FROM ONE TALIBAN REGIME TO ANOTHER: HIGHLIGHTING THE CURRENT CONTEXT OF WOMEN'S AND GIRLS' EDUCATION IN AFGHANISTAN

Abstract

Afghanistan is one of the most difficult places in the world for women and girls to acquire education at any level. During the first Taliban era in Afghanistan (from 1996-2001), women in the country witnessed all sorts of abuses, and the most destructive of them was the denial of education. About 60% of the approximately 3.7million out-of-school children in Afghanistan are girls, and less than 20% of the 5% of the population who attend university are female. Generally, a recent survey shows that 87% of Afghan women are illiterate, an indication that security, cultural, and religious challenges, including early marriage still hinder the education of Afghan women even after the ousting of the Taliban government in 2001. This study explored the status of women's and girls' education in Afghanistan, following the re-emergence of the Taliban government in August 2021. It argues that the reemergence of the Taliban government is at the moment a setback to the progress made by women's networks, global connectivity, as well as collaboration between state actors and international organizations in facilitating the education of Afghan women and girls. However, repressive attitudes towards women's and girl's education are not universal in Afghanistan. The evidence that not all parts of Afghan society are hostile towards women's and girl's education in Afghanistan means that there is room to significantly challenge inimical attitudes in this area.

Keywords: *Human rights, women's rights to education, women's agency, gender equality, women's empowerment, cultural norms, Afghanistan. Taliban.*

Introduction

The first Taliban era in Afghanistan (a period from 1996-2001) can be said to be such when Afghan women struggled to cope with the worst aspects of misogyny. One of the most destructive abuses meted against Afghan women by this Islamist fundamentalist group was the denial of education (Barr, 2017). Generally, over the decades, Afghanistan has been one of the most underperforming parts of the world in terms of women's education which is usually hindered by cultural practices such as early marriage. Current statistics on Afghan women's education show that about 60% of the approximately 3.7 million out-of-school children in Afghanistan are girls. Also, 66% of boys in Afghanistan are literate compared to only 37% of teenage girls (UNICEF, 2019).

There are views that the ousting of the Taliban government in 2001 opened the doorway to the promotion of women's right to education in Afghanistan with governments after the fall of the Taliban regime embarking on restructuring the education sector with the aid of international donors who had invested millions of dollars. This collaboration led to the building of many schools, as well as the recruitment of educated teachers and instructors. Also, families started sending their girl children to school (Barr, 2017). Furthermore, the efforts to improve women's education were backed by a Constitution which contained requirements aimed at the improvement of education (Ahmadi, 2016, p.366). Ahmadi (2016) also notes that alongside the constitutional provisions that supported women's legal rights, there had been effective steps toward gender equality, especially in the area of education.

Following the ousting of the Taliban government in 2002, Batha (2002) reported that more Afghan women than ever were able to attend school, including schooling beyond 6th grade, and many women were able to get a college degree. More than 3.6 million girls were enrolled by 2018 – more than 2.5 million in primary school and over 1 million in secondary According to Batha (2022), women's literacy, while still below 50%, increased significantly. In addition, Bickford (2022) noted that many colleges and universities including the Kabul University which was closed by the previous Taliban government were reopened in 2002 (Bickford, 2022). These achievements

were recorded in the face of cultural practices such as patriarchy and early marriage which hinder Afghan women's access to education (Bamik, 2018).

This study is a reassessment of the situation of Afghan women's and girls' education in the face of the reemergence of the Taliban regime in particular. It is guided by the following questions:

1. **What are the current barriers to women's education in Afghanistan following the re-emergence of the Taliban government?**
2. **What are the current improvements in women's education following the emergence of the Taliban government?**

Being Afghan, the researcher believes in Burridge et al's (2016) assertion that women's education can contribute to a peaceful and prosperous society. Considering that education for women is empowering (Yacoobi, 2011), educated Afghan women can contribute positively to the socio-economic growth of Afghanistan as a country that has been ravaged by decades of war. Studies show that highly educated women are better listened to by their male colleagues in the political, economic and social contexts and that their quality of life is improved generally through education (Unterhalter et al., 2017; Sehin et al. 2017). It is expected that findings from this study would contribute to the body of global literature on the promotion of women's right to education by presenting findings on how political contexts shape interventions in education in climes where insecurity and rigid social and cultural norms have hindered access to education for women. It is also expected that findings from the study would guide intervention measures aimed at promoting women's and girls' education in Afghanistan.

