Religion, Education, Health, and Society in
Afghanistan

Opportunities, Challenges, and Restrictions under Taliban Rule

edited by
Mohammad Baqer Zaki,
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Chapter 1

Introduction: Religion, Education, Health, and Society in Afghanistan: Some Remarks on a Complex Story

Mohammad Baqer Zaki / Stefanie Harsch / Uwe H. Bittlingmayer & Mohammad Javad Salehi

Afghanistan has experienced persistent crises over several decades. Armed conflicts, political instability, the collapse of governments, widespread human rights violations, and multidimensional underdevelopment are among the many challenges that have caused profound suffering for the Afghans. These issues are largely the result of actions and decisions made by individuals, institutions, and groups that have influenced the country's development at various historical stages and within different sociopolitical contexts (cf. a. o. Schetter, 2022; Barfield, 2022). The responses of Afghan elites, including political leaders, have often failed to solve these problems (Samimy, 2016). In many cases, their interventions have made existing challenges worse rather than resolving them. It is true that such challenges are common in the histories of developing countries, and some nations in the region have faced similar obstacles during their development. However, what sets Afghanistan apart is the persistent and continuous reproduction of these problems over the past few centuries, dating back to the country's formation in 1747. Like some countries in the region, Afghanistan is ethnically diverse (BFA, 2016). Many neighboring nations have also experienced periods of internal conflict or foreign domination. Yet, over time, some of them like India, Pakistan, Tajikistan or Uzbekistan have managed to address their challenges, achieve a degree of political stability, and make steady, if gradual, progress. In contrast, Afghanistan continues to grapple with its historically rooted crises.

Despite the suffering Afghans have endured and their general desire to overcome the challenges they face; they have not yet been able to resolve these issues or secure even the minimum conditions necessary for a normal life.[1] The country has experienced various political systems and grand ideologies with ambitious promises, yet none have effectively addressed its political instability.

A dominant perspective among politicians and even some Afghan scholars is to attribute these challenges primarily to the interference of global and regional powers. This narrative also appears in some studies by some researchers, where Afghanistan is portrayed as a geopolitical battleground for great power competition (Crews & Tarzi, 2009; Ghani, 2010; Khalizad et al., 1999; Saikal, 2014). According to this view, the country's instability and prolonged conflict are framed as inevitable outcomes of its strategic location. For example, the civil wars of recent decades are often traced back to the Soviet occupation in 1979. While such explanations capture part of Afghanistan's reality, they do not offer a complete picture. Reducing the country's ongoing challenges in governance, development, and basic services solely to external interference overlooks significant internal factors and dynamics. It is like trying to explain decades of conflict in Afghanistan without taking the Afghans into account and taking them out of the equation. This oversimplified view is one reason why Afghanistan's multidimensional crisis persists.

Despite the country's access to meaningful opportunities for resolution, the long-standing nature of these issues demands a more critical and reflective approach. Rather than repeating popular narratives and emphasizing ineffective solutions, it is essential to analyze current problems critically.

Afghanistan's problems can be attributed to the actions of the Afghan political elite, domestic institutions, and foreign actors involved in the country. Ordinary citizens have never had the opportunity to participate freely and meaningfully

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[1] Cf. the latest Human Development Reports where Afghanistan falls down again from rank 177 (of 193) in 2020 to rank 182 (of 193) in 2024; UNDP, 2022, 2024.

in shaping their political destiny. The role of the Afghan elite in the country's decades-long crisis is significant. In many cases, they either lacked a proper understanding of Afghanistan's problems or pursued misguided and at times, harmful policies to manage the country and address its challenges. The consistent reliance on such flawed approaches since the founding of the modern Afghan state in 1747 has contributed to the accumulation of a wide range of issues, including chronic instability, widespread poverty, and the lack of access to basic necessities.

Beginning with the establishment of the Durrani Empire in 1747, and particularly intensified during the reign of Amir Abdur Rahman Khan in the late 19th century, Afghanistan's rulers consistently attempted to build a strong, centralized state. This approach, however, often ignored the deeply entrenched local and tribal forms of governance that had historically managed community life, justice, and resource allocation. Thomas Barfield (2012) has argued that this attempt to impose a Weberian state model—a state with a monopoly on legitimate force—was a fundamental misunderstanding of Afghan society. This created an ongoing struggle between the center and the periphery, with local power brokers and tribal leaders frequently resisting central authority. Throughout the 20th century, various Afghan rulers, from Amanullah Khan to leaders of People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, attempted rapid reforms. These top-down reforms, which included changes to social norms, legal systems, and military structures, were often perceived as being detached from the lives and traditions of the rural population. The reforms alienated powerful religious and tribal elites, leading to frequent revolts and coups. These were not simply misunderstandings of local culture but often acts of misconduct, as they were perceived by many as an attempt by a narrow, urban elite to impose its will on the rest of the country without a popular mandate.

