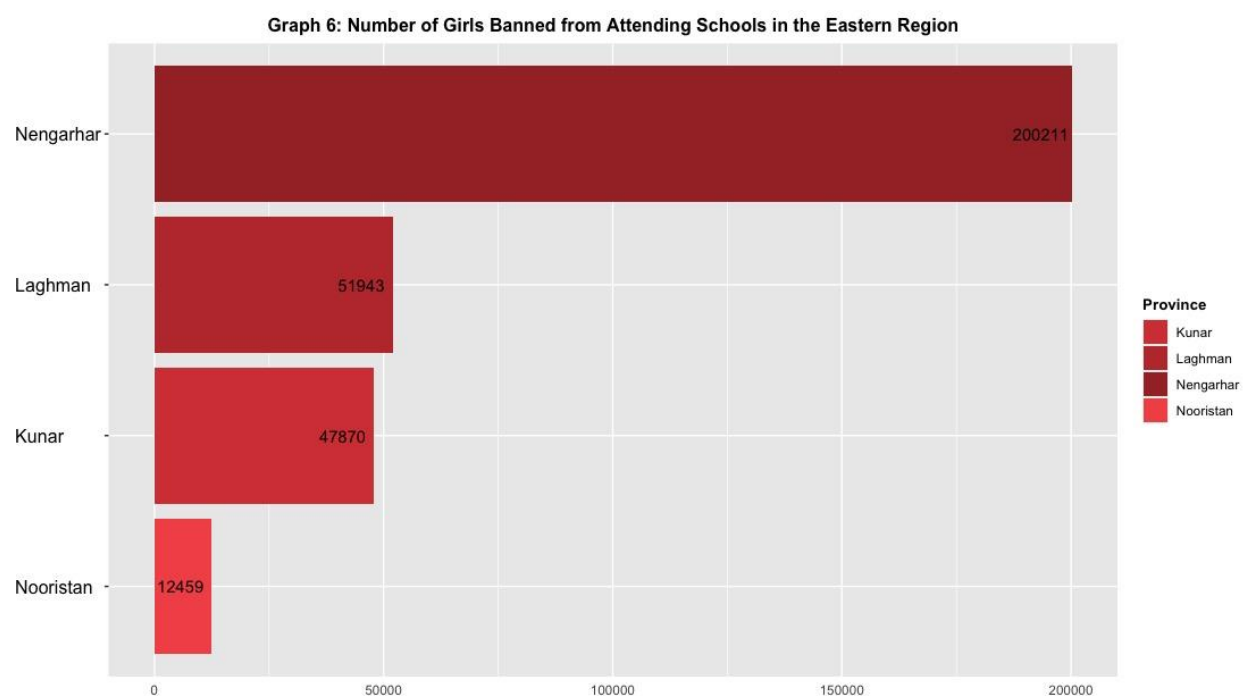
(Co-authors' analysis from Ministry of Education Provincial Report of 2019)

In the Western region of Afghanistan, the province of Herat has the highest number of girls affected by the ban on education, with 264,750 female students unable to attend school. The Ghor, Badghis, and Farah provinces have 54,355, 29,004, and 28,236 girls, respectively, who are impacted by the ban. The province with the lowest number is Nimruz, with 18,760 students. The total number of affected female students in the Western region is 395,105, as shown in Graph 5.



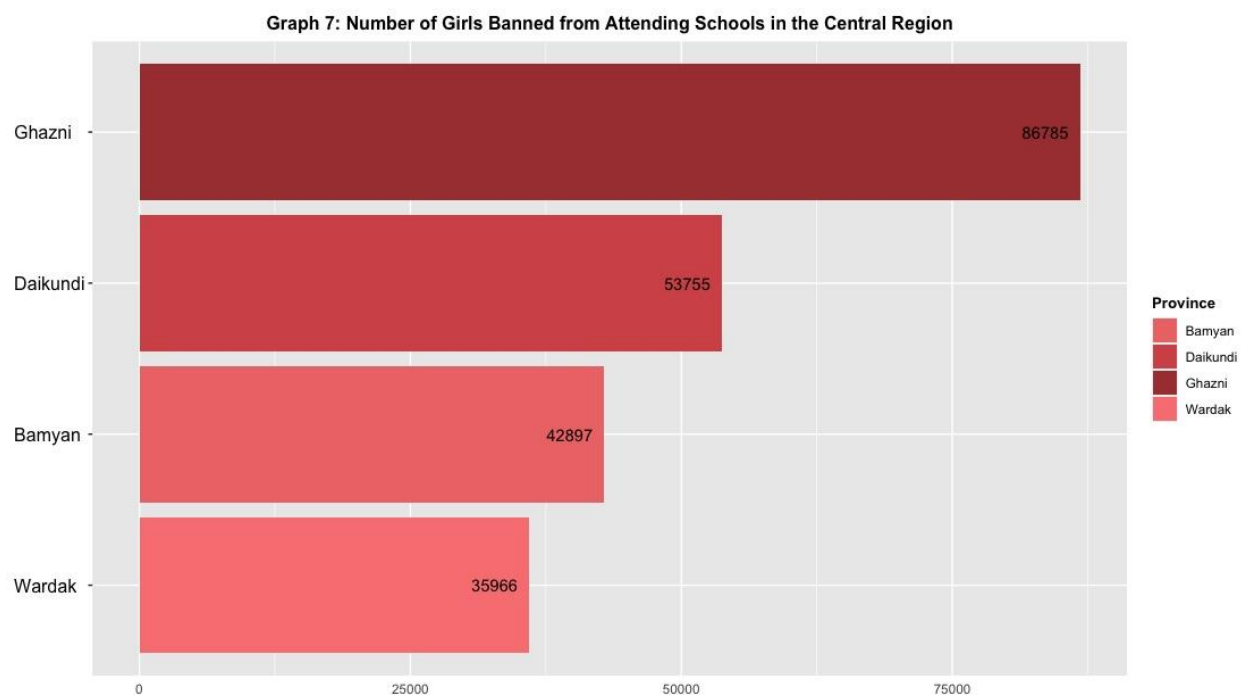
(Co-authors' analysis from Ministry of Education Provincial Report of 2019)

In the Eastern region of Afghanistan, the ban has affected the highest number of female students in Nangarhar (200,211), Laghman (51,943), Kunar (47,870), and Nooristan (12,459) provinces, respectively. The province with the lowest number of impacted female students is Nooristan (12,459). The ban has prevented a total of 312,483 female students from attending school in this region. A graph displaying the number of affected students can be found below.