Literature review

Different studies have explored the barriers to women's education in Afghanistan, as well as the strategies aimed at improving women's education since the ousting of the first Taliban regime in 2001. One such study, conducted by Kosha et al. (2014), showed that the most important challenges for female students in higher education in Afghanistan were cultural, economic, family and social-related in addition to university-related problems. However, participants in the study

also stated that family support and their hard work, goals, self-confidence and in-borne motivation to learn were factors that helped them in their educational goals.

Shayan (2015) reported that there were fewer girls and women in the education and higher education sectors because they do not have access to opportunities to continue their education. Findings from Shayan's (2015) study showed that insecurity, poverty, corruption in the education system, traditional and religious beliefs, harassment and lack of female teachers were the main barriers to women's education.

For their part, Burridge, Payne and Rahmani (2015) explored men's and women's views and attitudes toward getting higher education. Findings from their study showed that women were motivated to pursue higher education degrees. Findings also showed that women reported a higher level of family support for their higher education. However, irrespective of their family support, the participants in the study stated that they experienced such barriers to the attainment of higher education as national security, economic issues, unemployment, the lack of postgraduate opportunities, street harassment and corruption. Also, the participants mentioned certain cultural restrictions, especially the pressure to choose between marriage and education.

Afzali (2017) conducted a mixed methods study to assess academics' interpretations of gender inequality in their workplace. Findings from the study showed that gender inequality existed in higher education institutions, and that unfortunately, its existence has been normalised. Findings from the study also showed that deep gender inequalities that have persisted in the wider socio-cultural context of Afghanistan, in addition to some aspects of university policies and practices, have made gender inequalities in academia invisible to many.

Reha and Sidiqi (2018) explored the limitations in gender strategy for promoting women's higher education in Afghanistan. One of these limitations, as noted by the authors, is that gender strategy benchmarks are unclear and immeasurable. They noted for instance that while one of the strategies to achieve gender equality is to work with institutions to create a supportive environment for women to enable them make progress in their careers, the kind of work that needs to be implemented was not mentioned.

Regarding the promotion of women's rights in Afghanistan after the ousting of the first Taliban era in 2001, Shir (2018) found that educated Afghan women were in the middle of the struggle to promote women's right to education in a conservative socio-cultural environment. (ibid) found that in the site of this struggle, democratic and non-democratic forces play their part in affecting the lives of women, but significant results have been achieved since 2001 when the Taliban regime was ousted. According to (ibid) notably, despite security, cultural and religious challenges, changes were happening with family support (men's especially), women's international networks, and global connectivity as major facilitators. Participants in the study conducted by (ibid) noted that they went ahead to counter family-based norms that hindered women's access to education.

In addition, Shir (2018) found that participants who recognize themselves as highly educated metropolitan women helped to promote women's education in Afghanistan at least around the places where they lived. These women are also connected to international networks and this has had its effect as a catalyst in the education promotion process. Furthermore, Shir (*ibid*) found that the ability to find jobs post graduation is another factor that empowered Afghan women to play an active roles as promoters of women's education in Afghanistan. According to Shir (*ibid*) the activities that Afghan women engage in in promoting education in Afghanistan point to micro spaces of emancipation for women within the country, which in some cases can be family or support networks.

Shir (2020) conducted a study that assessed the work of organisations at the macro level, and individuals at the micro level involved in promoting women's rights to education and the social norms and motives that influenced their work in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Findings from the study show that there have been significant improvements in women's education in Afghanistan since the Taliban regime was ousted in 2001. The progress made has been due to the combined efforts of non-governmental organizations such as the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (CHA) and government agencies in formulating and implementing plans to improve Afghan women's access to quality education. Findings from the study conducted by Shir (2020) also showed that the female participants felt obligated to help their fellow women. In addition, the male participants showed a strand of masculinity which favoured women's education. However, results further showed that challenges such as insecurity and inimical cultural norms such as early/forced

marriage continued to hinder women's education in Afghanistan.

