



Cultivating Visible Invisibility for Afghan Women through Online Education

For Rahela Trust by Dr. Marissa Quie & Rahela Sidiqi

In August 2021 the Taliban swept to power in Afghanistan recreating their version of an Islamic emirate. The hallmark of the new regime is the violent repression of women particularly in terms of education. Education is a training ground for leaders and a loadstone for domination. The Taliban have reduced teacher training, transformed many secular schools into madrassas and reneged on promises to allow girls to attend secondary school in most provinces. Women are generally banned from paid employment and participation in government. They are essentially silenced. The costs to human capital, growth, productivity, and mental health are incalculable. The right to education is recognised in international law and policy as a ‘multiplier right’ that improves health, socioeconomic, political and cultural development. It is central to sustainable development. This research explores pathways forward focusing on “visible invisibility” through remote education for women. It investigates how women can be educated, enabled, and empowered under the current conditions. Crucially, we probe a programme for action to help safeguard women falling behind, uncovering opportunities for distance mentoring in education and in medicine and business and vocational work. Finally, we ask how carefully targeted partnerships can constructively encourage more egalitarian trajectories in the future.

In the course of little more than a year, the Taliban have annihilated the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan. They have reneged on promises made in the negotiations which led to the 2020 [Doha Agreement](#). Education was central to these commitments, and it was framed as ‘the basic right of *all Afghans*’. After retaking power, the Taliban reinforced this message, publicly stating that they would permit women to be active in society through education, work, and freedom of movement. Zabiullah Mujahid, the Taliban spokesperson eloquently declared, ‘our sisters and our men have the same rights’ (<https://www.hrw.org/node/380027/printable/print>.) The realities of Taliban governance are radically different. Women are essentially silenced. They live on the margins of society as virtual prisoners within constricted domestic settings dominated by men. The Taliban’s deceptive rhetoric on education has now been transformed into a potent bargaining chip in discussions with the international community. Meanwhile, a confluence of humanitarian, socioeconomic, health and environmental crises is unfolding in Afghanistan, placing even the most basic survival at risk. This landscape of suffering is conducive to negative choices that result in an increase in child marriages, poor mental and physical health, and domestic violence. Afghan women have fundamentally become human shields in the battle to unlock international aid.

Our research probes creative approaches to supporting women within the narrow confines of Taliban governance, looking at ways to cultivate distance learning and what we call *visible*

invisibility. In exploring this route, we do not want to reinforce humanitarian imaginaries that superimpose western models. The history of education in Afghanistan illustrates the problematic nature of foreign interventions and failures to indigenise curricula and to leverage local strengths and requirements. Inconsistent and poorly developed interventions can inadvertently deepen inequalities, exacerbate ethno-political tensions, and amplify the risks for women.

Visible invisibility is conceived as a channel for navigating the harsh restrictions on women and girls' education and participation in the work force. It is a mechanism to safeguard against falling behind and the ripple effects of exclusion under the Taliban regime. We do not advocate this strategy as a long-term solution and we call on the international community to reinforce the significance of gender equality in eradicating poverty and achieving prosperity. We do not believe international recognition of the Taliban regime should be forthcoming without this.

Online education is the pathway to visible invisibility, but it is not a one size fits all solution. The complexities of Afghan life demand context-appropriate alternatives in different areas of the country. Fleshing out the contours of tailored curricula is a dynamic process that necessitates continual revisions. Online education interventions cannot be designed in a vacuum. They demand careful assessment of existing curriculum and shifting education policies considering the previous learning experiences of students and educators. They also require close liaison with parents and communities to generate collaboration and shared investment in the approach. Research has shown that students thrive when they are taught in their mother tongue^[1] and that the content of curricula should be locally adapted and framed to address context-specific needs. Local adaptation implies moving away from centrally organised blueprints and working from local families and communities outwards.^[2] In Afghanistan, sensitivity to different understandings of Islam, gender and the insecurity of violence and conflict is essential. The challenge in prioritising the local is to recognise processes of change and to avoid outdated understandings, epistemologies, and ontologies.

In contrast with Western paradigms, Afghan women are not individuals in a vacuum; they see themselves as integral parts of extended family networks. The support and protection of these networks is vital to effective learning environments. Online technology is not enough. Afghanistan is currently the only nation in the world that prohibits advanced education for girls (<https://genevasolutions.news/explorations/dispatches-from-women-in-afghanistan/afghanistan-the-only-country-that-bans-girls-education>). Against this bleak background, female role models or 'connectors' are critical. Women need to see concrete examples they can emulate and refine. They need to know that even in the darkest of circumstances they can continue to learn and grow.

