



# CASE STUDY

## Gender Equity in Education in Afghanistan: Status and its Impacts on MATPD Implementation

A Multi-Modal Approach to Teacher Professional Development in Low Resource Settings

Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, Afghanistan  
2024

Supported By



# Gender Equity in Education in Afghanistan: Status and its Impacts on MATPD Implementation

## Abstract

This case study aims to describe the status of gender equity and education in Afghanistan, and its effect on the implementation of MATPD in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, in 2022-2023. The study examines the key factors contributing to gender disparity in educational access, describes challenges to gender equity faced in the course of implementing MATPD in Afghanistan, and explores possible initiatives to promote gender equity and social inclusion, and barriers such efforts may face. The case study provides valuable insights into the existing gaps in gender equity, how they affected project implementation plans, and proposes recommendations for future action to address gender inequities in Afghanistan's education system.

## Introduction

According to Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Eriksson et al., 2010: 7), “everyone has the right to education. However, education has suffered repeated setbacks in the past five decades in Afghanistan, during various phases of political conflict and upheaval. In a 2011 survey of women’s rights experts [by TrustLaw](#)<sup>1</sup>, Afghanistan was voted the most dangerous country in the world to be a woman. If that was its standing as a ten-year-old democracy, with a constitution that guaranteed human and citizen rights to women, there can be no doubt it still holds the unfortunate position in the ranking. In comparison to the present, 2011 was a time of hope and opportunities in Afghanistan. In the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, girls and women had access to education, entrepreneurship, and employment, and were slowly and steadily becoming socially and politically significant and active.

Regrettably, education for women and girls in Afghanistan has historically, been relegated to the back burner and in addition to cultural barriers, its importance has been subject to the political ideology at play at a specific time. The essentially patriarchal and tribal culture places women and girls in a position subordinate to men, and education for girls has typically been low on the list of societal priorities, particularly in rural and traditional communities. Though the first formal public schools in Afghanistan emerged during the first decade of the twentieth century, and the first girls’ school was established in 1921 under the leadership of Queen Suraya, education benefitted a small proportion of the female population, and that too, only in urban Afghanistan. The right

---

<sup>1</sup>TRUSTLAW POLL-Afghanistan is most dangerous country for women  
<https://news.trust.org/item/20110615000000-na1y8/>

to education was eventually extended to all citizens in the 1960s, but cultural and religious biases affected uptake by girls.

In the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there was considerable investment in the education sector by the then governments and their international partners, in a post-Taliban Afghanistan under the freshly minted democracy backed by the US and other Western countries. School attendance of girls increased dramatically, from no girls in school between 1996 and 2001, to over 3 million by 2021. A 2021 twenty-year review of the status of education in Afghanistan published by UNESCO<sup>2</sup> indicated Afghanistan's education trajectory over the previous two decades revealed that its pace of progress was faster compared to most other countries in the South Asia sub-region. School enrollments increased nearly 10-fold, especially between 2001 and 2005, particularly in primary education, and the percentage of girls among all students increased from 0% to 39% at the primary level, with 3.6 million girls enrolled in primary and secondary level grades in schools across the country.

With the sudden overthrow of this government in August 2021, progress in education in general, and girls' education specifically, was upended.

Since assuming power, the De Facto Authorities (DFA) of the Taliban have announced more than fifty edicts progressively curtailing and limiting the rights and agency of girls and women in the country, restricting their access to education, employment, mobility, and to hold public office. The findings of the Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan shed light on the Taliban's issuance of edicts and decrees following their takeover, prohibiting women and girls from pursuing education. In September 2021, education for girls was restricted beyond the sixth grade; later, in December 2022, the right of women to attend university was "suspended"<sup>3</sup>. Girls in grades seven and above no longer go to school, and despite verbal assurances that these are temporary measures and that girls like boys, have the right to education, girl schools beyond grade six have remained closed for two successive academic years.

Those in power no longer entertain any discussion on gender, perceiving it as a Western construct, and therefore any argument for gender equity in education is moot.

The SATE Fellowship and MATPD were implemented in Afghanistan against this backdrop. Beginning in March 2021, the SCA project leadership had to continuously adjust and adapt parameters to work within the changed political landscape in August 2021.

---

<sup>2</sup> The Right To Education What's at Stake in Afghanistan A 20-year review  
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000378911/PDF/378911eng.pdf.multi>

<sup>3</sup> Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan and the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls, A/HRC/53/21, 20 June 2023.

## Methodology

This case study draws upon a review of existing literature, including research papers, official and news reports, and press releases of education stakeholders in Afghanistan, as well as personal observations and experiences shared by the SCA team and field researchers in the project.