Regarding culturally influenced views and attitudes towards women's education, Shir (2018 and 2020) found that Afghan men and women have experienced living abroad (Iran, Pakistan, Central Asia or India) and through their lives were influenced to accept different cultural values and integrate them with their traditional norms. These experiences shaped or reinforced their mindsets and as such influenced their attitudes and views towards women's education. In the case of respondents who resided in the North of Pakistan (among the Pashtun ethnic group), they were influenced culturally to adopt a strict kind of masculinity that was inimical to women's education.

Reviewed literature showed that in the midst of the cultural practices that still hindered the education of Afghan women and girls after the ousting of the first Taliban regime in Afghanistan, women's right to education was upheld through women networks, global connectivity, the activities of pro-feminist men, as well as collaboration between state actors and international organizations. The current study aims to analyze the situation since the re-emergence of the Taliban regime in August 2021.

Current context

Studies have been conducted to explore the status of women's education in Afghanistan since the re-emergence of the Taliban government in August 2021. In one of such studies, Jackson (2022) reported that despite the promises made by the Taliban government to uphold women's right to education, it had closed schools for both boys and girls beyond the 6th grade, the reason offered being that it needed time to revise the school curriculum so that it would better reflect Islamic values, and so that a female curriculum and school uniforms for women could be developed (Jackson, 2022). Also, Glinski (2022) found that one of the concerns the conservative members of the Taliban have regarding education for women over 12 years old, has to do with 'proper' dressing or school uniforms, leading to the continued restriction of girls from schools. The Taliban have expressed concern that the school uniforms older girls wear to class may be too revealing and that they needed time to find the proper uniform for women to wear to class (Glinski, 2022).

Also, findings show that girls' schools have only remained open in some areas in Afghanistan, such as its capital, Kabul, because of pressure from parents, and also because the United Nation's children's charity UNICEF has negotiated agreements that permit it to run schools in parts of the country. However, it has been found that a divided Taliban leadership is unable to agree on how its policies should be implemented. One faction of the Afghan leadership has been found to be completely opposed to girls' education and women's employment — in line with the original Taliban ideology, under which girls and women were prevented from getting an education, going to work, running businesses or taking part in the country's governance (Nature, 2022).

In a study conducted by Inayatullah (2022), findings showed that the barriers to women's education during the recent Taliban era include physical barriers in the form of little or no infrastructure to promote female schooling. Findings from the study conducted by Inayatullah also showed that views are divided on the extent to which women's access to education in Afghanistan is a function of the culture and social norms of Afghan society. Half of the respondents thought cultural barriers were significant and existed while half of them did not think so. The Hazaras, Tajiks, and the Uzbeks along with the Pashtun make up the bulk of the Afghan population. However, the non-Pashtuns have a lot less strict social code and are more cognizant of women's freedom and rights compared to the Pashtuns. Findings from the study conducted by Inayatullah (2022) also showed that poverty was perceived as a barrier to female education in Afghanistan under the Taliban. Inayatullah (2022) also found that Afghanistan's current alienation from the rest of the world and its abject poverty were perceived as barriers to women's education in the country. In addition, findings from the study showed that a family's aspirations and hopes for their women in the context of education determined the interest in education.

Regarding culture also, Farr (2022) found that traditional beliefs that restrict women's education are still followed by many traditional Afghans, including the religious conservatives. Adherence to these restrictive beliefs, including early marriage, was found among Afghans who live in tribal societies, particularly the Pashtun in southern Afghanistan. However, adherence to these religious beliefs was found to be less prevalent among other ethnic Afghans particularly the Hazara and the Tajiks who do not have a strong tribal social structure. It can be argued, therefore, that the reemergence of the Taliban government (which traditionally has an ideology that is restrictive to

women's education) tends to reinforce aspects of culture (such as *Purdah*) which does not promote women's education. However, Farr (2022) also found that the concept of *Purdah* and the resulting limitations on the freedom of young women is beginning to change, especially those among the urban upper class. Farr's findings suggest that the value of education for both men and women is growing in Afghanistan to the point that some of those in the Taliban leadership have daughters attending school, either in secretive private schools or abroad.