After the Taliban were removed from power in 2001 by the US-led coalition and their Afghan allies, the new government repeated a mistake that had plagued Afghanistan for decades by concentrating power in Kabul in the hope of securing national unity. Under President Hamid Karzai and his successors, a neopatrimonial system took shape. Power was centralized in the presidency, and state resources were used to reward loyalty and maintain control. This arrangement fostered widespread corruption and produced a fragile coalition of elites. As William Maley (2020) notes, it allowed state authority to be used for personal gain, eroding public trust and creating fertile ground for criminal networks. The international community reinforced this problem by imposing a highly centralized, top-down governance model that ignored Afghanistan's diverse ethnic and tribal landscape. This represented a fundamental misunderstanding of the country's social structures, which had long relied on decentralized, informal systems of governance. This Soviet-era legacy of centralization alienated local communities and deepened the sense of exclusion outside Kabul (Murtazashvili & Murtazashvili, 2021).

Almost all foreign interventions in Afghanistan have been carried out in cooperation with domestic actors who have served as facilitators for external agendas – this is also true for the last of such adventures; the twenty years of building an Islamic Republic of Afghanistan are no exception from this pattern (cf. Whitlock, 2021; Deutscher Bundestag, 2024). One of the critical mistakes made by Afghan elites, particularly those in power, has been their perception of the country's social and ethnic diversity as a threat to national unity and a potential driver of disintegration. Based on this flawed understanding of Afghan

society, successive regimes over nearly three centuries have built a highly centralized political system aimed at suppressing local communities and preventing separatist movements. However, these centralized systems have consistently encountered resistance from local communities. Due to their incompatibility with Afghanistan's social structure and their lack of popular support, especially in the face of insurgent forces, they have repeatedly failed to sustain themselves and have collapsed over time. What was once viewed as a strategy for national unity and a mechanism for top-down development has, in fact, evolved into a fundamental problem. The centralized governance, originally intended to prevent fragmentation, has instead become a major source of instability (cf. Kux & Tenham, 1997; Sahrai, 2018).

From 1747, when Ahmad Shah Durrani, one of the commanders of Nader Shah Afshar, the Persian king, founded Afghanistan, until 1973, the country was governed as a monarchy. Governance during this period was primarily structured around tribal relations, with the Shah's own tribe serving as the foundation of political authority. Ahmad Shah Durrani had significant military skills, enabling him to conquer parts of India and effectively establish an empire. However, he was never able to resolve the internal power struggles over succession to the throne. Relations between the Shah and the tribes were consistently marked by tension (Rubin, 1988). Mobilizing tribal forces for military campaigns served only as a temporary solution, channeling their fighting capacity toward external enemies rather than addressing deeper structural divisions. The reign of Abdur Rahman Khan is an example of an attempt to establish a centralized political system, which some Afghan scholars have described as a successful case of state-building.[2] However, during his twenty-year rule, there were forty rebellions against him. His ability to overcome local opposition was largely due to the extreme violence he employed. For instance, in 1883, he brutally suppressed a rebellion by the Shinwari tribe in Nangarhar and ordered the construction of two large towers made from the severed heads of the dead as a warning to others (Khan, 1900). Throughout these years, the survival of the regime relied heavily on repressive military power that crushed any form of opposition with maximum force. As a result, the relationship between the state and society became deeply antagonistic. Local forces, rather than supporting the central government, often seized any opportunity to rebel or, at the very least, withheld support when the regime faced existential threats.

In some cases, changes in political regimes represent little more than a change in title rather than a fundamental change in structure and function. Afghanistan's transition from a monarchy to a republic in 1973 is an illustrative example. Mohammad Daoud Khan, who had previously served as prime minister under the last king, Mohammad Zahir Shah, led a coup in 1973 and established a new republic political system. However, this political system was far from a true republic; it was an authoritarian political system. In fact, many viewed it as a political setback when compared to the ongoing reforms during Mohammad Zahir Shah's reign (Giustozzi, 2013). This newly established "republic" was short-

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[2] It is important to note that Abdur Rahman Khan conducted severe crimes against the Hazara minority during his reign. In the last years there are discussions whether his policy between 1884 and 1905 against the Hazara need to be named as genocide (cf. Ibrahimi, 2017). In any case it is necessary to remember these crimes of Abdur Rahman Khan and not only his role in creating a centralized state power in today's Afghanistan. For a more recent study about the current Hazara minority in Afghanistan before the second takeover of the Taliban cf. (Monsutti, 2005).

lived. Daoud's promised democracy and republic quickly ended in "the dissolution of the democratically legitimized parliament and the banning of the free press. He brutally suppressed dissenters" (Samimy, 2016, p. 38; own translation). Consequently, it was overthrown in 1978 by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan. Mohammad Daoud Khan and several members of his family were killed in the coup.