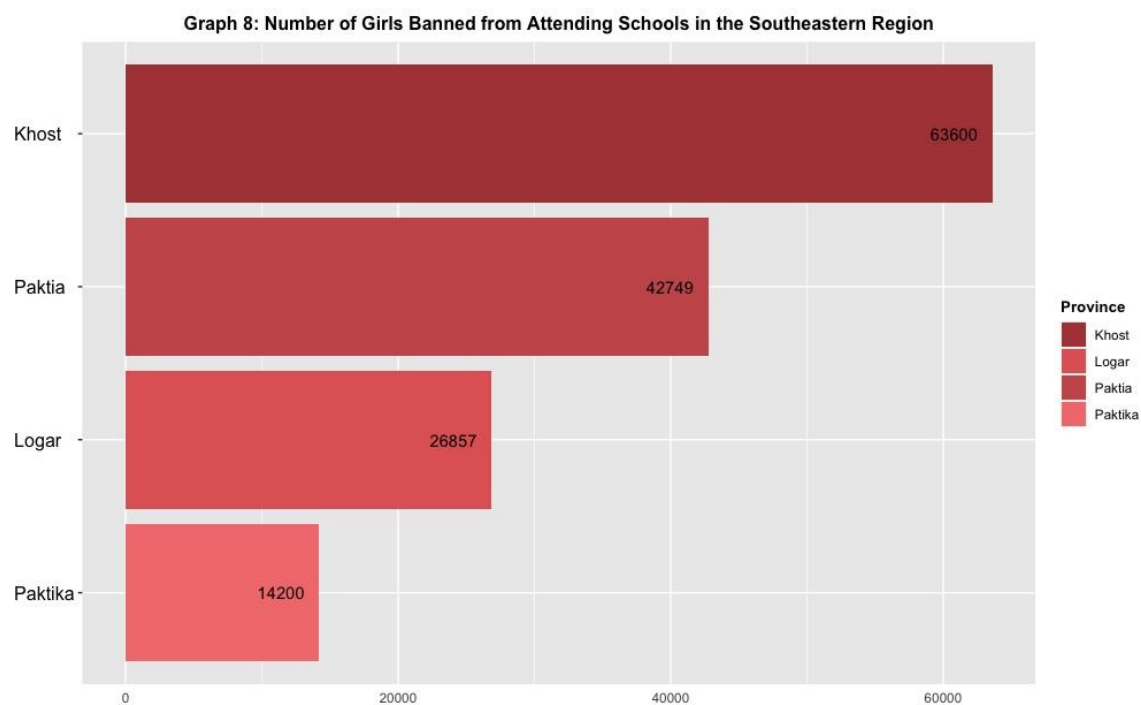
(Co-authors' analysis from Ministry of Education Provincial Report of 2019)

In the Central region of Afghanistan, Ghazni and Daikundi have the highest number of girls who are banned from attending school, with 86,785 and 53,755, respectively. Bamyan and Wardak have the lowest number of female students unable to participate in school, with 42,897 and 35,966, respectively. The total number of girls in the central region who are unable to attend school due to the ban is 219,403.



(Co-authors' analysis from Ministry of Education Provincial Report of 2019)

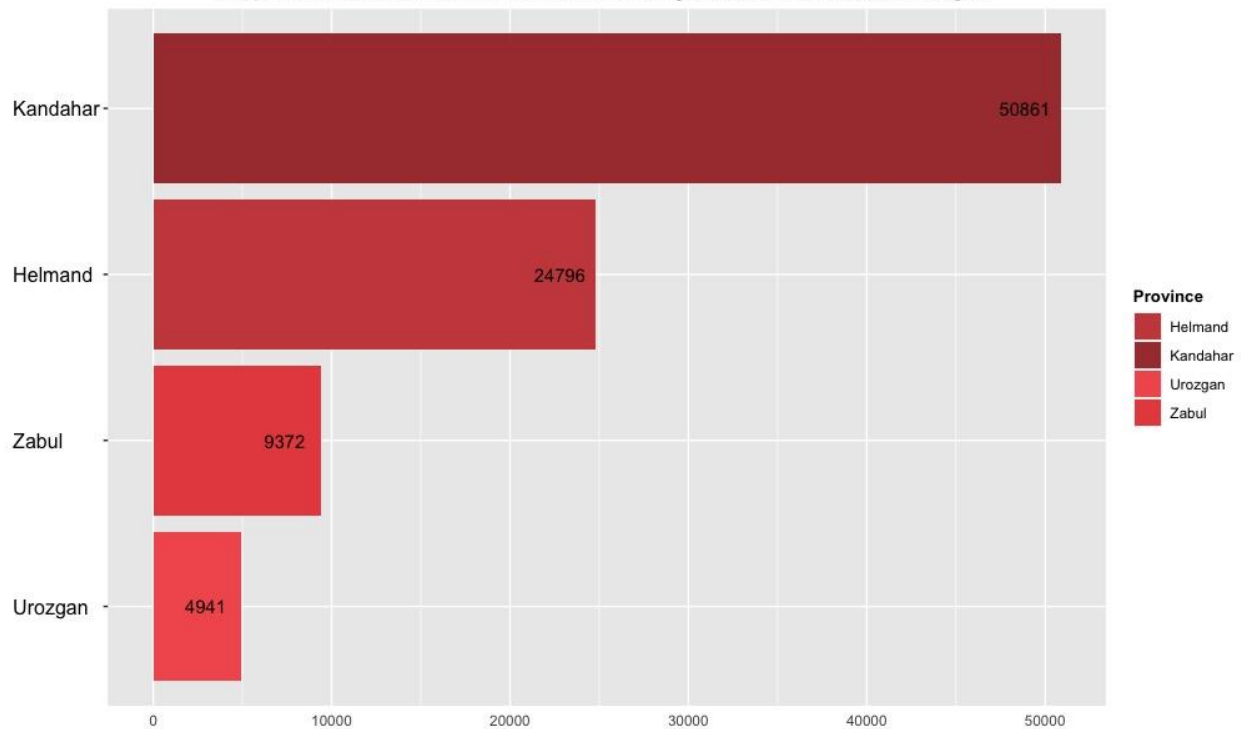
The Southeastern and Southern region of Afghanistan has the lowest number of girls impacted by the ban on education. Historically, enrollment in these regions has been low, mainly due to conflict and cultural factors. Khost has the highest number in the Southeastern region, close to 63,600. The province with the lowest number of affected students is Paktika, with 14,200. The total number of girls in the Southeastern region who cannot attend school is 147,406, as shown in Graph 8.



(Co-authors' analysis from Ministry of Education Provincial Report of 2019)

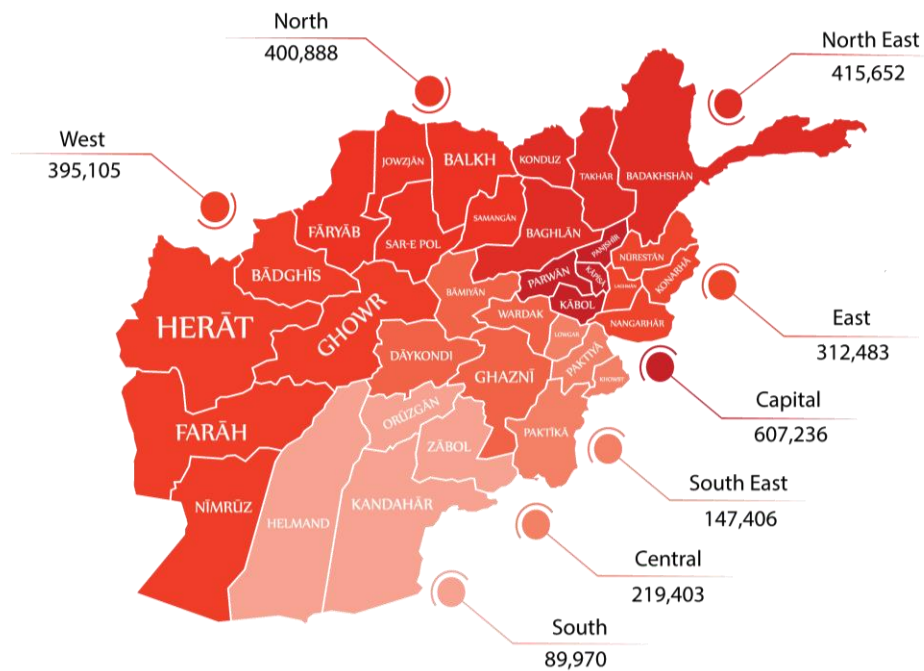
The total number of female students affected by the ban is the lowest in the Southern region compared to other regions in Afghanistan. In Kandahar province, approximately 50,861 female students cannot attend school. Similarly, the ban affects Helmand 24,796, Zabul 9,372, and Urozgan 4,941 female students, which are the lowest compared to all other provinces. Overall, the total number of girls unable to attend school in the Southern region is 89,970. Graph 9 visualizes the effect of the ban in this region.

