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*Trajectories of public and private education in  
Afghanistan and its gendered impacts'*

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## **Introduction**

When Afghanistan’s Taliban caretaker government announced that young women and girls would be allowed to continue their education, the world seemed prepared to hope that this time the Taliban would deviate from the strict education ban they enforced while ruling the country for the first time from 1996 - 2001 (Knipp, 2022). However, a year after the takeover, the international interest in the situation in Afghanistan has faded, just as the promises made by the Taliban. Afghanistan is currently the only country in the world depriving women and girls from getting an education, as pointed out in an open letter by Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai in September 2021 (Psaledakis, 2021).

While this does not come as a huge surprise to many close observers and analysts, the so-called “U-turn” on the promise to allow teenage girls return to secondary school further restricts the already limited possibility of Western governments to negotiate with the Taliban which leads to multiple dilemmas. On the one hand, the leverage that is granted to the Taliban by inviting them to negotiations results in powerful images of Talibs on private jets that are used to boost their claim of legitimacy in Afghanistan. On the other hand, there are 40 million Afghan civilians, looking to the West for action while facing starvation, for which some form of engagement with the Taliban will be necessary.

Turning away from this more general discussion about the necessity and possible forms of engagement with the Taliban - that is however ultimately deeply entrenched with girls’ education - this article attempts to analyze and anticipate lines of development in relation to public and private education in Afghanistan. This examination highlights the securitization of the Afghan educational sector by spotlighting possible long-term trajectories of educational bodies, especially in times of social and military conflict. To this end, the Taliban’s (previous and current) educational policies are analyzed by means of a feminist institutional lens in order A) to shed light on the interaction between formal and informal institutions and the gendered way in which they shape political and social outcomes (Kenny, 2013) and B) to understand the Taliban’s reasons for a highly securitized educational sector that is based on the exclusion of women. As a next step, future trajectories and opportunities for international actors to not completely give up its remaining leverage on a deprived Afghan nation are discussed. In this context it becomes clear that (public and private) educational bodies are a key factor in shaping the social and political deposition of a country and play a vital role in developing a State by means of knowledge production and capacity-building.

## Trajectories of education in Afghanistan

Educational bodies in Afghanistan have long been inherently political institutions that have existed in a field of tension between a conservative interpretation of religion and progressive aspirations for more female participation and gender justice. Sustained conflict and wars have had a devastating impact on the educational landscape of the country, the higher education system being one of the casualties of more than three decades of war. While this submission focuses mostly on the younger Afghan history and the Taliban's educational policy with regard to women's and girl's right to education, it is important to note that prior to the decades of war, women's status saw a steady progressions and gradual improvement throughout the 20th century. This progress included access to education for women. In this regard, important modernization reforms were pursued under Amir Habibullah Khan (1901- 1919), who introduced modern education to Kabul, and subsequently under King Amanullah Khan (1919- 1929), who established links to European education by sending students abroad and began to educate women. He reportedly drew his inspiration from the Turkish modernization under Kemal Ataturk, although many of Amanullah Khan's reforms were met with strong opposition from tribal leaders (Gopalakrishnan, 2022). Goodson (2001) points out that from the 1950's onwards, women in Afghanistan were educated in large numbers and joined teaching as well as medical professions: *"Especially in Kabul, [women] were able to work in government offices, drop the veil (after 1959) and run for public office (from 1965). These freedoms continued under the leftist nationalist government of Mohammad Daoud (1973–1978)"*. In the 1970s, the demand for women in the workforce was high and education was made compulsory.

During the time of the Soviet Invasion (1979-1989), women in large government-controlled cities like Kandahar, Herat, Jalalabad and Mazar-i-Sharif enjoyed great freedom, working in all professional sectors and even holding high-ranking government positions. In 1990, 60% of the 10,000 Kabul university students were female, and girls accounted for about one third of the primary pupils on the local level (Lemar-Aftaab, 2004). However, the majority of Afghan women were deprived of education and lived in contested rural areas or were driven into exile as refugees (Goodson, 2001).

