



Exploring Opportunities to Invest in the Education of Afghan Women and Girls

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Nearly 132 million girls between the ages of 6 and 17 are still out of school worldwide, 75% of whom are adolescent girls. Girls' limited access to education and barriers to completing 12 years of schooling cost countries between \$15 trillion and \$30 trillion in lost productivity and lifetime earnings according to the World Bank's July 11, 2018 report.

"If leaders take seriously their mission of building a better world, it must start with seriously mobilizing investments in girls' secondary education."

Other economic and social benefits of getting girls into secondary school for themselves, their future children, and their communities include: the almost disappearance of early marriage, a one-third reduction in fertility rates in high-growth countries, and declines in child mortality and malnutrition.

Women with a high school education are also better able to make decisions about their personal lives, including their health. They will be less likely to be victims of domestic violence and more psychologically sound. Their children will be healthier, less likely to be malnourished, and more likely to attend school successfully. Finally, better-educated girls will be more likely to play an active social role in their communities.

In Afghanistan, after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, girls' and women's education in Afghanistan took an extraordinary leap forward with more than 3.8 million girls in 2018 compared to 5,000 in 2001.

Not only has the enrolment of girls in school increased over the last two decades, but the presence of women in higher education has also risen. Datasets from Afghanistan's national entrance exam, called Kankor, show that the number of female participants in the Kankor examinations has gradually increased in the last 20 years. The statistics from the Kankor datasets also illustrate the persistent wide gender disparity in higher education.

A significant number of professional training courses were provided and the so-called community schools, whose number is not known, contributed to their arrival in the workforce.

When higher education was reopened to women in 2002, 1,746 were able to enroll. Total female enrolment in higher education remained nearly constant at 19 percent between 2005 and 2014, largely due to a shortage of dormitory space for women. After the establishment of

many women's dormitories, their total number increased to over 45,000 in 2016, or 22.8% of the total student body, a major success considering the obstacles.

This progression would undoubtedly bring unprecedented development in the economic and societal life of the country and, along with improved health standards, would increase the life expectancy of women by decreasing the mortality in childbirth of girls who were still minors.

However, the return of the Taliban in August 2021 brought this momentum to a halt. This stop had a catastrophic impact on the human rights, the economy of the country and the construction of a better world in general.

ACTED has been present in Afghanistan since 1993, contributing to the country's long-term recovery and development by providing education and vocational training, investing in agriculture and livelihoods, and strengthening local governance, among other things. ACTED reported: "after years of war and restrictions on girls' schooling, Afghanistan's female literacy rate is still among the lowest in the world. The national literacy rate is 26%: 39% for men and only 12% for women. The gender parity ratio in primary education is 0.74. 40% of boys and only 21% of girls complete elementary school. Although the Afghan constitution provides for the right to basic education for all, of the 7 million children currently enrolled in school, only 37% are girls. As much as 42% of the total school-age population in Afghanistan is still not in school, and the majority of these are girls".

Since 2009 I have been going to Afghanistan almost twice a year. During these trips, I have been able to attend parliamentary and presidential elections as an independent observer. The thirst of the women to exercise democracy despite the threats was palpable in the different women polling stations which, for the most part, were located in the girls' schools. With the drawings and written words that I saw in these schools, with discussion with the girls, mothers and teachers, I could understand the craze for learning.

All these little girls with their white scarves were leaving school happily and joyfully at the time of the exit. I could also meet regularly women parliamentarians, senators and senior civil servants who explained to me the challenges they were facing. I spoke with the Speakers of both Houses. I participated in a dozen conferences and interviews where I was able to exchange with a youth full of hope, with powerful, relevant and unmatched media in the region. I was able to visit schools where alternative dispute resolution was taught to children.

I was able to contribute to the influence of the Aschaina association which, with an intelligent program, helped street children to go to school and learn a trade while providing for the needs of the family.

I was able to teach at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Kabul University in the Master's program "Gender & Women Studies". Each year, my course took place during a blocked week of about 40 hours. Each year, my students, about 40 women and men, came from all regions; they were university professors themselves, state officials or senior managers of NGOs. I allowed women who came from far away and had no one to look after their young children to come with their children so as not to create an obstacle to their learning. The objective of this

professionalization master was above all to extend the notion of gender to the level of state officials as well as to the academic level in the universities of the different regions.

I could design, conduct, and facilitate programs to help building the capacity of Afghan women leaders in negotiation, conflict management, and leadership so that they could become more involved in the governance of their country.

During these programs, I had opportunities to meet women who came from different regions, ethnicities, and beliefs. They were deputies, senators, activists, doctors, lawyers, entrepreneurs, ministers, and even candidates for vice president of the Islamic Republic OF Afghanistan. They could also simply be from a remote area and try to improve the situation of other women, to help build peace, to denounce forced marriages or girl child marriages or to fight violence against women.

During and after these programs and trips, I maintained contact with these women, I was able to create a wide network of communication, exchange and advice on how to understand and analyse a subject, how to make a decision, how to learn the art of speaking and to convince.