## Factors Contributing to Gender Disparities in Afghanistan

Afghan culture is essentially patriarchal and tribal in nature, where women and girls have always held a position subordinate to men. Whatever opportunities for education and advancement did become available, were largely available to urban girls and women. For girls and women living in rural Afghanistan, where over 70% of the population lives, there have been few opportunities for education and advancement, despite extensive investment in formal, non-formal, and community-based education focusing on girls by the previous governments (2002-2021) and its education partner organizations. Some factors contributing to gender disparities in education are:

- 1- Socio-cultural norms and traditional gender roles assigned to girls and women in Afghanistan have a direct correlation with gender inequity in all areas, including education. Ultra-conservative and traditional communities, particularly in Pashtoon-majority provinces, favor restrictive social norms for post-pubescent girls and women, discouraging formal education or work outside the house for girls, putting girls at a higher risk of under-age and forced marriage, and other forms of domestic violence. The de facto government's policies reinforce such practices, and currently approximately 3 million girls in grades 7 and above, have been barred from going to school<sup>4</sup>
- 2- Poverty has been exacerbated further in Afghanistan since August 2021, and is a critical factor affecting the rights of girls to an education. According to an article published by the International Rescue Committee in December 2022 (Updated in August 2023)<sup>5</sup>, the lives of more than 90% of the Afghan population are impacted by poverty. Consequently, investment in girls' education becomes a very low priority for families struggling to survive.
- 3- Despite extensive work on school infrastructures in the last two decades, many schools still lack basic facilities like classrooms, boundary walls, or functioning toilets, or are too far from village settlements to be accessible to girl students.
- 4- With the current establishment's objection to male teachers teaching girls even at the primary level, the lack of adequate female teaching staff also poses a barrier in some rural areas with very low literacy

---

<sup>4</sup>In Afghanistan, women and girls are being erased  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/03/23/afghanistan-women-girls-schools/>

<sup>5</sup> Afghanistan: An entire population pushed into poverty IRC Watchlist 2023  
<https://www.rescue.org/article/afghanistan-entire-population-pushed-poverty>

- 5- Security-related disruptions used to be another factor in the years before August 2021, when militant groups periodically targeted girls' schools and other educational institutions. While security in general has improved, families are wary of the unchaperoned movement of girls outside in parts of the country, and parents may fear for the safety of their daughters.
- 6- Most important of all, the gender-exclusive policy of the DFA is a critical factor leading to gender inequity in education as in other sectors of life. Since August 2021, girls have faced incremental limitations imposed on their lives and rights, resulting from a series of edicts<sup>6</sup> released by the DFA leadership that contain and control the lives and opportunities of women and girls. These have not only circumscribed the social and economic opportunities for girls and women but also severely limited their access to education. For the past two years, girls students have been barred from education beyond grade six, and while there are repeated assurances that this is a temporary measure, it is unclear when and if girls will have access to their basic human right to education.

### **Gender Equity Issues and MATPD in Afghanistan**

The 'A Multi-Model Approach to Teacher Professional Development (MATPD)' project started in Afghanistan in May 2021 with Gender Equity and Social Inclusion as a critical crosscutting theme and an important component of its design. However, before project activities could begin, the overthrow of the democratic government, and the coming to power of the Taliban group, changed the socio-political environment completely.

The Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA), the implementing partner in the consortium from Afghanistan, has been a significant contributor to the education sector in Afghanistan for forty years. As such, they have enjoyed a level of trust, acceptance, and support within communities as well as local and national-level leadership. The Education Ministry under the DFA, was led by non-qualified members of the group in senior decision-making positions, who were generally supportive of any project claiming to contribute to the development of the education sector, but with one caveat: in accordance with the directive of their senior-most leadership, no woman staff – either from NGOs or the MoE was permitted to participate in any kind of project or professional development activities. At the time, all female employees of MoE had also been 'temporarily' banned from coming to work.

In keeping with the gender equity aspirations and work policies of the SCA, the MATPD project team in Afghanistan used their personal relations and professional credibility

---

<sup>6</sup> Taliban Edicts Against Afghan Women and Girl - <https://feminist.org/our-work/afghan-women-and-girls/taliban-edicts/>

with local authorities at provincial and district levels, to enable seven female research fellows to participate in the South Asia Teacher Education (SATE) fellowship programme. They abstained from bringing it to the notice of the Ministerial level leadership, who had made their official position regarding the participation of women clear at the outset, and instead, relied on the mid-level management within the provincial and district education offices, who were supportive, and willing to facilitate and allow school visits and training of the female research fellows.