This conference links education with empowerment. However, we recognise that women's empowerment means more than education. Our case studies focus on the experiences of women supported by The Rahela Trust and Omid International both within Afghanistan and in the 'third countries' to which they have fled. Interviews reveal the courage and resilient agency of these women against intense oppression; they are by no means replicas of Sharbat

Gula, National Geographic's iconic "Afghan girl". They are not passive victims of an oppressive regime. Their words poignantly uncover an ongoing desire for security and social, political, and economic justice. The Taliban's antediluvian programme of gender apartheid has not diminished key elements of a 21st century mindset. These women consistently express a desire to be involved in wider worlds beyond Afghanistan with youth across the globe. Concurrently, they convey multidimensional understandings of empowerment exceeding education alone. Security in both its objective and subjective forms is pivotal. Against the limitations imposed upon them by the Taliban they will not be silent. They have dreamt of serving their country. They have experienced freedoms that are now rescinded. Their dreams are still alive. They ask us for informed action and solidarity in the quest for empowerment.

Yet, education remains at the heart of empowerment. The right to education is recognised in international law and policy as a 'multiplier right'. When it is fully realised it enables right-holders to access a wide range of human rights. Education is a catalyst in promoting substantive gender equality and [social justice](#). It is a conduit to improving health, socioeconomic, political, and cultural development. Ultimately it helps to ensure deeper security, prosperity, tolerance, and international cooperation. Education unlocks [women's leadership](#) for policy change benefitting the wider society. It is a catalyst for conflict reduction and substantive peace. Education drives [economic development](#), leading to higher productivity and income, tackling youth unemployment and instability. Finally, it is one of the most effective ways of [tackling climate change](#), because investing in girls' education is the foundation for female leadership for climate action, including in climate-smart agriculture, leading to better nutrition, increased resilience to climate shocks, reduced emissions, and more sustainable futures. The benefits of education are explicitly recognised by Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4).

Without an education, no one can count on economic or social advancement. But the Taliban today remains strikingly like the regime it established in Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001. The human catastrophe and economic suffering of ordinary Afghans has not prevented them from unleashing a revenge agenda that essentially reverses the fragile progress on human security achieved since 2001. Systemic violence against women, minorities and supporters of the deposed government continues to increase across the country. Noorullah Munir, the Taliban's Minister of Education recently [questioned the importance of education itself, saying](#), "no PhD or Master's degree is valuable today. You see that the Mullahs and Taliban that are in power have no PhD, Masters or even a high school degree, but they are the greatest of all." His crude perspective stands at odds with the Holy Qur'an which stresses the importance of knowledge acquisition through more than 800 references to the word '*ilm*' (knowledge) and related terms.

Education is a critical soft power tool for weakening extremism. If Afghan women are unable to fight on the battlefield, they can be a potent source of change. The right kind of education is conducive to empowerment. It not only fosters economic growth but can completely transform the horizons of women and men in regions affected by conflict. People with good job prospects and prosperous businesses are often more invested in the long-term stability of their communities and countries. Educated, employed women are a catalyst for future

generations. They are more likely to invest in the education and health of their children and are more likely to advocate for a better life for themselves, their families, and their local communities. When women are educated, everything changes. Research shows that educated women will reinvest 90% of their earnings back into their families, compared with 35% for men. They will invest in their children's education and support their studies.

[Clinton Global Initiative](#). Girls with secondary schooling are five times less likely to marry as children compared to girls who have little or no education, and have healthier families

[Global Partnership for Education \(2019\)](#). Prior to the Taliban takeover, education had a positive correlation with women's participation in the labour force particularly in urban areas. Females with qualifications at higher levels (in both rural and urban areas) were more likely to work. Recent data from The Asia Foundation survey found that out of girls with a formal education up to 16 years, 65.4% say they earned money, compared to only 6.5% of female respondents with no formal education.[3]

Case Study

Our case study focuses on 25 Rahela Trust scholars from 9 provinces in Afghanistan and two in Pakistan. Five of our respondents are refugees in “third countries” neighbouring Afghanistan. All our respondents were enrolled in full time secondary or tertiary education when the Taliban regained power. They are now excluded from formal education and employment opportunities. Our questions were in the form of semi-structured interviews conducted in Dari and Pashto allowing for reflection on areas we did not explicitly raise. Our questions encompassed previous education history, aspirations, work and living conditions prior to the Taliban victory. We then looked at their current situations asking whether online solutions would be of interest and the kinds of challenges they would confront with remote education. Finally, we touched upon the meanings of empowerment and the kinds of action and solidarity they hope for.