Graph 9: Number of Girls Banned from Attending Schools in the Southern Region



(Co-authors' analysis from Ministry of Education Provincial Report of 2019)

The ban on education imposed by the Taliban in Afghanistan can be better visualized through the following map displaying the country's provinces based on their zonal division.



It is noteworthy that in 2001, there were approximately 5,000 female students enrolled in higher education institutions. However, this number increased to around 103,854 by 2021. Unfortunately, in 2023, the number dropped to zero due to the Taliban's ban on female education (UNESCO 2023).

The Impact of the Taliban's Regained Control on the Education Sector and, With It, the Overall Society

The Taliban's return to power has had a devastating effect on education and society. The facts and analysis reveal that the restrictions have harmed schooling, especially for females, and within this frame, it also harmed girls from different angles. The following appear to be the worst effects of the Taliban's return to power on education and, with it, society.

First, the Taliban's assumption of power in Afghanistan has negatively impacted the educational system, particularly for female students who were studying at private institutions. The strict restrictions placed on the education of women and girls by the Taliban have resulted in a marked decrease in the student population to zero (Ahmadi 2022). The consequent lack of sufficient enrollment has caused the closure of over half of Afghanistan's private educational institutions. In addition, functioning private educational institutions are being compelled to revamp their curricula with a focus on religious topics, a shift that contradicts the educational goals and aspirations of female students who would have otherwise paid (in case of a no ban) to study science or social science subjects (Ahmadi 2022).

Second, the prohibition on education for female students beyond grade six and higher education has caused substantial emotional harm, including elevated levels of distress, depression, and anxiety (Neyazi et al. 2022). Several reports have shown that girls were left in tears after the Taliban's initial efforts to shut down schools for female students beyond grade six and openly pleaded for the schools to be reopened (Tu 2022). The evidence from multiple studies on the subject underscores the fact that the ban on education for girls has not only impeded their cognitive growth but has also caused substantial psychological harm in Afghanistan (Tharwani et al. 2023; Neyazi et al. 2022). It is indeed a sad and challenging reality to reside in a country where girls are not legally permitted to receive any form of offline education beyond grade six, making Afghanistan the only nation in the world with such restrictions (Akbari and True 2022; EFSAS 2022; Ahmadi 2022).

Third, the closure of the American University of Afghanistan for political reasons, one of the internationally accredited universities in Afghanistan¹⁴, and the bankruptcy of several other universities due to a decrease in enrollment numbers serve as solid evidence of the adverse effects of the ban on education for girls and limitations on education, the quality, and accessibility of higher Education in Afghanistan. It furthermore thwarts the educational initiatives by private institutions (EFSAS 2022; Ahmadi 2022).

Fourth, the discontinuation of research funding and projects for universities in Afghanistan, particularly in the crucial areas of agriculture, livestock, irrigation, and water management, is a critical issue that has far-reaching consequences. As a country characterized by its agrarian and mountainous terrain and the

¹⁴ Interview with one of the students of the American University of Afghanistan.

potential for food self-sufficiency, Afghanistan heavily depends on research in these areas for its food security, economic stability, and growth (EFSAS 2022; Ahmadi 2022).

Fifth, the recent review of university subjects and curriculum to adopt a so-called "Islamic" focus, and the removal of the fine arts faculty, including music courses and teachings, and cultural activities, hinder the growth and development of cultural, musical, and artistic expressions in Afghanistan (Ahmadi 2022). This is in stark contrast to the actions of previous leaders, such as Monarch Zahir Shah, President Daud Khan, and generally, the Communist regimes, who invested in and encouraged the growth of radio, cinema, and culture in the country. These recent changes are detrimental to the cultural heritage of Afghanistan.

Sixth, academic freedom is under threat in Afghanistan (Ahmadi 2022). The country's progress toward establishing free and uncensored educational institutions, where knowledge is shared, criticism is encouraged, and constructive recommendations are made, has been hindered by recent events. These events include the appointment of unqualified Talib militants to key positions, the censorship of libraries to eliminate materials critical of the Taliban, the closure of the political science department at Kabul University with a rich history of producing leaders and policymakers, and the cancellation of the master's program in international relations due reason of lack of professors/preceptors. These actions impede academic freedom, a cornerstone of democratic societies, and restrict the growth and development of higher education in Afghanistan.

Seventh, the restriction of women's participation in the education system beyond primary schools is a hindrance to their ability to contribute to the workforce as educators, administrators, researchers, managers, coaches, and female dormitory supervisors¹⁵ (Ahmadi 2022). This prohibition unfairly limits the potential of half of Afghanistan's population and perpetuates gender inequality in the workforce and society at large.

Eight, the evacuation flights started on August 15, 2021, have led to a mass departure of academics and scholars who studied abroad during the Republic, causing a significant brain drain in Afghanistan. This has been fueled by the departures of both male and female experts who studied abroad through scholarships or other educational opportunities or who worked on Western-funded projects. The loss of these experts at a time when Taliban-oriented individuals are prioritized over Western-educated ones has created a vacuum that cannot be filled by those who have decided to stay or who had no option to go abroad. This has resulted in a decline in the quality of education in the country, as teaching is no longer seen as a preferred profession, and people with insufficient levels of education and training are being recruited for teaching positions. This shortage of professionals, coupled with the lack of female teachers in rural areas, undermines the progress made in education efforts during the Republic. Additionally, those who are studying or planning to study abroad are less likely to return to Afghanistan, exacerbating the problem (Ahmadi 2022).

¹⁵ Interview with a former student of Kabul University, Online, January, 2023.

Ninth, in Afghanistan, the closure of schools and universities contributes to the increase in suicides, especially among females. Considering that 80% of all suicide attempts are made by girls and 95% of self-immolation casualties are females aged 14 to 19, action must be taken to address this problem (Tharwani et al. 2023). Girls are deprived of a critical source of support and chances for personal and social growth when schools and universities are closed for that age category, in a critical age where they need to learn about life management and combatting problems either through examples in textbooks or debates and discussions in the classroom or during the way toward home with friends. Inaccessibility to schools and social support would leave young girls feeling hopeless and alone (Tharwani et al. 2023). Suicide risk may increase under such conditions, especially in societies such as Afghanistan, where females face extra obstacles and restrictions. The closure of schools and universities, imposed by the government as a ban on education, undermines the government's duty to address the issue of rising suicides among girls. This ban restricts access to crucial resources and services that could help prevent suicide, such as community-based mental health programme and online psychosocial counseling (Tharwani et al. 2023). In rural areas, where women already face limited access to formal education, the ban on education makes it even harder for them to receive the support they need. The Taliban's harsh impositions further worsen the situation, making it more challenging to achieve the objectives of providing online education services and mitigating suicides (Tharwani et al. 2023).

Tenth, in Afghanistan's modern history, political transformations have usually been initiated and led by elites in urban areas who had far better opportunities to access modern education compared to those living in the periphery. The political elites usually attempted to transform society by embedding their political discourse in the education system and textbooks. The Taliban, however, presents an opposite case. The majority of the Taliban members have grown in Afghanistan's rural areas of the south and east as well as along the Afghan-Pakistani tribal region. The Taliban have *madrasa* education and no modern education. As a rural grown and *madrasa*-educated group, they want to transform the society, especially the urban regions, through an education system that comes in contradiction with the modern education the urban residents are used to. In other words, the Taliban want to dominate the rural social atmosphere over the urban one. A practice that is inconsistent with that of earlier administrations, in which they desired to dominate the urban social atmosphere over the rural environment. This transformational strategy places education at the forefront of pursuing this purpose. Hence, the decline of educational standards may complement this purpose.