In parallel, Islamic religious seminaries (Madrassas) in Pakistan offered young Pakistani men as well as refugees from Afghanistan free access to food, shelter and military training. The religious education in Madrassas often followed an extreme interpretation of Deobandism, a branch of Sunni Islam that promotes restrictive views about the role of women. Refugee camps thereby became fertile ground for Islamist ideologies, as Goodson (2001) explains:

*"The camps also bred a new generation of Afghan fighters, who came of age in a drastically altered society, where women's status and control over women's behaviour and activities became symbols of the differences between the Communist governments and their mujahideen opponents. Caught in a society undergoing rapid transformation, many young boys failed to learn the traditional balance that existed among rural Afghans in their attitudes toward women—that women were to be controlled, but also respected"*.

The indoctrination of boys and young men in Madrassas through ideological-religious education can thus be seen as the foundation for later developments and as a decisive turning point with regard to women's right to education in Afghanistan. While the withdrawal of the Soviet Union in 1989 led to a sharp decline in U.S. aid to Afghan factions in Pakistan, financial flows from Saudi Arabia increased. These funds were invested in the construction of a large additional number of Madrassas, particularly concentrated in the borderland areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan (Lemar-Aftaab, 2004). As a consequence, religious education for boys remained the priority also throughout the time of the Afghan Civil War (1992–1996).

Moreover, what followed from the periods of war was an “exodus of more than half of [Afghanistan's] faculty members, both local and foreign, with many of the most productive among those who were lost.” (Babury & Hayward, 2014) The ongoing conflict and the primacy of religious education have thus not only dramatically affected the quality of primary, secondary and higher education, but have also brought knowledge production in Afghanistan to a virtual standstill. With regard to faculty research, Babury and Hayward (2014) have pointed out:

*“Faculty research was among the strong points during the early years of higher education in Afghanistan with many important works produced, some of which were particularly valuable for Afghan development. These included many pioneering works on irrigation and dam projects as well as important research in agriculture. However, years of war have left research as the weakest area in higher education”.*

When the Taliban first came to power in 1996, it also meant that graduates of Pakistan's Deobandi Madrassas had succeeded to occupy the most high-ranking positions, as well as at least eight ministerial posts (Rashid, 1999). Girls and women were not allowed as students in school, in higher education institutions, and moreover excluded from faculty positions and most employments (Babury & Hayward, 2014). Throughout the first Taliban regime (1996- 2001), textbooks and the educational curriculum were used as instruments to spread a religious ideology that is massively gendered and ultimately resulted in the systematic erasure of women from public life.

### **Educational policy 2001-2021**

Reconstruction efforts after the fall of the first Taliban regime have led to considerable improvements with regard to the provision of (public and private) education in Afghanistan.

In 2001, schools and universities were reopened to women under the Karzai government, and the Afghan Ministry of Education, together with different UN bodies (UNESCO's International Bureau of Education and UNICEF), started developing a new general education curriculum in 2002 (UNESCO, 2011). Foreign aid from countries such as France, Germany, the United States, Russia, Japan, Norway, and other countries have massively fostered these efforts, to the extent that about 100 foreign academics were teaching in Afghan universities (Babury & Hayward, 2014). Additionally, legislative and policy-making approaches have contributed to a

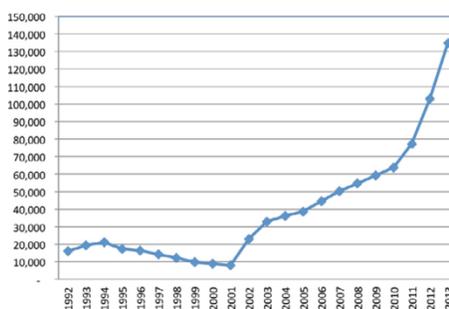
substantive change in Afghanistan’s educational landscape. Article 43 of the 2004 Constitution of Afghanistan established education as basic right of all Afghan citizens and further stipulated that free education shall be provided up to an undergraduate B.A. level (UNESCO, 2011), which resulted in a rising number of students and a more equal access to education for women and girls. Moreover, the 2008 Education Law aimed to promote and develop “*universal, balanced and equitable education*” (UNESCO, 2011) while protecting women’s rights and eliminating discrimination, amongst others by mandating compulsory intermediate education until grade nine.