Female fellows were officially, not permitted to work with male teachers in boys' schools. With girls' schools only up to grade six, this placed a limitation on which grade the female fellows could work with. Three of the research fellows were able to circumvent this barrier with the cooperation of SCA and the local education authorities. Two women fellows worked with secondary-level teachers in Jowzjan province, where the local education authorities had kept girls' schools open through secondary and high school levels, in spite of the national directives. Another fellow from a conservative predominantly Pushtoon province, Kunar, used a creative approach that enabled her to work with secondary-level teachers and students for her action research. The other four female fellows had to restrict their interventions to primary school teachers.

Gender Equity and Social Inclusion (GESI) in education was an important theme of choice for some of the fellows in Afghanistan, in light of the current situation. However, none of the fellows conducted action research on a gender-related topic, even though a few had initially selected such subjects for their research. It would have risked repercussions for their person or even for the project as a whole. Any mention of 'gender', is highly sensitive, and considered taboo, in Afghanistan led by the DFA. There is a blanket denial of any issue with the rights of women and girls, and gender is perceived as a Western construct, in dissonance with their extreme interpretation of Islamic ideology.

Toward the end of project implementation and fieldwork, the DFA pronounced a total restriction on women working with NGOs, and completion of the project activities at field level was only possible with the continuous mediation by provincial-level SCA teams and the project team.

The MATPD project in Afghanistan was only possible due to SCA's credibility and standing within local communities and education authorities, and the project leadership's commitment to adapting to changes and finding creative and individual solutions to every challenge that came in the way of gender equitable participation in the project.

## Possible Future Action

The MATPD project was concluded with a reasonable amount of success, given the circumstances, but the prevailing issue of gender inequity remains an issue of concern in all areas of life, particularly, in education. With two years of schooling already lost for girls in secondary and above levels, and now girl students even banned from university education, it is bound to have serious socio-economic repercussions, in the not-so-distant future, both for the girls and women affected, and for the country as a whole.

In her paper titled, *From Theory to Practice: An Overview of Women's Access to Education in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan*<sup>7</sup>, Wahida Omari recommends the following:

1. Alternative informal modes of continuing education for girls through home schools, or tutoring. This is already in practice in secret, organized by a small number of brave and determined educators, who continue to provide what education they can to out-of-school girls, even at the risk of their own lives. Such opportunities, however, are few, and mostly ad hoc in nature. While still having value, their reach is limited and they can help a very small section of these students.
2. Another alternative girl students could explore is online education. Many international education institutions and non-profit groups are offering some sort of free education opportunities to Afghan girls. Again, this assistance, while well-meaning, has its own limitations, and is not specifically designed to fill the needs of Afghan secondary school girls. Courses may be in languages other than those spoken in Afghanistan, thus limiting their accessibility. In addition, not all Afghan girls have access to technology and stable connectivity to benefit from online content. For online tuition to be effective, education actors both inside and outside Afghanistan would have to get together with Afghan educators in the diaspora to design contextually relevant courses in the local languages in specific important areas of study, so that girls can continue to enhance their education even while they await the opening of schools. This requires intensive investment in material and human resources and the development of easy-to-use technology that students can learn to use easily.

While all the above suggestions are reasonable and logical, they all have their limits, and may at best benefit a section of out-of-school girls, mostly residents in the cities, and from families with some means. For any solution to be universally accessible to all,

---

<sup>7</sup> *From Theory to Practice: An Overview of Women's Access to Education in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan*, Omari Wahida - <https://gchragd.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Research-Paper-On-Education.pdf>

concerted advocacy is needed, with a group, that is not known to listen to suggestions or advice from outside.

3. The Taliban policies on education for girls and women are at odds with Islamic thought and belief. It is important that Islamic nations engage in soft advocacy with the DFA to convince them about the importance of giving girls and women their right to education.
4. International partners such as UN agencies that directly or indirectly continue to support Afghanistan at a time when the international community has mostly withdrawn material and other support, should also use their influence to put sustained pressure on the DFA to honor their promise of resumption of schools for girls beyond grade six. They can sensitize them to the real economic hardship the country will face in the not-so-distant future, resulting from deactivating half the human potential of the country by keeping them out of schools, universities, and the workforce.

**Disclaimer:** *The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of International Development Research Centre (IDRC) or its Board of Governors.*

**Acknowledge:** *This work was supported by the Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange, a joint endeavour with the International Development Research Centre, Canada.*