Eleventh, the Taliban aim to gradually shift formal institutions towards informal ones, not through a formal policy or announcement, but at an implicit and localized level. This is demonstrated in the conversion of schools and learning centers into *madrasas* in several provinces of Afghanistan, which results in a change from a formal to an informal education and learning structure (Radio Azadi 2022). *madrasas* hold a significant place in the Taliban's ideology, as the word "Taliban" translates to "students of Madrasas." (Radio Azadi 2022)

Twelfth, the Taliban's ban on education and the reduction of women to second-class citizens perpetuates a negative image of Islam as a religion that denies women access to education and rights. Despite being widely criticized, this conservative viewpoint is not uncommon in today's international community. The

Taliban's claim that women's education is anti-Islamic and part of a "Western agenda" is a false representation at best (Misra 2023). In Islam, the significance of education and the pursuit of knowledge is emphasized by the first word of the initial verse revealed in the Quran, "*Iqra*," meaning "read." Islam has a long history of promoting knowledge, as demonstrated by numerous verses in the Quran emphasizing its importance. The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, not only emphasized the importance of knowledge through his teachings but also set a personal example by promoting education (Baryal, Mehraaen, and Patang 2022).

Thirteenth, education plays a critical role in addressing and preventing domestic violence, particularly for girls (Kovess-Masfety et al. 2023; Vale, Margolin, and Akbari 2023; Moorehead 2023). Not attending school is a major contributor to domestic violence, and providing education, especially to girls, is a crucial step in mitigating its impact. At the same time, attending school is essential for the mental health of all children, regardless of gender. Failing to prioritize education would have negative consequences on the mental well-being of the children, as well as the future of the country (Neyazi et al. 2022; Kovess-Masfety et al. 2023).

Fourteenth, a ban on female education goes against the fundamental principles of human rights. Education is recognized as a fundamental human right by international law, as stated in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The UDHR also recognizes that education is necessary for the full realization of other human rights and for the promotion of peace, well-being, and sustainable development (Bogaert 2022).

Fifteen, the Taliban's ban on girls' education in Afghanistan has the potential to cause significant adverse effects on the country's economy in the coming years. A recent study by UNICEF estimates the cost of this ban to be 5.4 billion US dollars, which represents a substantial loss of economic contribution that could have been made by Afghan women had they not been denied access to education. By denying girls the opportunity to gain knowledge and develop skills, the ban limits their economic potential and their ability to contribute to the growth and stability of their country. This underscores the importance of promoting access to education for all, especially for girls, in order to foster a more prosperous and sustainable future for Afghanistan and maintain the economic cycle of the country to benefit all stakeholders (Barlas, Sadiq, and Haidari 2022).

On another side, the Taliban's ban on girls' education in Afghanistan has spurred the development of innovative online education resources. The Afghan diaspora and foreigners (e.g., The Asia Foundation) have started to work on introducing secondary school subjects via mobile applications, such as the Noon¹⁶

¹⁶ Noon is an online educational platform established in 2018 to provide children in Afghanistan with access to quality education. The platform offers a centralized system for delivering the Afghan school curriculum in both Dari and Pashto to students throughout the country. The platform's course module is comprised of subject lessons divided into a series of video lectures with accompanying graphics and animations to aid in comprehension. Chapter texts from the corresponding textbook are also provided, and quizzes are available for assessment purposes. In addition to the course module, Noon has integrated various other modules into its application to enrich the learning experience. The discussion module enables teacher-student communication via a chatroom feature, allowing students to present queries that teachers can answer and explain. The homework/assignment module enables students to submit assignments and receive feedback from teachers. The student performance monitoring module is another core feature, enabling parents and guardians to engage in the educational process through parental accounts.

app, which records lessons from books for the entire curriculum and can be accessed online¹⁷. However, the main challenge remains access to the internet (Faqiryar 2021). Many Afghan households cannot afford to pay for internet access¹⁸, which presents a significant barrier to girls who wish to continue their education online and further their learning opportunities. Despite these challenges, the creation of these online resources offers a promising alternative for girls who have been denied access to in-person schooling and highlights the importance of ensuring affordable and equitable access to technology and the internet for all.

Such a discriminating decision regarding ignorance of the Afghan women and girls' education will negatively affect the success of the environment. It causes potentially disastrous consequences for Afghanistan. The country's future prosperity significantly depends on the education level of the population. The next Afghan generation will not be capable of taking part in the country's development while the education of half of the population, women, is banned. The Taliban have not only violated the fundamental rights of Afghan women and girls, but such a decision will escalate hostility, harassment, and violence towards women as well. Additionally, the female education ban significantly results in brain drain.

Following the events of August 2021, the need for online education has become more pressing. Recognizing this need, Noon began working on a new phase of development in June 2022, which included the creation of new Android and IOS applications. The new design and content provide additional features to enhance the educational experience for students.

¹⁷ Interview with Abdul Salam Faiq, Chief Technology Officer of Noon Digital Education. 02/27/2023. Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic.

¹⁸ Faiq, interview.

Taliban-led Curriculum Modification in Afghanistan; Examining the Impact on Close-Mindedness and the Emergence of Neo-Taliban Nation-Building

On 17 December 2022, the *Hasht-e Subh* daily newspaper (aka 8AM) published an exclusive report demonstrating the efforts of the Taliban either during the Doha agreement's negotiations period or following its endorsement of modifying the content of Afghanistan's school textbooks from grade one to twelve (*Hasht-e Subh Daily* 2022). According to the report presented on 20 December 2020 by the Taliban's assessment board for the modification of the education curriculum to the Taliban's Education and Higher Education Commission, it is conspicuous that the designated board to perform the curriculum evaluation had spent months presenting its recommendations and critics (*Hasht-e Subh Daily* 2022). Yet, the Doha agreement was signed between the United States of America and the Taliban on 29 February 2020 (Betz 2022).

Altering or modifying the school curriculum is not surprising when the regime changes in a country, either from a democratic to a despotic or vice versa. Nonetheless, the ambition behind the transformation could differ. To overlook, to underestimate, and to deny the power of textbooks in shaping society and detect of the form of a government would be a mere mistake, for an examination of the content of the textbooks reveals the extent to which a society is becoming nuanced objectively and the extent to which a regime is a democracy, tyranny, theocracy or else. In democratic regimes based on a non-politicizing policy of curriculum, ameliorating the curriculum serves to hone the students' abilities and skills toward open-mindedness, cultivate a critical and discerning stance towards novelty and instill an unbiased view of the past in order to do better in the future (Chun 2018; Curzer and Gottlieb 2019). However, the regimes pursuing to advance a particular political or religious doctrine, mold the school textbooks and curriculum to invent national and cultural identity, shape the nation's collective memory, engineer political socialization, foster an ascetic attitude towards life combined with patriotism, inculcate behavior patterns, specific kinds of dispositions, values and beliefs to support and maintain the regime or fight for it, disseminate fundamental and religious teachings or interpret scientific and non-scientific phenomena through a religious perspective (Alayan and Podeh 2018; Chun 2018; Mehran 1989; Cook 1999).

Furthermore, scholarly works on textbooks have drawn the attention to their numerous features, capabilities, and roles as a device for transmitting social, political, and religious values to students. It is more evident in conflict-ridden states where the regime instills its political and social agenda to legitimize or consolidate its social and political order. Textbooks and, in a broader sense, the curriculum holds a special role here because they are among the only widely available and extensively distributed forms of educational media in society, linking the school environment with the home environment and actively contributing to the implementation of the doctrine of the regime. But, in terms of design, the curriculum is there to function as an elevator for school students to learn the necessary skills and knowledge to shape their way of living systematically (Halinen 2018). Here arises the controversy between effective education, which is a non-politicized curriculum, and ineffective curriculum, which is a politicized curriculum.