From 1978 until 1992, Afghanistan was governed by a single-party regime under the name of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, led by members of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). The party's members identified as followers of communist ideology and aligned themselves closely with the Soviet Union. During their rule, individuals from ethnic minorities, previously marginalized, were able to enter government through party affiliation. However, the PDPA attempted to implement its reforms by imposing radical changes on Afghan society, often at great human cost. Large numbers of people were executed or imprisoned on charges of opposing the government, leading again to growing hostility between the state and society. This internal conflict was further exacerbated by the Soviet Union occupation of Afghanistan. Ultimately, the government, shaped by communist ideology and apparently committed to peace, development, justice, and equality among citizens, failed to achieve its goals. In the final months of Najibullah's rule, internal divisions within the government, especially along ethnic lines, intensified. In 1992, General Abdul Rashid Dostum, a powerful Uzbek military commander in northern Afghanistan, rebelled against the regime. Soon after, various provinces, and eventually the capital, Kabul, fell to Mujahideen forces, resulting in the collapse of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan.

The various Mujahideen parties, almost all of which bore the suffix "Islami" in their names, had declared their mission to establish an Islamic government in Afghanistan and promised to build a developed society based on religious values. However, they failed to establish an inclusive and effective government or to bring order and stability to the country. Instead, they engaged in violent power struggles, which resulted in the destruction of much of the nation's infrastructure. The civil war, which lasted for more than two decades, claimed the lives of tens of thousands and left many more injured. Most troubling was the transformation of the conflict into an ethnic and sectarian war. Whereas previous civil conflicts in Afghanistan had largely taken the form of confrontations between local communities and the central government, the intra-Mujahideen conflict became a war of all against all. This period marked not only the failure of the Afghan Mujahideen factions but also a broader failure of political Islam to deliver on its promises of a just and religiously grounded Islamic government. In 1994, another radical Islamist group entered the Afghan power struggle, denouncing the Mujahideen factions as deviants from Islam and proclaiming themselves the (only) true Muslims. This group became known as the Taliban, meaning students of religious schools. Formed and supported by Pakistan, the Taliban initially declared their mission to establish peace and security. However, after capturing large parts of Afghanistan, including the capital Kabul in 1996, they proclaimed the establishment of an Islamic Emirate. Rather than solving the country's problems, their rule added to them. The killing of civilians, widespread human rights violations, and systematic discrimination against women and ethnic minorities became a distinctive characteristic of the Taliban regime during its early years. Nevertheless, because multinational oil and gas companies viewed the group as a potential guarantor of regional

stability and a facilitator of energy routes from Central Asia to South Asia (Rashid, 2002), the international community largely refrained from taking serious action in response to these abuses.

The Taliban regime became a concern for the international community when its affiliate and sponsor, al-Qaeda, carried out terrorist attacks against the United States. In response to these attacks, a U.S.-led coalition launched a large-scale military operation in Afghanistan and overthrew the Taliban regime. Subsequently, without adequately considering Afghanistan's complex social and political realities, the United States, its allies, and some Afghan elites established a highly centralized political system (Dodge, 2021). For the United States, this appeared to be a straightforward solution for governing a traditional society, under the assumption that it could be more effectively managed by a strong, centralized government.

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, established with broad support from the international community after the 2001 intervention, lasted only twenty years and collapsed in August 2021. During this period, because of generous international support, the country made significant progress in the fields of education[3], healthcare, transportation, and communications. These two decades represented a valuable opportunity to bring about positive change (for developments in education cf. Bittlingmayer et al., 2019). A new generation was educated and was expected to contribute meaningfully to the country's stability and development. However, despite the services provided to the Afghan people, the divide between the government and society remained unresolved (Ibrahimi, 2024). This was largely due to the concentration of power and resources in the hands of a narrow ruling elite, and the lack of meaningful participation by local communities in governance (Schmeidl, 2016). As a result, when the government lost the support of the United States, it collapsed swiftly and failed to gain public backing. The burden of defending the government fell almost entirely on state-employed soldiers, whose numbers had declined in the final days due to combat losses and limited resources.