In view of the rapidly increasing demand for educational facilities for primary, secondary and tertiary education, the capacities of the public sector quickly reached its limits. As a report of the Afghanistan Analysts Network points out: “*Following the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001, the education sector in Afghanistan experienced the most dramatic expansion of its history*” and as a result “*the education system has been struggling to cope with the exponential rise in demand for education at all levels*” (Ibrahimi, 2014). Therefore, particularly large investments have been made in the private education sector. To satisfy the demand, private actors have accounted for a large share of the educational sector’s growth, in what has been characterized as an “*explosion*” of private education in Afghanistan (World Education Services, 2016).

#### ▪ *The rise of the private education sector*

The lack of State capacity to meet the newly established educational policies opened opportunities for private providers of higher education - many of them working for profit - to fill the institutional gaps. At the time of the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan had around 120 private universities. Figure 1 shows the numerical growth of students enrolled in Afghanistan’s public universities and higher education institutions and illustrates dramatic increase from 7,800 students in 2001 to 152,000 students in 2015, whereby a large proportion was accounted for by private institutions (World Education Services, 2016).

Figure 1 Enrollment at Public Universities and Higher Education Institutions 1992–2013



Source: Ministry of Higher Education data 1992–2013

Source: Babury and Hayward (2014)

The divergence between demand and capacity posed significant challenges to quality assurance of higher education. Private universities did not require students to take the national university entrance exam (Kankor exam), and therefore attracted less well-educated applicants who regarded private higher education as an alternative. In addition, the accreditation system for private institutions had not been properly implemented due to a lack of government capacity and resources, allowing for private institutes to run as extensions political and religious patronage networks. Ibrahimi concluded in a 2014 report that the “Afghan government lack[ed] both the material and human resources and a longterm strategic vision to effectively regulate the sector”.

#### ▪ *Women and (higher) education*

Despite private institutions being at the center of challenges for higher education in Afghanistan, the provision of (primary, secondary and tertiary) education for women and men was seen as a major achievement of the past two decades. The improved access to education was amongst others reflected in adult and youth literacy rates: While only 27% of Afghan men and 5.6% of Afghan women were estimated to be literate in 2001, this rate increased substantially to 55% for men and 29.8% for women by 2020 (The New Humanitarian, 2001; UNESCO UIL, 2020). Among youth, literacy rates were even higher: In 2020, 65% of youth (ages 15-24) could read and write (UNESCO UIL, 2020).

Despite rising numbers of women in schools and universities, it must be mentioned that Afghanistan has remained one of the countries with the biggest gender gap in education (Bartha, 2022). Figure 2 shows that while the number of female students in higher education has increased by 28,5% between 2008 and 2013 alone, women only accounted for 19,6% of students in total, indicating room for improvement.

Figure 2 Female Students in Higher Education: 2008–2013 (number and percentage)

Year	Students					
	Total students	Percent increase	Number female	Increase no. women	Percent female of total	Percent increase female
2008	54,683		9,991		18.3%	
2009*	59,260	8.4%	11,228	1,237	18.9%	12.4%
2010	63,837	7.7%	12,465	1,237	19.5%	11.0%
2011	77,336	21.1%	15,025	2,560	19.4%	20.5%
2012	101,000	30.6%	19,215	4,190	19.0%	27.9%
2013	130,195	28.5%	25,510	6,295	19.6%	32.8%

\*Note: 2009 data are estimates.  
Source: Ministry of Higher Education data 2008–2013

Source: Babury and Hayward (2014)

However, all positive trends and development of the education sector in Afghanistan came to an abrupt end when the Taliban seized power in August 2021. While the consequences remain volatile and circumstances can be subject to change on a daily basis, one trend is foreseeable:

Against the will of Afghan civilians, of which 87% were in favor of gender equality in education (Dreikhausen & Gaub, 2022), the Taliban do not plan to provide women and girls with the same education as men and boys and continue their crackdown on women's rights.

### **Education in Afghanistan post-Taliban-takeover**

When the Taliban took over Afghanistan in mid-August 2021, speculations about their current stance on women's rights were widely discussed in the media, and the notion of a possibly reformed "*Taliban 2.0*" gained momentum. However, speculations about more moderate positions on women's rights were quickly dismissed by the Taliban's actions.