Against this backdrop, in the 1980s, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) provided the University of Nebraska-Omaha and its Center for Afghanistan Studies with a budget of \$50 million from September 1986 to June 1994 to produce books that were deeply polarizing and anti-Soviet, with violent images and passages encouraging *Jihad* and terror as per combating Communism strategy of the United States (Davis 2002; Stephens and Ottaway 2002). This curriculum is known as the "J is for Jihad" curriculum and features politicized, Islamized, militarized, bigoted and fanatical genre of textbooks that were intended to indoctrinate those who study them (Sarvarzade and Wotipka 2017). A revision of the textbooks in the "J is for Jihad" curriculum was undertaken by the Mujahideen in 1991 due to the violent nature of their content, was completed in 1992, and involved the removal of images of militants from the textbooks. However, a large number of unrevised textbooks remained in circulation in Afghanistan even for a while after the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001 (Davis 2002).

The unrevised textbooks in the set "J is for Jihad" curriculum were initially intended for use by Afghan refugees in schools in Pakistan (Matsumoto 2011). However, with the help of regional military leaders, these textbooks were smuggled into Afghanistan from Pakistan and eventually disseminated throughout the entire country (Davis 2002). When the Taliban, as the successors of the Mujahideen, inherited the "J is for Jihad" curriculum, they made two changes to it. Firstly, they removed the images of human faces from the unrevised textbooks but left the rest of the content unchanged (Davis 2002). Secondly, they changed the name of the regime printed on the first page of the textbooks from the Islamic State of Afghanistan to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The Taliban were unable to revise the curriculum during their first administration because they were subject to severe sanctions and lacked the financial means and resources to attempt printing new textbooks at the time the country was still embroiled in a civil war, which prevented them from prioritizing curriculum modification. However, this was not the case when the Taliban were about to return to power for the second time. The official establishment of the Taliban's political office in Qatar in January 2012 granted them de facto legitimacy, a platform for communication and networking, and diplomatic privileges (Wolf 2016). The prolongation of negotiations between the United States, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (ignored as a signing party of the Doha agreement), and the Taliban, with back-and-forth meetings, inflexible positions, and entanglements, turned the Qatar station into a comfort zone for the Taliban. This comfort zone emboldened the Taliban to embark upon planning to bring changes according to their doctrine. Modifying the 2011-2014 (gradually prepared, printed, and distributed) Western-funded and backed school curriculum was one of the plans being considered by the Taliban (Hasht-e Subh Daily 2022). The 8AM¹⁹ newspaper revealed this intention in 2022, almost two years after the recommendations and critiques about the 2011-2014 curriculum were presented to the Taliban's body in charge of education and higher education before the signature of the Doha agreement.

Of these modification attempts in the curriculum, the Taliban's board of educational evaluation had agreed upon twelve principles as criteria, serving as the base for considerations, recommendations, critiques, and shortcomings associated with textbooks. This framework of twelve principles works as if the textbooks' content is in contrast with at least one, then a change to that contrasted content would be

¹⁹ Hasht-e Subh Daily

inevitable. Following are the twelve principles the Taliban used as criteria in the entire evaluation process. The textbooks would not tolerate 1) anti-Sharia notions, 2) immoral issues, 3) contradiction with Afghan traditions, 4) compliment of foreign cultures, 5) compliment of Western or Eastern individuals instead of Afghan forerunners, 6) anti-Islamic traditions and practices, including but not limited to music, television, and democracy, 7) contradictive notions against the independence of the country, 8) negation or disrespect to the national heroes, 9) Xenophilia and foreign individuals portrayed as heroes, 10) thinking of democracy and its norms as values, 11) negation of Afghanistan's geography and the geography of the Islamic world, and 12) negation of historical facts (Hasht-e Subh Daily 2022).

It is within the jurisdiction of a regime to establish a framework for textbooks and, more generally, to design the content of the curriculum. However, how curriculum design has been approached in some countries has varied. One approach to curriculum design involves the transfer of responsibility from a state body to an independent institution, or the complete absence of state involvement in the process, in order to adopt a bottom-up approach (Halinen 2018; Chun 2018). This approach (non-framed) allows a diverse group of actors, including teachers, students, experts, members of civil society, and scholars, to design a curriculum that aims to avoid nationalistic bias, include essential content in the textbooks, and "become objective classroom material that will help future generations become true global citizens." (Chun 2018, 16) Another approach to curriculum design involves the presence of the state in all levels of the process, but with a distinctive feature of presenting trajectories in a justified way from the state's perspective in relation to "others." Under this approach (framed), the state provides guidelines for textbook production but does not overstep its boundaries by attempting to indoctrinate or propagate an ideology or doctrine (Chun 2018; Alayan and Podeh 2018). The final approach to curriculum design involves the promotion of a state-led ideology or doctrine, which may be motivated by a religious, political, or social agenda. This approach (state-led) to curriculum design primarily cuts the ties of students with the broader world and current educational practices, leading to a lack of exposure to diverse perspectives and hindering their ability to access equal and high-quality education. It also promotes close-mindedness and exacerbates biased views within the society (Curzer and Gottlieb 2019).

It appears that the recommendations for curriculum modification proposed by the Taliban follow an approach characterized by total state intervention and a focus on state-centric priorities. The Taliban's board of evaluation, in the light of the 12 mentioned principles, identified and described 23 general issues in the curriculum that, according to them, are deemed problematic, misused or have associated issues, either conceptually or empirically. The categorization of the 23 general issues identified by the Taliban enables us to examine each of the raised issues from a broader perspective. Because of this, a synopsis of them opens the way for understanding the orientation of the type of curriculum they would like to attain, its source of origin, and the objective of such an endeavor. It is crucial to realize that, despite the following categories being established, the 23 identified general issues are deeply intertwined with one another, indicating weak editorial board knowledge to conceptualize their identified issues properly.

Under the category of "so-called 'Islamic-oriented' considerations" falls 1) lack of awareness of the significance of Islamic global geography, as well as its political and economic spheres, 2) incorrect description of *Jihad*, war and civil war, 3) celebration of un-Islamic holidays such as *Nawroz* and similar

events, 4) inclusion of information about other faiths such as Buddhism and Zoroastrianism or kinship ties to them, 5) incorrect introduction of the Buddha of Bamiyan as cultural and historical heritage, 6) incorrect and intentional introduction of the concept of 'equality,' 7) lack of consideration of natural disasters from an Islamic perspective, and 8) use of a Westernized definition of 'peace' and the misinterpretation of '*Jihad*.'

Considerations under the category of "alien values" fall the following 1) indoctrination and encouragement of alien cultures, personalities, and values while providing minimal information about Afghanistan and Islam, 2) use of a Westernized narrative of 'human rights,' 3) introduction of a Westernized definition of 'women's rights' that, unlike the Islamic definition, violates women's rights, and 4) propagation of women's education as an absolute right while failing to specify which subjects women are allowed to study.

Under the category of "Taliban-centric" falls 1) the marginalization of the history and progress of Islamic societies and whitewashing or ignoring Afghan personalities who made mistakes, 2) the provision of limited knowledge about independence and misleading information on the occupation of the country, 3) replacement of Republic's national anthem with the Taliban's, 4) mis-introduction of the concept of "terrorism" and linkage of it with Jihad-related operations, while failing to highlight who real terrorists are, and 5) limited information about all types of drugs, including the omission of wine as one.

Under the category of "political" falls 1) excessive efforts to cultivate nationalism and ethnocentrism through Pashto language textbooks while negating the concept of Islamic brotherhood., 2) the absence of mention of the brutal invasion of Afghanistan by the United States in Patriotism subjects, as well as the lack of inculcation of hatred toward the invaders, 3) lack of mention of the structure of an Islamic regime, but the inclusion of detailed information on republicanism, democracy, and the separation of powers, 4) information about the Westernized and Western-influenced constitutional law of Afghanistan, and 5) references to parliament and *Meshrano Jirga* (House of Elders) of Afghanistan (The Taliban's editorial board had failed in the original document to differentiate bodies of the National Assembly of Afghanistan) instead of '*Ahl al-Hall wa'l-'Aqd*' and '*Majlis ash-Shura*.'