From all these years, I have kept the memory of the women, most of them persevering, hard working and relevant. They spoke about the Taliban's time, the situation and their challenges with gravity.

Today Afghan women and girls, and people in general, are the saddest people on the planet, wherever they are. Today, I feel that there has been an abysmal waste of energy and financial resources continuously squandered for 20 years.

For almost 340 days, the doors of the schools have been closed to girls over 8 years old, the instructions imposed by the Taliban prevent them from going out. The very few community schools are forbidden by the Taliban. The financial difficulties of the parents do not allow them to pay the school fees, books, transport .. for the girls to go to university, when the latter are open. There is general discouragement about the future. How can they find an interest in continuing their studies? The absence of NGOs working for the development of education for girls and women is a disaster.

In such a context, exploring investments for girls' and women's education may seem difficult.

The relevant targets are:

- Girls and women currently in Afghanistan, displaced or not, under threat from the Taliban or not,
- Those Girls and women who are in uncertain or critical situations in neighbouring countries,
- Those Girls and women who have found a host country as refugees.
 - However, in the current context, which remains marked by great uncertainty as to the future of the country, whether near or far, a sustainable investment strategy in Afghanistan seems hypothetical.
 - Funds may come from international institutions, host countries, private donors, or NGOs. Other in-kind resources could come from private actors (including the

diaspora), universities, volunteers, and not to mention virtual platforms that have set up free access to content for Afghanistan.

...Resources could come from:

- International institutions such as UNICEF, the World Bank, UNDP, OECD,
- Development funds of different countries such as the USA with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), France with the French Development Agency (AFD), England with the Department for International Development (DFID),
- Development programs of neighbouring countries (Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, or India) and other countries in Asia (South Korea, Indonesia, ...),
- NGOs like: ACTED (1993) providing education and skills training, AFRANE (1980) humanitarian aid and information with the slogan: "Education, the best way to peace" are some examples, ...
- Foundations like Aga Khan Foundation - AKF,
- NGOs, the Afghan diaspora, structures that have been created almost spontaneously, private donors or individuals are also to be mentioned.

The list is not exhaustive.

These funds should cover teachers' salaries, logistics such as dormitories, books and supplies. Payment to the family to encourage them to send their daughter to school may be considered.

UNICEF had announced emergency cash support for all public education teachers in Afghanistan for the months of January and February, stating that this would help maintain access to education for millions of school-age boys and girls in Afghanistan. UNICEF continues to provide a stipend to teachers for emergency support.

The World Bank, which had four projects worth \$600 million aimed at improving notably education, unfortunately suspended them after the Taliban banned girls from returning to secondary schools.

The proposed measures could be as follows:

In Afghanistan:

- To set up an effective monitoring program seems necessary in order to avoid the mistakes of the past with ghost teachers, ghost schools and ghost students. In addition to these past phenomena, the Taliban now have an appetite for diverting aid to their fighters in order to retain them, to recruit new members, and to create religious schools for boys. Effective aid would have an impact on the continuation of girls' education and help stem the tide of their sale and early marriage,
- Encourage the development of community schools. Identify and support women who organize clandestine schools while respecting the confidentiality and safety of the organizers, and professors and girls,
- Identify educational and distance learning platforms. The access and financing of the internet connection remains the hardest part of the project.
- Encourage short and professional trainings in order to help the autonomy of women and girls. The help of some sponsors in this issue, especially in Balkh, should be mentioned,

- Pay special attention to vulnerable women and girls who are threatened by the Taliban and have been living in hiding for several months,
- Work with local NGOs to identify women and girls in danger and provide them with the necessary support to resume their studies in a clandestine manner and, if necessary, in the same time in shelters by providing them with psychological assistance,
- To promote media that work in the fields of information and education. Example radio Begum, aimed at sharing Afghan women's struggle and stories and defending their rights. The station covers seven provinces of Afghanistan, including Kabul, Parwan, Bamyán, Baghlan, Logar, Wardak and Ghazni.
 - Radio Begum is currently the only women's voice broadcasting in Afghanistan on FM frequency. Launched on March, 8th, 2021, Radio Begum FM 90.1 is a militant project, made for women by women. Its program is in Dari and Pashtun. Radio Begum has over 100,000 subscribers on its FB page (<https://www.facebook.com/Begumfm/>). Its program includes health, Psychology, education, religion, drama and stories.
- Intensifying the pressure on the Taliban:
 - to open schools to girls over 8 years old,
 - to alleviate the strict rules imposed by the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Suppression of Vice, particularly with regard to travel. This will allow girls and women who live in households without a close male relative "mahram" to have the opportunity to travel and learn,
 - Ensure that the curriculum remains as it was before
- Continue to put pressure on international organisations to ban Taliban travel abroad as long as schools remain closed. We have already mentioned this in several press releases and pleadings.
 - Since the announcement of the opening of the schools and their closure a few hours later, several reasons have been given by the Taliban, including:
 - Lack of funding to establish a sharia-compliant safe space for girls: this was the same pretext before 2001 and the schools never saw the light of day,
 - The deputy of the Ministry of Education, Sayed Ahmad Shahidkhel, said that girls' secondary schools are de facto closed due to the lack of a proper educational program. He told to the media that "moral science, belief, science of education of children are not included in the current curriculum",
 - The revision of curricula requires resources that are insufficient at the moment,
 - The Taliban cabinet supported the opening of schools to all girls during the month of March, but opposition from Mullah Hebatullah and the Taliban in Kandahar prevented this. They said the Taliban cabinet in Kabul did not have the authority to make a decision on the matter,
 - If it remains in place, the Taliban's ban on girls studying in high schools will become