Girls have been banned from higher education (beyond middle school grade 6) in most parts of the country, with the Taliban initially citing security concerns. Current acting Minister for Education of Afghanistan Noorullah Munir stated in October 2021 that women and girls will be allowed to continue their studies in accordance with Sharia law, and that contents and subjects in contradiction to Islamic law - such as music - will be replaced (MEMRI TV, 2021). Despite repeated reassurances that girls would be allowed to go back to the classroom in the beginning of the new school year in March 2022, the Taliban have reversed the decision in what appears to be a last minute win by hard-line leaders of the Taliban (Gannon, 2022a; Kugelman, 2022). When many universities reopened in the beginning of 2022, inconsistent edicts on education have led to anger and confusion, and issues such as gender segregation and a curriculum in accordance with Sharia law have come under discussion. Notably, the ban for women from secondary and higher education disrupts previous efforts of the Taliban to gain recognition from potential international donors and is thus a crucial endeavor in Taliban operations.

The current state of public and private education in Afghanistan, like the country in general, is in crisis. Due to the severe economic situation, many parents are unable to provide sufficient food for their children, and much less to pay the tuition fees for their education. Consequently, many Afghans students rely on free educational offers. In the face of the humanitarian crisis, the United Nations children's agency UNICEF has paid the salaries of around 194,000 public primary and secondary school teachers with funds from the European Union in order to uphold operations at least in part (Reuters, 2022). While private schools and universities have continued their operations in Kabul, private education centers outside the capital struggle with a collapsing economy. Many students who previously prepared for the national university entrance examination in private education centers have stopped attending classes following the closure of public universities. The mandatory separation of boys and girls in classes, paired with a lack of female teachers and insecurities about the restrictions on education for women and girls have drastically decreased the number of students and consequently forced over half of Afghanistan's private education centers to close since the Taliban takeover. Reports from Herat state that only 70 out of 200 education centers are still operational, while the number of students dropped from 50.000 to 15.000 students (Salaam Times, 2022). The remaining private institutions are pressured to alter

their curriculum and focus on religious subjects, restrictions that are particularly discouraging for female students.

What becomes clear is that the Taliban's educational policies have serious short-term implications for children who are stuck at home and unable to receive the necessary education to build a future for Afghanistan. The country is in crisis, parents can no longer afford tuition fees for their children and many private education centers were forced to close. This further contributes to the already high unemployment and exacerbates economic meltdown. Additionally, the Taliban have quickly begun to dismantle the educational achievements made in the last two decades and are thereby risking a similar setback to the 1990s.

### **The ban on education of women**

Contrary to promises and repeated reassurances made by the Taliban, girls above grade six were not allowed to return to their classrooms in the beginning of the new school year in March 2022 in a decision that has reportedly surprised schools as well as the Ministry of Education itself. Following a statement that urged all students to return to school, the ruling has allegedly been a result of a last-minute senior Taliban meeting in Kandahar ordered by the movement's leader Haibatullah Akhunzada in an attempt to appease the ultraconservative faction of the organization (Gannon, 2022a; Kugelman, 2022). As mentioned earlier, this hard-line approach to women's education similar to the 1990s prevents rapprochement with international donors who could provide the much-needed humanitarian- as well as financial aid.

Almost ironically, women - who have such a low status in the Taliban's view - are thereby becoming one of the biggest issues of contention between hard-line tribal leaders and more moderate figures within the Taliban. The latter caused ridicule with the fact that they send their daughters abroad for education (Gupta, 2022; Wallen, 2022), and some observers posit that Taliban leaders see the need to moderate their stance on women, but are discouraged by a possible loss of hard-line supporters, their crucial base of support. This raises the question of why women's rights are so strongly securitized by the Taliban, which brings us back more than two decades ago, when Goodson (2001) offered an interesting explanation for the high importance of Taliban policy toward women that is still highly relevant today:

*“[T]hey have virtually no other policy. They have few able administrators, a tiny budget, no industry and a single-crop agricultural economy. [...] The only policies they can introduce, then, are regulatory and symbolic outgrowths of their Islamist identity. The Taliban have virtually no program with regard to more traditional areas of social policy, such as public health, infrastructure reconstruction, and education”.*