Under the category of "artistic images and personalities" falls 1) portrayal of living or non-living objects that each exhibit characteristics of modern Western societies, 2) efforts to highlight non-Muslim scientists and scholars while neglecting Muslim ones, 3) textbooks with pictures that depict Western uniforms as representing progress while portraying Sharia-based clothing as inferior to Western clothing, and 4) portrayal of music instruments as means for their cultivation and regularization in society while ignoring the fact that they are considered haram and contradictory to Islam.

It is true that the 2011-2014 curriculum, which the West supported, has its own flaws, and to an extent, West-centric content is involved in it. History textbooks, especially those lessons that cover the country's history, have not been designed to help students understand the mistakes made in the past and what can be done to create a better future. The educational system lacked a structured framework or subject dedicated to physical development, with the emphasis instead placed on nurturing students

intellectually²⁰. While physical education was included in the curriculum (under the 'Sport' subject), schools were given the freedom to choose what activities to offer under this subject only for one or two classes in a week, which mostly involved some activities in passing the time based on the teacher's available equipment, interest, and expertise²¹. The textbooks contained limited sources, and social science narratives did not have adequate critiques. Additionally, the science-related textbooks had numerous illustrations drawn from Zambak Publishing's textbooks, which were previously used by the Afghan Turk schools affiliated with the Gulen Movement.

Donors have also consistently emphasized Western learning and teaching norms in Afghanistan's post-2001 textbooks (Jones 2007). However, the curriculum is not as heavily flawed as the Taliban claimed in light of their 12 principles. Although a team of UNICEF-contracted "parachute workers" was responsible for providing "advice," "assistance," and "support" to the Afghan Ministry of Education's Compilation and Translation Department (CTD) in order to improve their professional skills and encourage independence in textbook development (Woo and Simmons 2008). An example of the content of the textbooks aids in dealing with the Taliban's one-sided narrative description. In the History textbooks, Afghanistan's superiority in the face of colonialism is highlighted, while the West is portrayed and referred to in a derogatory manner. However, in the Civics textbooks, Western principles such as constitutional law, democracy, freedom of speech, mass media, gender inequality, and human rights are covered in detail from grades ten to twelve. The content of the Civics subject textbooks could be replaced with lessons that teach students about the rights of diverse citizens in Afghanistan and encourage them to understand and respect these individuals. So, a type of evaluation would be justified if one attempted to critically evaluate the 2011-2014 curriculum in order "to improve the joy and meaningfulness of learning and student agency, enhancing thinking and learning to learn as well as other transversal skills, and to support the development of schools as collaborative learning communities," or even instilling respect and understanding towards various ethnics, faiths, traditions, figures, personalities, symbols, languages, and minorities as proper means of nation-building (Halinen 2018, 76). However, the Taliban's approach seems to be diametrically opposed to the ground realities and necessity of curriculum modification in Afghanistan.

Taliban would want to erase all images from textbooks, but it is important for textbooks to contain images and pictures because they can significantly impact the learning process, stimulate creativity, and enhance the book's overall quality (Hasht-e Subh Daily 2022; Kasmaienezhadford, Pourrajab, and Rabbani 2015). When students are able to view visuals before reading a text, it can help them engage their imaginations more effectively. The combination of words and visuals is a powerful tool for making a lasting impression on children and students (Kasmaienezhadford, Pourrajab, and Rabbani 2015). However, Taliban 2.0²² has proposed removing all depictions of living things and pictures from textbooks, citing their belief that these elements are anti-Sharia. They have even suggested deleting human body models from biology textbooks.

²⁰ Interview with an expert, online on 01/08/2023.

²¹ Interview with superintendent of private school, Online, January, 2023.

²² Referring to the second rule of the Taliban over Afghanistan from 15 August 2021 to the Present.

In addition, using a strategy known as "differentiation," teachers adapt lessons to the specific learning requirements of each student in the classroom. This could be extraordinarily helpful in Afghanistan, where students may come from a wide range of cultural and educational backgrounds and varying degrees of previous knowledge and abilities. By using differentiation tactics, educators may provide every student, regardless of their unique characteristics, the chance to learn and develop to their full potential²³. Nowadays, in developed and developing countries classes are less about teachers lecturing and more about students actively engaging with the material via hands-on activities and group projects²⁴. Children in Afghanistan may benefit significantly from this kind of instruction since it emphasizes the development of 21st-century skills like critical thinking, problem-solving, and teamwork. Teachers in Afghanistan may better equip their students for success in today's complex and interconnected world by adopting and adapting 21st-century teaching and learning practices. But the Taliban want to replace the role of the teacher as a facilitator with that of a religious clerk, whose primary responsibility is to relate the subject matter to religion and follow the Taliban's guided philosophy in the classroom as part of the curriculum revisions they suggested.

Taliban are also laying the groundwork for gender apartheid in Afghanistan by changing the curriculum in accordance with the broad principles they have proposed. In the context of education, gender apartheid often implies that girls are refused access to school or are given a different, frequently poorer education than males (Schirmer 2015; Sehin, Coryell, and Stewart 2016). Gender apartheid is the practice of dividing or discriminating against individuals based on their gender. Taliban categorized as prohibited and unsuitable almost all content of textbooks that included women's rights, whether it was in reference to education, employment, travel, or anything else. Thus, the promotion of gender apartheid in textbooks in Afghanistan might develop into a significant problem with detrimental effects on women and girls. Taliban's anti-women ideas would be legitimized throughout the textbooks in the classroom and spread to the home.

Afghanistan's multi-religious background necessitates a curriculum promoting and endorsing Islamic and non-Islamic values. Notably, the promotion of those Islamic principles that are endorsed based on a moderate exegesis of the Quran and Sunnah, which represents a moderate, joyous, and open Islam. The same holds true for non-Islamic values in accordance with their religious foundations. One example of the diversity within Afghanistan is the settlement of Hindus and Sikhs, which illustrates the need for a comprehensive approach to curriculum revision that takes into account the country's heterogeneity. There were about ten thousand Hindu and Sikh religious minority families in Afghanistan, although none of the country's administrations have formally recognized all the rights of a Muslim citizen to them (Shayegan and Ammar 2016). Therefore, if one intends to eliminate religious discrimination and segregation, it could be achieved either through the inculcation of mutual understanding, respect, and knowledge of each other's similarities and differences, by the inclusion of related topics in textbooks and the implementation of equal recognition of rights throughout the political, legal, and social hierarchy. This is an area where the 2011-2014 curriculum from a textbook design analysis was unsuccessful, as there

²³ Interview with superintendent of private school, Online, January, 2023.

²⁴ Interview with a teacher of a private school, Online, January, 2023.

was ample opportunity for improvement in a particular subject of Civics. While the Civics subject textbooks portrayed Western-centric content rather than the country's diversity, other subjects also failed to depict and work toward the unity of ethnicities, minorities, and faiths. Moreover, due to the Islam's status as the state religion, small religious minorities like Sikhs and Hindus saw their beliefs and practices marginalized in the school curriculum (Sadr 2020). Eventually, the denial of minority rights would lead to prejudice and racial stereotyping because it closes the door to learning about and appreciating the opinions and peculiarities of others.