From today's perspective, the international, predominantly military, intervention in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021 is widely seen as a complete disaster. During that time an estimated one trillion dollars was spent by the U.S. government alone. The published evaluations of this campaign are full of harsh criticism. The German Enquete Commission concludes in its report the following:

"With the withdrawal (of military troops and non-military supporters; the authors) and the Taliban's seizure of power in 2021, Germany, together with its partners, has strategically failed to secure lasting results and achieve its goals. […] The international community lacked a long-term, coherent strategy that could be realistically implemented with the available capabilities and resources to promote a stable Afghanistan with sustainable security, reliable statehood and economic and social prospects for the future. […] The German side has also failed to engage sufficiently with Afghanistan's culture, history, and traditions. Existing knowledge of the country was largely ignored, especially at the beginning. There was insufficient understanding and integration of traditional

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[3] It is noteworthy that Afghanistan was among the top ten performer worldwide in the increasement of the gross enrolment rates between 1970 and 2005 (cf. Gray Molina & Purser, 2010, p. 46). Particularly, education and health care were routinely mentioned when societal progress in Afghanistan during the twenty years of the NATO-led occupation of this country was in question.

hierarchies and social structures, regional characteristics, and local power relations for the purpose of state-building." (Deutscher Bundestag, 2024, p. 6)

Most of the research presented in this anthology reflects the transition and backlash of the second takeover of the Taliban in Afghanistan. The Taliban, who first emerged in the 1990s as students of religious schools, have now seized power in Afghanistan for the second time and have rapidly implemented widespread gender discrimination against women and ethnic minorities (cf. Samar, 2024). They justify their discriminatory governance by invoking Islamic teachings and Sharia law. The Taliban openly declare democracy to be incompatible with Islam and deny the people any role in determining their political future. As a result, they have established their political system as an Islamic Emirate. The belief that Islam is incompatible with democracy is a core assumption of the political theology of the Taliban and other radical groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and ISIS-K. The first chapter addresses the religious foundations of extremism and totalitarian political theology. It analyzes the relationship between Islam and democracy in Afghanistan, focusing on the political views and actions of various Islamist parties. The most important finding is that the Taliban's rejection of democratic legitimacy lacks solid religious justification and reflects only a minority perspective in Afghanistan. Most other Islamist parties do not share this view.

In the first section, *Religion in Afghanistan*, two chapters address the relationship between religious education and extremism. The Taliban are graduates of religious schools who have established an authoritarian political system in the form of a theocracy. The most important conclusion drawn from these studies is that the radical political theology of groups like the Taliban is not an impartial interpretation of religious teachings, but rather a power-driven discourse used to justify political totalitarianism. While radical political interpretations of Islamic teachings have a long history in the Muslim world, their systematic promotion through religious schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan was part of a major political and military project during the 1980s. This project aimed to train ideologically motivated fighters for the war against the Soviet Union and was supported by member states of the U.S.-led coalition in the region. As such, extremist groups in this region do not have deep historical roots but are largely the products of geopolitical conflict between global powers. In contrast, tolerant interpretations of Islamic tradition are more popular in the Muslim world and can be seen as a valuable resource for countering extremism and terrorism (cf. for example Khan, 2021).

The Taliban's return to power is a serious issue that demands critical analysis. The victory of an extremist, anti-development, and anti-women group in a country that had seen two decades of progress, supported by generous international aid, raises urgent questions. In the chapter *How Misaligned State-Building Efforts Led to the Collapse of the Afghan Government*, the fall of the Afghan government and the Taliban's resurgence are analyzed as part of a recurring pattern of failed state-building in Afghanistan. Afghans and their international partners had the chance to reflect on the political history of Afghanistan and recognize the long-standing conflict between a centralized state and local communities. With international support and experience, they could have built a decentralized political system that included meaningful participation of local communities in governance. Instead, political instability was wrongly blamed on local power structures. At both the 2001 Bonn Conference and the 2003

Constitutional Loya Jirga, Afghanistan adopted the same flawed solution and built a highly centralized political system (Shahrani, 2018).

The concentration of power led to a monopoly over resources by a small group of Afghan political elites and severely limited meaningful political participation, especially by local communities. In this context, without public oversight, some political elites embezzled public funds and built extensive corruption networks. As a result, Afghanistan ranked among the most corrupt countries for several years. The lack of public participation, combined with widespread corruption and nepotism, weakened government effectiveness and fueled public dissatisfaction. A wide gap developed between the people and the state, leaving the government without genuine popular support (Larson, 2009). Its survival depended almost entirely on foreign backing, particularly from the United States. When that support ended, the government collapsed quickly. This collapse was not a unique event but part of a recurring political pattern in Afghanistan. The problem remains poorly understood, and no solution with broad Afghan consensus has been put forward. It is ironic that the concentration of power, which has repeatedly proven to be a cause of instability, is still promoted as the path to a stable and developed society.