A de facto ban on women receiving university degrees. Automatically, in the absence of female high school graduates, there will be no new female students at the university.

The Taliban seem to be divided on the aspect of girls' education because for those whose families live abroad, their children attend mixed schools and universities and for those who are in Afghanistan, they resort to clandestine schools for their daughters!

The international community must continue the pressure on them.

If the Taliban continue to close schools, most of the measures listed above will not be sustainable for all of them and with required quality for some. Therefore, psychological assistance for those who are condemned to stay at home without any hope for their future will have to be put in place in parallel, in order to prevent them from committing the worst.

In neighbouring countries:

The situation of Afghan refugees in countries such as Pakistan, Iran or Turkey is dramatic, as for many months, some have been waiting for asylum request to be accepted by a host country and some others, for several months, have not even been able to have an interview at the embassy of a possible host country. For some of these people, their visa has expired and their financial and security situation has worsened to the point where they are psychologically unable to have a short or mid-term educational perspective. They simply risk being sent back to Afghanistan.

Some of the female students in the Master's program in Gender & Women Studies who fled Afghanistan and arrived in Islamabad or Iran confirmed to me that all their efforts to obtain a student visa or any other visa to reach countries such as Canada, England or Germany have been in vain.

The situation is no better for the girls who were evacuated with their families to Abu-Dhabi in August 2021 and are still waiting there.. The situation is similar for the Balkan countries, which had been urged by the American authorities to organize "a temporary reception". Evacuation to the U.S. is taking place far too slowly.

This interminable wait has prevented any initiative to resume schooling. For this group of Afghan girls it is very difficult to project themselves into the future to continue their education for any level.

Nevertheless, there are schools and institutions that have transferred their activities to countries like Kazakhstan or Tajikistan where the girls continue their education thanks to sponsors or with the help of their parents who provide financial support. Without a more comprehensive program and the availability of medium and long-term funds, these solutions have limited sustainability.

An interesting example is Rwanda's hosting of Afghan schoolgirls at SOLA, the School of Leadership of Afghanistan, the only boarding school for girls in the country where by creating a conducive learning environment, other than the academic aspects, the girls provide life skills.

This example could be extended to the group of students for example the Master of women & Gender Studies in order to avoid the loss of knowledge and investment made.

In countries where their refugee status is recognized,

Situations vary according to the country and the date of arrival, but the Covid was an additional obstacle in the process.

France now has simplified procedures and, depending on the children's profiles, they were able to complete the school year (pre-school, primary school and high school). Some older ones were able to enrol in university. With the help of the social workers, all of them have been able to benefit from 200 to 600 hours of French lessons, an introduction to the values of the French Republic and to French culture, which is compulsory to obtain a residence permit. Most continue to learn the language to increase their chances of finding a job quickly and/or to be comfortable in university courses. Similar steps would take several years for others.

In addition to the government programs, associations and volunteers have done remarkable work in supporting language learning or individual coaching in writing CVs and cover letters, finding a university or looking for job.

For those who had a high profile with an excellent application and a good argument they have been accepted in prestigious French universities such as Science Po Paris with the exemption of tuition fees of several tens of thousands of euros.

Starting in September, some universities are organizing distance learning in English for a few cases, for the moment rare, for master's students who have not been able to leave the country.

For those who have left Afghanistan since the Taliban took power, everything is extremely complicated. This is why academic education must be accompanied not only by psychological support, but also by teaching the history and culture of the host country, intercultural aspects and citizenship, so that integration can take place in a smooth but effective way.

Conclusion: In general, to succeed in the challenge of education, it is necessary that the investment approach be global, within a structure that takes into account a set of academic, economic, societal and cultural parameters with an effective monitoring system according to the different geographical areas where the girls and women are located:

- In Afghanistan, taking into account the diverse security, family and geographical situations of girls and women,
- In the neighbouring countries, taking into account the complexity and helplessness of the refugees who are desperately waiting for a way out,
- Negotiate the acceptance of female students who are in the neighbouring countries with no way, to be accepted via sponsorships from a university (Europe, USA, Canada,..),
- In addition, in the host countries taking into account the intercultural aspects and challenges of integration.

A physiologic assistance has to be taken into the consideration in any case.

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