By excluding Afghanistan's diverse history and culture from the textbooks by each regime, students are denied the opportunity to learn uncensored and unbiased information about the country's history, its influential figures, and the symbols as means to represent the current geography of Afghanistan. It is important to recognize that the history of a country and its culture is a crucial part of education and understanding the world. Omitting or censoring certain aspects of a country's history can lead to a distorted understanding of the past and present. It is important for students to have access to a well-rounded and accurate education that includes a diverse range of perspectives and histories. As examples of violations and manipulation of the principle of providing a well-rounded education; in 2012, the Republic prohibited the entire history of the last 40 years from being taught in schools. The Republic further indoctrinated the so-called "fabricated" chain of events about the reign of Ahmad Shah-e Abdali (Sadr 2020). It also failed to teach students about figures who greatly influenced the spread of art in the country, such as Nainawaz (Fazel Ahmed Zekrya) and Ahmad Zahir, both of whom passed away under suspicious circumstances - the former executed by the Communist regime of Taraki by the 29th day of Ramadan before breaking his fast, and the latter passed away in a car accident toward the Salang Tunnel ("Nainawaz" 2022; Hasti TV 2020). Furthermore, the Republic largely failed to depict a nationalistic image of Buddha Statues, Kuchi livelihood, Rumi's or other scholar's contributions, or also the unique traditions, traits, and peculiarities of minorities, or other faiths such as Sikhs, Hindus, Jews, and Christians or else, as a means of mutual acceptance and understanding. Thus, instead of favoring one philosophy or religion over another, it is critical for the curriculum to acknowledge and celebrate a country's and its people's variety.

The Taliban intended to accomplish the exact opposite of what one would anticipate in a revision effort. Their plan to impose a fundamentalist Islam-centric curriculum, characterized by religious dogmatism and extreme intolerance for mutual acceptance, would result in close-mindedness and the creation of a rift between ethnicities, cultures and faiths with the potential to harm or mobilize against one another. This would be the case because it would not adhere to the standard curriculum objectives for an integrative pedagogical approach. Furthermore, it will not adhere to the 'value basis of education,' which defines what counts as essential knowledge and worthy to learn (Tikly and Barrett 2011). Given that each student comes from a unique background, the negation of the 'value basis of education' would result in the production of barbaric and uneducated individuals who do not value diversity and have no understanding of living sustainably (Robertson 2003). In the contemporary world, social and cultural systems are intertwined to the extent that makes it impossible for a person to stick to a set of pre-identified and pre-imposed cultural and social norms. Therefore, not being exposed to other philosophies, experiences, or

behaviors and attempts to instill students through a narrow and non-interactive curriculum would have negative consequences for their future development and the country's development.

There are five countries that have had most similar experiences in terms of education to what the Taliban intends to impose on Afghanistan. Pakistan, Somalia, Iran, Egypt and Saudi Arabia (Ghazinejad and Ruitenberg 2014; Park and Niyozov 2008; B. Rieffer-Flanagan 2022; Center for Religious Freedom 2008; Mwangi 2012; B. A. Rieffer-Flanagan 2016). Upon gaining power, pro-Islamic regimes or institutions in these countries have used education as a tool to Islamize the nation. Textbooks in the named countries often contain 'us' versus 'them' notions, hateful and violent content towards other faiths, and portray Islam in a hostile and stereotypical manner (Ghazinejad and Ruitenberg 2014; Park and Niyozov 2008; B. Rieffer-Flanagan 2022; Center for Religious Freedom 2008; Mwangi 2012; Chun 2018; B. A. Rieffer-Flanagan 2016; Oweidat 2022; Idoko 2023). The fundamental pro-Islamic policies and changes implemented in these countries are seen as a successful model by the Taliban²⁵, who seek to replicate the efforts to Islamize the nation and vast their own type of nation-building. Therefore, examining the contemporary situation in Afghanistan under Taliban dominance, the societal plights of the aforementioned countries, as well as the unfruitful impacts of their curricula on addressing social challenges, provide a clear understanding of the negative consequences that would result from Taliban-led curriculum changes in Afghanistan. Importantly, the process of Islamization of the curriculum in Pakistan, particularly under the leadership of General Zia, is viewed by the Taliban as a successful model to follow. This model allegedly appears logical for the Taliban to follow strongly because 1) their leaders lived in Pakistan and studied *Madrassa* in Pakistan under General Zia's imposed curriculum or educational system, which gives them a nostalgically positive impression, and 2) the Taliban believe that Afghan and Pakistani societies have commonalities and similar societal conditions, which make it feasible to copy and paste and endorse what was practiced in Pakistan.

Some examples of the changes that were made to the curriculum and system under General Zia's leadership, along with the impacts of those changes, can further illustrate this claim. The recognition of *Madrassa* certificates as equivalent to master's degrees led to a devaluation of the education system, as *Madrassas* are not held to the same academic standards as traditional schools and universities. The Islamization of the curriculum, including scientific subjects, resulted in a lack of critical thinking skills and a focus on rote memorization instead of understanding, analysis, and critique. The imposition of the Chadar on female students was seen as a form of oppression of non-Muslims. Arranging afternoon prayers during school hours disrupted the regular schedule and took away from educational time. The alteration of the definition of literacy to mean religious knowledge marginalized those who did not have religious knowledge and discriminated against non-Muslim students. Finally, the grant of extra marks to engineering school candidates who had memorized the Quran further marginalized those who did not have religious knowledge. These changes had a negative impact on the education system in Pakistan and could potentially have similar consequences in Afghanistan if implemented (Razzaque 2009; Nosheen 2019). In practice so far in Afghanistan, It has been stated by the acting minister of higher education of the Taliban that the academic degree of a Taliban member is determined by the number of bombs he has

²⁵ Interview with an expert, online on 01/08/2023.

placed. Additionally, the Taliban have gone beyond the restrictions imposed in Pakistan by banning education for girls above grade six and completely shutting down higher education and work for women in Afghanistan (Noori 2022). In the city of Gujrat, it has been observed that the onset of puberty and the distance to school significantly decrease girls' enrollment and attendance. The Taliban, up to date, only cited the girl's uniform as being un-Islamic and the education as secondary and above against culture, plus contradictory with Sharia as the justification for their ban on both secondary schools and above and universities (Bhatty 1998). Yet, the role of puberty age and distance from school is not mentioned as a justification for this decision yet.

In this context, the article aims to illustrate how the Taliban-led textbooks would serve as an instrument for neo-Taliban nation-building that promotes closed-mindedness, terror, hostility, and segregation on the way to assimilation in Afghan society.

Neo-Taliban nation-building

Nation-building as "an intergenerational project" "pursued by state leaders, intellectuals, educators, and others who try to give a state the qualities of a nation-state." (Bauböck 2003, 718; Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008, 484) The goal of nation-building is to foster a feeling of unity among the people and to make them feel as if they only belong to the state in which they now reside. In addition to that, in order to build a nation, one must also both establish new institutions of government and strengthen those that already exist (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008). There are "hard" and "soft" components to building a nation. Part of the hard side is laying the groundwork for a stable and functional government, including the institutions necessary to manage the economy, maintain order, and protect its citizens. The soft side entails using state-sponsored education, propaganda, ideology, and symbols to foster a feeling of national identity and cohesiveness among a country's citizens. Both are necessary for the development of a solid and stable nation-state (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008).