The second section in this anthology focuses on *Education in Afghanistan under Taliban rule*. These studies indicate that the Taliban, through discriminatory policies, have deprived women of access to education, which has severely damaged the country's human resources. They have also changed the management structure and curriculum of the education system, claiming to "Islamicize" it. Subjects on human rights, democracy, and other topics they label as secular have been removed from school and university curricula, replaced with religious content based on the Taliban's interpretation of Islam. A representative from the so-called morality police now oversees university affairs in line with Taliban directives, which has effectively eliminated academic freedom. The Taliban have also expanded a parallel education system made up of Madrasas (religious schools), whose reach now rivals that of the formal school system built over recent years with international support. These Madrasas teach religious teachings aligned with the Taliban's ideology. A major concern is that these Madrasas may serve as centers of radicalization and fuel extremism in Afghanistan and across the region.

The critical question now is how to overcome the Taliban's educational restrictions in Afghanistan, particularly concerning women's education. Based on the research in this chapter, a solution exists. The Afghan diaspora, especially the significant number of Afghan university professors in exile, can collaborate with international donors, educational institutions, and universities. This partnership can provide access to education and academic activities for Afghans, particularly women, through online platforms. The relative success of online education in Afghanistan during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates its potential as an emergency educational service. Before the Taliban's 2021 takeover, effective partnerships existed between some Afghan and international universities. This experience can now be applied to support education in Afghanistan. While collaborating with state universities under direct Taliban control presents challenges due to international sanctions, private universities offer significant potential for such cooperation. It's important to note that these private institutions still require support in various educational and research areas. Partnering with foreign organizations and universities would strengthen their capabilities. Given that many private universities in Afghanistan now face

severe financial hardship and are on the verge of collapse due to the Taliban's restrictions, supporting them is crucial to ensuring the continuity of their educational activities.

The Taliban's extensive restrictions on women's work outside the home haven't eliminated employment opportunities for Afghan women. Resourceful, educated women with internet access are circumventing these rules by working remotely and online. In rural regions, the Taliban's inability to fully monitor all villages means women can continue their work in the agricultural sector. However, these limited opportunities for women's employment require significant support, particularly in training and capacity building. To successfully enter the online job market, Afghan women need to develop relevant skills, which are often underdeveloped within the current Afghan education system, even among educated women. Similarly, rural women require capacity building to produce profitable agricultural products and effectively raise livestock. Furthermore, for women to succeed in the agricultural sector, they need essential skills in marketing and selling their products. This means rural women still require capacity building and other relevant support. It's crucial to understand that these limited educational and employment opportunities for women don't normalize their lives under Taliban rule. Afghan women face severe gender discrimination, yet these very limited opportunities can still be used to support their education and employment.

The chapters in the third section focus on *Health in Afghanistan*. For many years, Afghanistan has struggled to develop an effective health system. While the Western-backed government made relatively good progress in providing health services, it never fully overcame the sector's inherent challenges. With the Taliban's return to power, some of these gains were reversed, and healthcare provision faced even greater hurdles. Although a general decline in health services is evident, the consequences of the Taliban government's policies for women's health are particularly disastrous. Women in Afghanistan have historically been more vulnerable in terms of health compared to men. Therefore, most chapters in this section are dedicated to women's health, aiming to document their experiences under these difficult circumstances.

The last section addresses the multifaceted crisis encompassing political instability, failing health and education systems, and pervasive gender discrimination against *Women in Afghanistan*.[4] These issues are complex and stem from diverse backgrounds, but a significant contributing factor is the ineffectiveness and decline of Afghan governments. Historically, Afghan governments have been highly centralized and controlled substantial resources. Compounding this, the prevailing approach to state-building among Afghan elites and their international supporters has consistently favored a highly centralized state. This strategy inadvertently fostered a monopoly of power and resources among Afghan political elites, effectively marginalizing the people,

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[4] The current gender policy of the Taliban is such discriminatory that in January 2025 the International Criminal Court located in The Hague published arrest warrants for Taliban leaders (cf. UN News 2025); even though this is an important step to scandalize the gender-based persecution in Afghanistan that is almost unique worldwide, this step is not free from ambivalences. Thomas Ruttig (2025), probably the most well-known Afghanistan expert in Germany stated the following: "However, Karim Khan's (approach to Afghanistan is controversial. Although he resumed the temporarily suspended investigation into the situation there in March 2022, he limited it to the actions of the Taliban and Islamic State. His predecessor, Fatou Bensouda, also wanted to investigate violations by US and allied Afghan government forces. This led President Donald Trump to impose sanctions on her and three other ICC judges.

particularly at the local level, from meaningful participation in governance. Consequently, a persistent conflict between society and government has emerged. This ongoing conflict is a primary driver of political instability and exacerbates challenges across the education, health, economic, and security sectors.