The regulation of women's bodies and rights also continues with a newly introduced decree that has amplified the desolate decision-making structures of the Taliban. On May 7th, Taliban ministry spokesperson Akif Muhajir announced that women are required to mask their face, except for the eyes (Devdiscourse, 2022). He is speaking on behalf of the Afghan Ministry for Promotion

of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, the ministry that has replaced the Afghan Ministry of Women's Affairs quickly after the Taliban takeover last August. It was further announced that women and girls should not leave their homes unless necessary, and the ministry established possible punishments for male chaperones in case the decree is breached (Human Rights Watch, 2022). In contradiction to these announcements, the Taliban's official spokesperson Suhail Shaheen stated in an interview with the BBC that women solely have to wear a traditional hijab to cover their head. These contradictory statements illustrate the discord of the Taliban, which on the one hand rely on the symbolic regulation of women's rights and bodies as almost the only sign of power, and on the other hand are in urgent need of international aid funds.

In turn, this means that the international community still has limited leverage to pursue the Taliban to reform their policies on women.

## **Conclusion**

This article has taken a closer look at the development and state of public and private education in Afghanistan. Building on what happened to the Afghan education system as a result of sustained conflict and war in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it must be noted that education is in fact to some extent the cause of the current situation: The religious education, or rather indoctrination, in Madrassas has sowed the seeds for sustained extremism not only in Afghanistan, but in the region as a whole.

After the fall of the first Taliban regime, a public education system was slowly re-established, giving more young people access to education. Due to a lack of State resources, the private sector became a crucial pillar in the Afghan education system, and the demand for education was (and remains) extremely high. The development of this sector and the educated people it produced were seen as a crucial engine for Afghanistan's future development, an engine that was abruptly thwarted by the Taliban takeover.

In particular, the Taliban leadership is causing multiple insecurities for women, with gender as highly relevant in the production of (in)security. First and foremost, the ban on education for women shows how formal institutions, in this case public and private education institutions, are being instrumentalized to produce gendered outcomes and to systematically discriminate against women and girls. However, beyond the immediate horrendous consequences for women and girls, this ban gives closer insight in the anatomy of the second Taliban regime. Bearing in mind the state of the country and the multiple conflict hotspots (most notably against the Panjshir Resistance and the Islamic State), as well as the dire need for international support, the Taliban has risked revealing its divisions over the question of women's education. The outwardly visible disunity has confirmed analysts' conjectures about increasing divisions within the Taliban ranks, with the hard-liners keeping the upper hand (Gannon, 2022b).

The issue of women's rights in society, and in particular the issue of education for girls, is probably the most obvious divide that runs through the Taliban regime. The Taliban has

understood that education is powerful, which is exactly why the education of women is so dangerous for the organization. Currently, the Taliban is neither able to guarantee security, nor to address the economic crisis and ensuing poverty and hunger. What remains is highly symbolic policy-making focused on women's bodies and rights, the only area in which they can supposedly exercise power without any legitimacy and financial resources. The securitization of the educational sector and in particular with regard to women and girls' access is thus necessary for the Taliban's Islamist identity.

Aside from the drastic short-term consequences felt by Afghan civilians, the developments in the educational sector will affect the country in the long-term. The collapse of the private educational sector will lead to further unemployment and worsen economic crisis in what can only be characterized as a vicious cycle. Poverty and hunger often force (educated) Afghans to flee the country, with brain drain further mitigating the countries' chances for the desperately needed development. Recent numbers show that half of the Afghan population experience "*high levels of acute food insecurity*" (UN News, 2022). The Taliban is clearly unable to govern the country and has begun a return to familiar decrees and policies of the 1990s. Nonetheless, the international community must continue to find spaces to support Afghan civilians, many of them working relentlessly to build the country. Although imperfect, private education has proven extremely powerful in the developments post-2001, and private initiatives continue to bring education to war-torn communities and strive to improve people's lives by means of education. These initiatives need financial support, and countries must continue to use the remaining leverage to convince the Taliban to pursue reforms, while simultaneously providing resources and support to (private) education campaigns.

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