In the context of Afghanistan, nation-building has been linked with efforts to promote Islam or de-emphasize Islam in the country's state, society, and culture (Akhlaiq 2022). This has been seen in the various ideologies and policies of different governments and groups in Afghanistan over the years. The curriculum is one of the areas that is significantly impacted by these efforts, and changes are made to it based on the doctrine of the time's ruling state or leader (Akhlaiq 2022; Samady 2001a). Amir Abdul Rahman Khan pushed educational reform in order to attain intellectual hegemony for his interpretation of Islam (Akhlaiq 2022). The Habibiyya, the first modern school in Afghanistan, was established by King Habibullah, who also hired Muslim Indian teachers from outside the country. His intention was to establish strong national institutions that would prevent Afghans from having to go over the border to pursue their education as part of the Afghan modernism project (Green 2011). Under the reign of Amanullah Khan, "to a very large extent education was secularized." (Khan 1932, 464) Education was turned over to religious authorities by Habibullah Kalakani, who also outlawed education for women (Saba and Sulehria 2017). Nadir Shah reopened schools, and his son Zahir Shah, followed by his successor Daud Khan, promoted the modernization of education and significantly expanded access to education in rural and urban areas (Dupree 1973; Matsumoto 2011). The traditional and cultural components of the school curriculum were

altered by the communist rule in the 1980s, reflecting the political and cultural stance of the new administration (Samady 2001, 12). Education was utilized as a 'weapon' by both the communist regime and the opposition Mujahideen. The communist government's attempts to 'enlighten' Afghan society by imposing Marxist doctrine via mass education stoked unrest among the country's citizens. During Mujahideen's leadership, a new generation was educated with textbooks that instilled Islamic militantism and equipped them to wage *Jihad* against Soviet might. Violent pictures were used in communist government textbooks to promote the battle against Mujahideen, described as "agents of colonialism and Western oppression." (Matsumoto 2008; Davis 2002, 91) Taliban 1.0²⁶ inherited these violent textbooks from Mujahideen. The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan made attempts to modernize education through temporary and then later revised curricula, but these efforts are in the process of halting according to the leaked proposal by Taliban 2.0²⁷, aiming to revert to a more fundamental Islam, state-led curriculum.

A consensus of scholars argues that, in Afghanistan's recent history, education has often had a negative side, serving primarily to inflame conflict rather than to reduce or stop it (e.g., Matsumoto 2011; Akhlaq 2022). Because ideological conflicts between modernism, communism, Islamism, and fundamentalism have long been waged in the educational system, and as a result, Afghanistan's society has become more divided (Matsumoto 2008). The situation would become tenser when education, as a soft aspect of nation-building, would actually get misused as an instrument for an unpragmatic nation-building process. The intentional and incorrect use of that "destroys the traditional social bonds of the extended family, the clan or the ethnic group and institutes a direct relationship between individuals and the nation-state, a process that often eventually leads to conflict." (Matsumoto 2008, 66) It would also create hate towards the homeland and the citizens of different ideas by individuals. Using education and textbooks for nation-building with incorrect or inappropriate materials can have detrimental consequences. It may create a false sense of national identity and fake history, causing misunderstandings and conflicts within the nation. It could also lead to a society that is closed-minded and intolerant of diverse perspectives, resulting in increased polarization and social unrest, as well as a lack of critical thinking skills and the ability to engage in constructive dialogue. The use of education and textbooks for propaganda can also negatively impact the quality of education overall and discourage people from seeking further learning. Furthermore, when teachers are expected to act as religious clerks/officials in the school, it ultimately shifts the focus of the educational system away from formal to informal and from modern teaching and learning methods, such as differentiation, inquiry-based learning, project-based learning, problem-based learning, flipped classrooms, gamification, collaborative learning, blended learning, and more importantly co-education.

Notwithstanding, "encouraging Afghans to learn, to question, and to be practical, can improve their agency with regards to nation-building." (Akhlaq 2022, 71) Thus, this paper claims that by biased and unprofessional curriculum modification, the Afghan conflict would be further fueled through neo-Taliban nation-building that would firstly empower the notion of "us" versus "them" as enemies, deepening the conflict between 'traditionists' versus 'modernists' in person and in media, and immensely cuts the representation of all those who have the right to be represented and voices to be heard among all

²⁶ Referring to the first rule of the Taliban over Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001.

²⁷ Referring to the second rule of the Taliban over Afghanistan from 15 August 2021 to the Present.

stakeholders of the nation-state named Afghanistan. Importantly, it would create a generation of narrow-minded individuals willing to die for the sake of others, just as it did during Mujahideen's experience. Recruitment for terror and horror would be achieved easily as this type of nation-building through textbooks as its component could create feelings of resentment and radicalization among some members of the population, making them more susceptible to recruitment by militant groups. For the last claim, the Taliban's potential influence over the Afghan education system and textbooks have severe implications for the country's heterogeneous cultural population. This would prevent stakeholders from voicing their opinions and prevent them from showing their true identities. We no longer have a functioning civil society. Almost all Hindus and Sikhs left the country because they felt their safety and civil liberties were being threatened. Half of Afghanistan's population is female; however, they are not allowed to get an education or a job. One day, when the textbooks are updated, the reasoning for this and similar prohibitions may make it into classrooms. As time goes on, textbooks will be employed to disseminate fabricated and biased rationales. Textbooks would then be used to justify these rationales, related actions, and ideas imposed on any stakeholder in the nation-state based on numerous religious justifications that are false, disputed, and debatable.

Conclusion

During its modern nation-statehood, Afghanistan has its education system divided into ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ education categories. Both systems have been experiencing vicissitude due to the pursuit of the state- or ruler-led policies on Islamization or de-Islamization of education or pursuant of specific political agendas/doctrine. The ‘informal’ institutions are the non-state and traditional ones, such as *madrasas*, mosques, and homes. The ‘formal’ institutions are modern or state-run schools and universities. With the United States and its allies' intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, which led to the overthrow of the Taliban in the late 2001, a new chapter in the fluctuation within Afghanistan's educational categories was opened. Due to the years of civil war blocking the path to education for both men and women and the country's large number of illiterates, this intervention prepared the way for a rule in which education was given particular attention.

In the aftermath of the Taliban's withdrawal from power, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was established as a democratic regime, which was short-lived, lasted for twenty years, and was toppled by the Taliban. This research was conducted using a mixed-method approach due to the lack of research on the fluctuation of education during the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the pressing necessity to analyze the present situation of education under the second reign of the Taliban.

The results of the research show that the Islamic Republic, with the assistance of both Afghan and foreign professionals, developed plans to enhance education in the country, particularly concerning the production of strategic documents. These initiatives led to the creation of updated and improved textbooks with better quality and content compared to previous versions. However, despite these efforts, various challenges hindered progress toward the motivation of better education. These challenges included insecurity caused by the Taliban-ISIS-K nexus, cultural barriers stemming from certain family beliefs in some provinces, scarcity and plundering of resources, and excessive corruption, both disclosed and undisclosed, all of which slowed down progress in the education sector. The study's analysis indicates that due to the Taliban's reemergence to power through the Doha agreement with the United States and the imposition of restrictive measures on education, girls and women are primarily affected, and the entire Afghan community suffers as well. It is uncertain and could be examined whether the United States had no reason to assume that the Taliban would not respect its promises, commitments and violate the implementation of the agreement, *inter alia* as far as respecting the right to education.

The research proposed three different theoretical approaches (non-framed, framed, and state-led) to curriculum and textbook design while also exploring the typical methods employed by a government when implementing one of such approaches. Furthermore, by examining the Taliban's curriculum and textbook modification plan (categorized as a ‘state-led’ approach) and analyzing the Taliban's proposed changes to the curriculum and textbooks, the study shows that the Taliban's modifications of textbooks and curriculum promote hostility, intolerance, close-mindedness, and irrational justifications, which are being instilled in the minds of Afghan students, and transmitted from classrooms to homes. Additionally, the study discovered that the total number of female students who are unable to attend school, encompassing the 12th-grade students of 2022 and all 2023 secondary school girls, is estimated to be around 2.6 million.

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درخت تو گر بار دانش بگیری به زیر آوری چرخ نیلوفری را

-ناصر خسرو-

By acquiring knowledge, you can go beyond the sky and conquer it;

It is knowledge and science as part of it that gives you the power and brings the time and world under your command.