Respondents were well-acquainted with remote education which became a significant option during the Covid-19 pandemic. The suffering caused by the general loss of face-to-face interaction in the public sphere means that most respondents see remote solutions as sub-optimal. They reflected on the advantages of in-person dialogue, close connections with teachers, camaraderie with other students and synchronous learning in the classroom. However, they recognise the need for urgent responses in the current context of profound learning poverty.

Online education can facilitate “visible invisibility” for women who endure virtual gender apartheid. It removes many of the disturbing concerns about travel to school or university and the risks of public exposure under Taliban governance. The increased activities of the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice combined with beatings, kidnappings and Taliban brutality towards women makes public interactions dangerous. Security is a persistent thread in the data we gathered. For instance, one respondent said, “online courses have many advantages” and then poignantly added a key benefit is that

“when you are at home you can read the lesson easily because you are not afraid of explosions or suicides.”

Travel costs are eliminated in online delivery, and courses can fit around individual lives and family commitments. Nonetheless, distractions at home and scant space for quiet reflection can make learning difficult. Students hope for 24/7 access to course materials to accommodate challenges linked to technology. Some respondents said that there was only one smartphone in the family and that the male breadwinner used this during the day. Likewise, access to laptops is patchy. Families who were associated with the former government have had their laptops and smartphones destroyed in Taliban raids on their homes. Books and up-to-date learning resources are in short supply. Internet connectivity has declined since the Taliban takeover and is undependable. There are serious lacunae in terms of educational materials. In most cases, libraries do not exist, or they are severely understocked. Not all students are able to access textbooks; this is either because current and reliable textbooks are unavailable in the market, or they are unaffordable, or both. Textbooks and other sources of instruction are usually written in English or other foreign languages. Women who worked as teaching staff in the past tend to lack the requisite level of fluency to translate these materials. When adequate support is lacking, partial or incorrect translation can undermine the learning process and learning outcomes. According to Marinotti, inaccurate content delivery and lower quality learning materials can perpetuate the cycle of educational impoverishment.^[4] Electricity and power supplies are also inconsistent. The potential for synchronous as well as asynchronous learning therefore gives much needed flexibility.

Almost all respondents mentioned anxieties around costs. This is unsurprising given the virulent economic and humanitarian crises since the August 2021 Taliban takeover. The World Food Programme (WFP) says that approximately 20 million people (about half the population) are suffering level 3 “crisis” or level 4 “emergency” levels of food insecurity (<https://www.wfp.org/news/half-afghanistans-population-face-acute-hunger-humanitarian-needs-grow-record-levels>.) In provinces like Ghor tens of thousands have slipped into “catastrophic” – level-5, acute malnutrition, a precursor for famine. WFP states that Afghanistan has the highest prevalence of insufficient food consumption globally (<https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipcinfo-website/resources/resources-details/en/c/1155598/>). Humanitarian organisations continue to warn about the sheer scale of the crisis and the alarming drop in household incomes (<https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-food-security-update-round-ten-june-2022>). (<https://reliefweb.int/country/afg>). Experts like Dr. Fahimeh Robiolle therefore urge combining online education delivery with some form of financial support and food supplies for families.

Gender-based violence (GBV) is threaded through the lives of many Afghan women. Estimates from the United Nations Population Fund suggest that 87% of women in Afghanistan experience at least one form of GBV during their lifetime and 62% are subjected to multiple forms of violence, such as physical, sexual, and psychological harms. The loss of rights and freedoms for women under the Taliban exacerbates the impacts of associated psychological trauma ([https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(22\)00283-](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(22)00283-)

[5/fulltext.](#)). As the situation becomes increasingly precarious after some 12 months of the new Taliban regime, anxiety, depression, and suicide are on the rise. There are grave fears for the future of Afghan women's health. Remote education is not a solution to the mental health crisis but many of our respondents believe online interactions, structured assignments, measures to address the loss of knowledge, the potential for recognised qualifications and work will offer a lifeline in a very bleak context. Some existing online education initiatives include psychological support and counselling.

The Taliban claim their victory over the Ghani government signals and end to violent cycles of war. Our respondents do not share this view. One characterised life under Taliban 2.0 as 'living through the worst days of our lives'. Others cited the costs of uncertainty, 'the Taliban are unpredictable, we never know what problems they will create'. Both objective and subjective security are destabilised by severe volatility. Women are persistently on guard against the dissonance between Taliban rhetoric and realities. Amidst these uncertainties, they believe the invisible visibility of online courses provide helps to mitigate the loss of knowledge or what one respondent characterised as 'knowledge illiteracy' women experience under the new regime.