Despite Afghanistan's complex problems and the Taliban's destructive policies, opportunities still exist to support the Afghan people, especially women, in education, employment, and health. Although many of Afghanistan's human resources, particularly in education, have left the country, they can continue to contribute by collaborating with academics, educational institutions, and non-governmental organizations in their host countries to support education within Afghanistan. Even with the numerous restrictions imposed by the Taliban, non-governmental organizations can still operate in Afghanistan. Decades of political instability and under-development have fostered a patient and resilient Afghan society, one that has consistently resisted misguided policies from its rulers. For instance, the rise of informal and underground schools for girls, alongside women's continued employment in handicrafts and agriculture, exemplified women's civil resistance against the Taliban's restrictions on their education and work. Supporting the Afghan people, particularly women, will help preserve the gains Afghanistan has made with international community assistance and prevent further deterioration of the situation.

The concluding chapter argues the Taliban government will not be sustainable because of domestic illegitimacy, internal divisions, and increasing tensions with neighboring countries.

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Part 1: Religion in Context

Chapter 2

Democracy and Islam in Afghanistan

Mohammad Javad Salehi

In Afghanistan, however, the debate between democracy and Islam has always existed, and each has its supporters and opponents, but the mujahideen have always insisted on competition and participation. They have never rejected elections and other democratic values. But in practice they did not succeed in holding fair and just elections. They always argued and fought with each other, and Afghanistan was left burning in the fire of their civil wars. This situation led to emergence of totalitarian regime of Taliban that completely rejected any kind of political competition and participation of people calling on everyone to obey Amirul Momenin and to enforce Sharia law. This interpretation of Islam is now dominant, but among majority of political activists, intellectuals and Muslim scholars in Afghanistan, it is only a minority view.

So, the question is why did the undemocratic Taliban regime come to power? And what is the position of this regime among Islamic parties and groups?

The process of formation and expansion of anti-democratic ideologies among Islamic groups in Afghanistan is the subject of this article, and it will deal with in describing this process.

Keywords: *democracy, Islam, Taliban, Mujahideen, anti-democratic ideologies*

Introduction

Muslim scholars have been studying the relationship between democracy and Islam since its emergence in Europe, particularly since the French Revolution in 1879. Each of them has presented different opinions and theories in this field, and so far no theoretical consensus has been observed. These views have included a wide range of theories, from complete rejection and negation of democracy to full compatibility with it.

In Afghanistan, too, the fundamental question is: what is the position of democracy among Islamic parties and groups in Afghanistan? Are Islamic groups in Afghanistan opposed to democracy? Does the return of the Taliban to power mean the end of democratic ideas in Afghanistan? How did the Taliban's anti-democratic ideology emerge? The process of formation and expansion of anti-democratic ideologies among Islamic groups in Afghanistan is the subject of this article, and it will deal in describing this process. The article is therefore divided into four parts. Definition of the concept, theoretical discussion, democracy under the mujahideen and the emergence of the Taliban.

Definition of democracy

Democracy does not have a single definition; political scientists have looked at it from different perspectives and have come up with different definitions. In general, however, it can be said that there are three main interpretations of this concept among scholars: majority democracy, legal democracy, and competitive democracy.

Majority Democracy: According to this perspective, the will of the majority is the essence and heart of democracy, and the majority never makes mistakes. The correct ideas and beliefs are always to be found in the minds of the majority of people, while the wrong beliefs are always to be found in the minds of the minorities. In this interpretation, which has its roots in "Jean-Jacques Rousseau", there is an emphasis on public and universal participation, and there is no role for competition and the multiplicity of groups and parties. It is not concerned with respecting the rights and freedoms of minorities and dissenters. The will of the majority alone is sufficient for the realization and manifestation of democracy (Dahl, 2008).

Legal Democracy: The second interpretation is rooted in the ideas of "John Locke" and his concept of minimal government. In this perspective, "concentrated power" is seen as dangerous and corrupting, and any form of "absolute power" leads to absolute corruption. When the will of the majority deviates from the rule of law, it becomes the most dangerous form of absolute power. Because it claims to represent the will of the people. A government based solely on the will of the majority not only fails to establish democracy, but can also lead to the most tyrannical state.