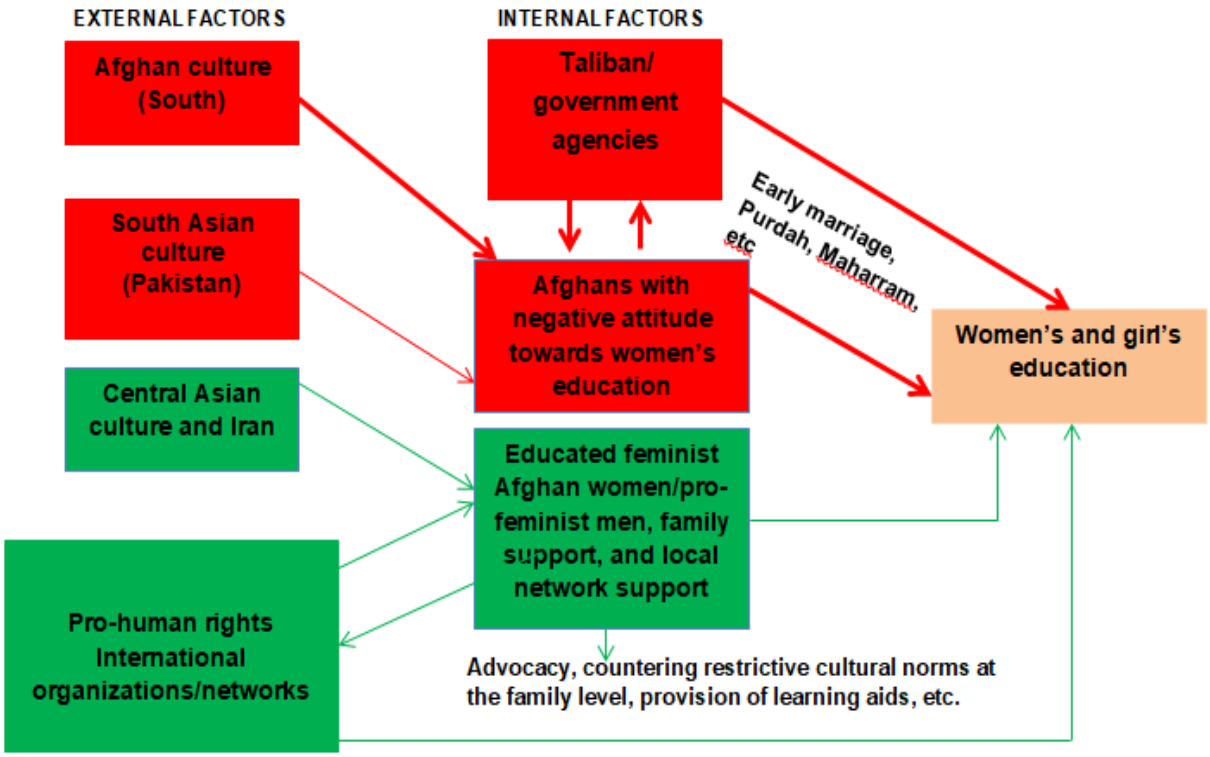

Fig 1: *Model showing determinants of women's and girl's education in Afghanistan since Taliban reemergence*

The model in Figure 1 as presented above shows the current players in women's and girl's education in Afghanistan as well as their influence on the cultural context of women's and girl's education in the country. The model shows that attitude to women's education is not homogenous and are influenced by some external and internal factors. As shown in the model, negative attitudes and culture among Afghan citizens are influenced negatively by a Pakistani culture (mostly from the Pashtuns in the southern part of the country). The Pashtuns are able to exert a lot of influence on Afghan women's education because they are the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan numbering

about 12 million and making up about 42% of the entire Afghan population (Britannica, 2022). Also, consanguinity is a predominant feature of the Pashtuns (they are mostly inbred) (Saify & Saadat, 2012). This makes them resistant to change and means that they are able to easily pass a lot of traits and attitudes (including negative attitudes towards women's education) from one generation to another. In addition, the Taliban mostly consist of people from the Pashtun group (Maizland, 2022) and this further reflects the negative stance of the Pashtun group toward women's education.