Fears of a regression in knowledge were omnipresent in our study: 'we are being left behind, and we absolutely shouldn't be left behind!' Women speak of trying to bridge knowledge deficits themselves. Many are engaged in self-study during the dead hours they are confined to their homes. They are hindered by a lack of resource materials and limited fluency in the English language. They believe that English will also be a challenge to reaching their full potential through online learning. Substantive research shows that students flourish when course materials are carefully designed with close attention to local languages, conditions and needs. Effective implementation requires innovative mechanisms for interpreting and refining off the shelf curricula as well as teacher training and mentors to support Afghan students. We discuss this in more detail below.

Our respondents are all part of Afghanistan's youth bulge (<https://afghanistan.unfpa.org/en/node/15227>.) whose aspirations and perspectives have been shaped by more expansive horizons of meaning than the Taliban offer. Women from this cohort were on track to become teachers, doctors, lawyers, journalists, psychologists, and businesswomen. They want to keep these aspirations and broad horizons alive. Connections with Afghan diaspora groups featured prominently: "I want to study with Afghan students all around the world." Others long for relations with international students, "I want to get to know them, their culture and their language – it can be a great experience!" Yet respondents also have reservations about learning with international students: 'we know that girls from other countries are more comfortable with online learning'. Comfort here may refer to mixed classes, fluency in English and freedom from oppressive restrictions.

Women who were studying medicine before the Taliban came to power are especially concerned about the loss of in person teaching within the physical setting of a hospital or a clinic. One respondent was nearing the end of her cardiology training. She said that virtual

learning was inadequate as she would not have the physical interactions with patients that are crucial to diagnosis and treatment.

Women living in “third countries” neighbouring Afghanistan underscored the themes of subjective and objective security. As in the past, most Afghans have fled to Pakistan. For decades, Pakistan has received displaced Afghans, creating one of the most protracted refugee crises in the world. Pakistan hosts [1.4 million](#) officially registered refugees and as many as 3.5 million displaced Afghans in total, according to [government estimates](#). Since the Taliban takeover, Pakistan has pushed back against new arrivals from Afghanistan, tightening its border restrictions. Visas are allocated for relatively short periods at a high cost. Black market trade in fake documents is exploding placing vulnerable Afghans at deeper risk. Deportations have increased further eroding any possibility of security.

Human Rights groups note that Afghans are [often scapegoated](#) by the Pakistan government and the public and blamed for economic uncertainty and extremism. Recent catastrophic flooding leading to a death toll of over 1300 people has exacerbated the problem. As the humanitarian situation in both nations deteriorates, options for Afghans attempting to seek refuge in Pakistan are limited. Pakistan is not a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention and has no domestic asylum laws. Undocumented Afghans in Pakistan have limited access to work, housing, and education, and without legal protections, they are targets of discrimination and harassment by law enforcement. One of our respondents is a women’s rights activist who has lived in Pakistan since August 2021. She has established a group of 150 women who are from different sectors – NGOs, civil society activists, politicians, journalists and others who document the traumatic insecurities of living in ‘third countries’ with uncertain futures. In Iran and Turkey, the situation is the same. Government authorities have repeatedly pushed back against Afghans who cross their borders. In a new report “They don’t treat us like human,” Amnesty International has documented several instances of Afghans who are arbitrarily detained, unlawfully and forcibly returned or killed. None of the Afghan interviewed for their report was able to register a claim for international protection. Here it is important to note that if the European Union continues funding detention centres where Afghans are held before being unlawfully returned, it risks being complicit in these violations (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/08/iran-turkey-fleeing-afghans-unlawfully-returned-after-coming-under-fire-at-borders/>).

All the women we interviewed wanted to serve Afghanistan by gaining better qualifications. Their voices echo the despair under the Taliban regime: ‘it is very clear that Afghan women are living in the worst situation and that all of our people have lost almost everything in the past year’. They have been forced to go back home because they no longer have the right to education, and they are ‘no longer required in the workplace’. Against this inhumane backdrop, they refuse to be silenced. They called on us to ‘raise their voices to the international community’. They ask for action and solidarity.

So how can we tackle oppression, gender inequality, injustice, and poverty through online education for Afghan women? How can we galvanize families and communities into action

making sure girls secure their rights to learn and lead? What role can diaspora groups in making their dreams a reality?