Therefore, in order to create the conditions for democracy, it is essential to limit the powers of institutions within legal boundaries, and the government must respect the individual and group rights and freedoms of citizens. The powers and responsibilities of the government should be minimized and the rights of minorities must be protected. The majority should never have the right to violate the rights of minorities, and should serve merely as a means of consultation to safeguard the interests of individuals and minorities (Lijphart,

1999). Thus, the essence of democracy lies in respecting the rights and freedoms of citizens and minimizing interference in their lives.

Competitive Democracy: This definition originated from Schumpeter. He states: "Democracy is a method for reaching political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote." In this definition, the fundamental pillar of democracy is the competition among elites to reach decision-making positions, and the role of the people is primarily limited to selecting candidates from available options. They do not necessarily have a direct role in decision-making, and "the ruling groups are not necessarily responsible to the people" (Schumpeter, 2013) .

In this definition, competition and participation are at the heart of democracy, and the existence of instruments of competition such as political parties, the separation of powers, a free press, and legal instruments of participation such as elections, peaceful demonstrations and civil society are essential for democracy. Competition and participation are the tangible and external manifestations of democracy, and democracy is measured by these criteria.

This interpretation takes a more pragmatic view of the nature of democracy, seeing its essence not in the rule of the majority or minority, but in competition and diversity among elites. The fundamental difference between democratic and authoritarian systems is that in autocratic regimes, political power is concentrated in the hands of a single group, which rules autocratically. In democratic governments, however, several groups compete for the votes of the people, and this competition provides opportunities for people to make choices and express their opinions. Therefore, the difference between political systems lies in degree, not in kind, and democracy is simply a method of governance that can be adapted to different cultures.

This chapter uses the term 'competitive democracy' to explore how Islamic groups in Afghanistan view competition and participation in politics.

Theoretical framework

In general, there are three fundamental questions at the heart of political thought. The answers to these questions determine the nature of any political ideology and define the relationship between government and the people. These questions are:

1. Who has the right to govern?

2. Who runs it?

3. For whom is the government?

How these questions are answered determines the nature of political thought and the relationship between the government and the people. Therefore, to understand political theories in Islam in general, and their relationship to democracy in particular, it is essential to examine the perspectives of Muslim scholars on these three questions.

Muslim scholars have given various answers to these questions over time, but in general these answers can be categorized into three main viewpoints.

The viewpoint of appointment

In this view, sovereignty belongs inherently and exclusively to God, because God is the Creator of nature and humanity, and therefore He has the right to rule over them. In this perspective, no one shares His authority. God's sovereignty was first ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad, then to the rightly guided caliphs in Sunni Islam, and to the imams in Shi'a Islam. Since the time of the caliphs and imams, however, religious scholars (fuqaha) have been regarded as the legitimate successors to this authority, and governance has been transferred to them.

In this view, the right to govern belongs exclusively to the religious scholars (fuqaha), who are tasked with safeguarding Islam and implementing Sharia law. The role of the general population in governance is diminished, as they have no active role in political decision-making. Religious scholars, like the Prophets and Imams, are appointed by God to rule, and opposition to them is seen as opposition to God and His Messenger. Religious scholars (fuqaha) carry out governance to secure God's satisfaction, and the duty of the people is primarily to obey divine commands. Opposition to them is considered an act of disbelief (kufr) and is punishable by death (Khomeini, 1981).

This view emphasizes a theocratic form of government in which religious scholars are the ultimate authorities in both religious and political matters, and the people are expected to submit to their rulings without question. It is important to note that this perspective is one of several within Islamic political thought, and there are different interpretations and variations in how these ideas are applied in different Islamic communities and countries.

The viewpoint of election

From this point of view, the right to rule is God's right, but this right has been delegated to the Prophet and his successors: the rightly guided caliphs in Sunni Islam and the infallible Imams in Shia Islam. However, following their era, this right was transferred to the people. According to this view, the people have the right to elect their government and, if necessary, to dismiss it. The legitimacy and sovereignty of the government depend on the people, and public opinion plays a fundamental role in the legitimacy of an Islamic government. No one has the right to exercise authority without the consent of the people. However, this role is subject to compliance with religious principles, and people have the right to choose within the limits of religious teachings. Beyond that, they have no such right (Maududi, 1980).

The composite view

According to the composite perspective, governance is based on the continuation of the leadership of qualified jurists (fuqaha) in the lineage of the Prophet and the infallible Imams. Their leadership is divine and rooted in religious texts. In other words, the leadership of qualified jurists is based on appointment and derives from the will of God. However, it is a reality that needs to be validated and updated, which requires public approval. Governance therefore has both a status and an actuality. Just as the status has specific characteristics and is not possessed by everyone, the actuality also has its own characteristics, which cannot be achieved by any religious credibility. Therefore, they consider the

consent of the people as the condition of actuality and believe that the imposition of government by force and coercion lacks religious legitimacy (Arasta, 2000).