As to the remaining 48% that belong to many other ethnic groups in Afghanistan, as findings from the study conducted by Shir (2020) suggest, not all are pro-women's education and not all put pressure on the Pashtun group to change their conservative attitudes which are against women's education. However, Shir (*ibid*) found that among this 48% are educated Afghan women and men who live in big cities in the center, the north and the northeastern part of Afghanistan, all of who, are pro-women's education. Though these women and men face resistance from Afghans with conservative attitudes in a way that hinders their impact on the south, findings from the studies conducted by Shir (2018) and Shir (2020) suggest that it does not mean that they are not mobilizing but that the change they are driving is happening slowly. As shown in the model presented above, the educated feminist Afghan women/pro-feminist men who support women's education in Afghanistan are influenced positively by Iranian and Central Asian culture. In the model, an interaction between Iranian, and Central Asian culture, pro-human rights non-governmental organizations, and educated feminist Afghan women/pro-feminist men in promoting women's education (though threatened by the Taliban regime) can be observed. They collaborate to contribute to women's and girl's education through measures such as advocacy, countering cultural norms at the family level, and the provision of learning aids.

On the other hand, the Taliban regime can be seen reinforcing the negative attitude of some Afghan people toward women's education. The Taliban and some Afghans with unfavourable attitudes (mostly from the south) are countering women's and girl's education in Afghanistan by promoting restrictive cultural norms such as early marriage, *Purdah* (seclusion of women from the public) and *Maharram* (restrictive male guardians).

The re-emergence of the Taliban government can be described as a setback to the progress achieved due to the cooperation between such non-governmental organizations as the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (CHA) and the Ministry of Higher Education, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Women Affairs in the formulation and implementation of plans to improve Afghan women's access to quality education. This reemergence can also be described as a setback to the progress achieved by the education promotion efforts of educated feminist Afghan women, as well as pro-feminist men who show a strand of masculinity that sees them supporting the educational pursuit of females in their families. However, the evidence that not all parts of the Afghan society are hostile towards education means that there is room to significantly contest or challenge inimical attitudes towards women's and girl's education in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

This study explored the status of women's and girls' education in Afghanistan, following the re-emergence of the Taliban government in August 2021. It argues that the reemergence of the Taliban government has not improved education but instead has tended to reinforce cultural practices that hinder the education of women and girls in Afghanistan. The study also concludes that the reemergence of the Taliban government is at the moment a setback to the progress made by women's networks, global connectivity, as well as collaboration between state actors and international organizations in facilitating the education of Afghan women and girls.

Based on these findings, this study recommends that the international community should increase advocacy for the education of women and girls in Afghanistan and exert united pressure in this regard. The international community, as well as non-governmental organizations that have focused on promoting the education of Afghan women and girls should take a long-term perspective on gender equality by intensifying efforts in increasing Afghan women's and girls' access to media and the Internet, financial and political support for Afghan women's civil society, as well as strengthening Afghan institutions to be more gender-responsive.

Also, internal players such as educated and working class Afghan women should intensify their advocacy to counter cultural norms that restrict women's education in Afghanistan. Furthermore,

they can collaborate with international organizations to help change negative attitude towards women's education at the family level and also provide learning aids including internet-enabled educational devices. Some enlightened individuals from the Pashtun ethnic group can also be made key facilitators of women's education programmes in Afghanistan. This way, both internal and external players can collaborate to drive positive change in the area of women's education in Afghanistan.

Suggestions for further studies

The researcher suggests that studies should be carried out to reassess the work of organisations at the macro level, and individuals at the micro level involved in promoting women's rights to education and the social norms and motives that influence their work in the new Taliban era. Also, the empowerment activities of educated feminist Afghan women, as well as pro-feminist men in fostering women's education should be reassessed.

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