A Programme for Action

Objectives:

Through public and private partnerships, the Rahela Trust and Omid International aim to support Afghan women in Afghanistan and in the third countries to which they have fled to continue their education. The objective is to act as a catalyst for sustainable individual and community growth in key sectors of the economy that generate the most jobs and opportunities. We believe this mission requires a holistic understanding of the volatile contexts Afghan women experience and their indelible ties with their families and communities.

Current Taliban prohibitions on women's education mean that measures to ensure security including cybersecurity must be paramount.

We believe that dismantling the barriers to women's education necessitates partnering with families, teachers, diaspora communities and public and private institutions. The creation of the programme will involve more than a one-off injection of funds. Instead, we want to think more holistically about a more expansive package that allows women to flourish academically, socially and psychologically and to maximize the value of their education once they have completed their qualifications. We envision a "Sisterhood" that creates virtuous circles bringing together an association of women leaders and mentors to help Afghan women to acquire the skills they need to start businesses or to apply for remote jobs or further education.

We want to deliver:

English language training that enables Afghan students to effectively utilise existing remote education solutions. As a first step, this may involve:

- A survey of free or cost-effective online materials and work to adapt those materials to the needs of Afghan scholars.
- A survey of diaspora resources for mentoring and support.
- We also recognise the need for wider and more in-depth surveys of scholastic levels and the needs of our target communities.
- Pilot Programmes to test effectiveness.

The Content of Our Remote Programme:

English language training

Digital literacy

Coding

Social media Marketing

Business studies

Mathematics

Craft enterprises

Implementation

- Provision of pre-loaded solar powered tablets that offer bilingual learning packages.
- Packages for food security, financial support and internet costs.
- Gathering a data base of diaspora groups – especially former military and government interpreters for translation support and offering training on effective support.
- Gathering a data base of university teachers and students to act as mentors.
- Development of a sponsorship/” Sisterhood” system to support individual scholars.
- Creation of subject-specialised mentoring circles in medicine, business, journalism, law etc. sourced from Cambridge, diaspora groups and further afield.
- Creation of volunteer trauma support and counselling unit to accompany learning materials.

Leveraging insights from other Muslim countries:

Across Muslim societies, women have made some outstanding achievements because of education. A 2019 report by the organization for Economic Cooperation and Development found that Jordan is one of the nations where women are more comfortable with Mathematics than men. Almost fifty percent of female Jordanian undergraduates are studying STEAM subjects.[5] Saadia Zahidi, author of ‘Fifty Million Rising: The New Generation of Working Women Transforming the Muslim World,’ finds that between 2000 and 2015, 50 million Muslim women joined the global work force, raising the total to 150 million, with a combined income of \$1 trillion. She predicts that Muslim women will make up over 30 percent of the global Muslim work force by 2030. Nonetheless, Zahidi acknowledges the difficult challenges for women. She suggests a “Third Way” in confronting patriarchy that mitigates against direct conflicts with men. This strategy entails, among other things, finding work that harmonises with domestic obligations. Here, STEAM education offers ideal preparation for the gig economy, working from home via the internet and drawing on the support of extended families. Zahidi gives multiple examples of women in Pakistan, Egypt, Jordan, and Iran who use technology and the internet to set up medicine portals and run transport initiatives from their homes. These ventures have cascading effects enabling other women to access services which might otherwise be out of reach because of their gender. In this way, the appropriate forms of STEAM curricula can empower women, allowing for ‘*visible invisibility*’ in the socioeconomic sphere.

*We propose developing links with women involved in education in Muslim countries to widen our network of support.

*We also wish to develop links with existing online education providers in Afghanistan

because *Collaboration is a guiding thread of this project*:

Herat Online School

The Bayat Foundation

Future Brilliance (Sophia Swire)

The American University of Afghanistan

OnlineEducation.com

Learn Afghanistan

Roya Mahboob Dreamers' Academies

Our overall goal is to treat online interventions as a process that has benefits beyond our initial recipients. We want these interventions to be stepping stones to further knowledge and reflection.

[1] Cooke, G. (2020). A New Cambridge Assessment Archive Collection Exploring Cambridge English Exams in Germany and England in 1938. *Research Matters: A Cambridge Assessment publication*, 30, 2–6.

[2] Aikenhead, G. S. (2017). Enhancing school mathematics culturally: A path of reconciliation. *Canadian Journal of Science, Mathematics and Technology Education*, 17(2), 73–140.

[3] The Asia Foundation survey, 2020

[4] Marinotti 2016, p. 5

[5] (Sumaya Bint al-Hassan post-2020. See also: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkb1jtZj2Lw>.)