In this perspective, the views of the people are given special importance, and the consent of the people is considered a condition for the exercise of government. According to this view, no one has the right to govern the people without their will.

Democracy under the Mujahideen

The process of forming Islamic groups in Afghanistan began in 1969 when they were inspired by the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. They began their activities in the universities of Kabul. Their main aim was to counter left-wing groups active in Afghan universities and intellectual circles. They formed an organization called Islamic Youth under the leadership of Abdul Rahim Niazi and began to organize Muslim Youth.

In 1974, the members of this group came under the scrutiny of the Daoud government and were forced to flee to Pakistan. Internal disagreements within this group eventually led to its split in 1975. After the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan coup in 1978, they reunited and formed a new organization called Harakat-i-Inqilab-i-Islami-yi Afghanistan. This union was short-lived, however, and the leader of the union, "Mawlawi Mohammad Nabi", transformed it into a new party, adding tribal elements. In 1978-1979, two new groups emerged, the Mahaz-e Milli-ye Islami-ye Afghanistan, and the Ittihad-i-Islami. This led to the disintegration of the Union (Roy, 1984).

The Hezb-e Wahdat was established in Bamyan in 1989 by eight parties, mostly Hazare. They started their activities from Kabul and later moved to Hazare area in central Afghanistan. During the jehad they liberated their regions from the central government and organized resistance activities in different cities. In 1986 they created the "Council of Coalition" and after 5 years it led to formation of "Islamic Unity Party" (Hezb e Wahdat). they protected always from democracy and human rights.

The situation continued to evolve, and by the 1980s a number of Afghan mujahideen groups had grown to form a complex landscape of political and military organizations. The influence of foreign actors, particularly during the Soviet-Afghan war, also played an important role in shaping the dynamics of these groups. These developments ultimately led to the emergence of different factions and parties among the Afghan mujahideen, each with its own leadership and objectives.

Most Mujahideen groups consistently emphasized the importance of competition and participation in government. Among the Mujahideen, only a smaller group, such as the Hezb-e Islami led by "Mawlavi Yunus Khales", held views that were opposed to democratic values and human rights. They adopted a more exclusionary and less democratic approach, often targeting the political participation of women, minorities and Shi'ites. However, the failure of these groups to establish a stable democracy paved the way for the emergence of the Taliban.

The coup against President Daoud in 1978 and the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan a little later in 1979 was a major turning point and the beginning of

the never-ending crisis in Afghanistan. This led to more than four decades of armed conflict, the emergence of the Taliban and many negative consequences for the region and the world.

The withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1988-1989 was a great victory for the mujahideen, and they saw themselves on the verge of taking power in Kabul. So, they began to build a state in Pakistan. In practice, however, this was the beginning of an escalation of disputes, continuous civil wars and, finally, the emergence of the Taliban.

The first Mujahedeen government was established in 1988 under the leadership of Ahmad Shah Ahmadzai by Mujahedeen in Peshawar without any other Mujahedeen group in Iran. This government was based in Pakistan and initially consisted of Pashtun and Tajik factions without Hazaras and Uzbeks. However, this interim government was short-lived and collapsed after six months due to infighting and lack of cooperation.

The interim government faced many problems and challenges from the outset, with each group wanting a greater share of power and no group being satisfied with less power, and after only six months Ahmad Shah Ahmadzai officially declared its dissolution, saying that (they had been unable to do anything beyond issuing statements).

This early attempt at a mujahideen government highlights the complexities and divisions within the mujahideen factions that would ultimately contribute to the prolonged civil war and the eventual rise of the Taliban. The period following this first government saw increased factional fighting and instability in Afghanistan, with various warlords and factions vying for power.

The second Mujahideen government was also formed in 1989 by various Mujahideen parties in Peshawar, Pakistan, and excluded Hazaras and Uzbeks from participating. On 4 December 1989, Sibghatullah Mojaddedi, who had received the most votes (174), was elected by direct vote of the members of mujahideen groups in Pakistan to head this interim government. In a press conference, Mojaddedi outlined the goals and programs of the new government, emphasizing the need to prevent further conflict and bloodshed between Afghan groups after the fall of the previous regime.

However, much like its predecessor, this government faced internal divisions and challenges. It struggled to maintain stability and unity among the mujahideen factions, and disintegrated relatively quickly. These early attempts to form Mujahideen governments underscore the difficulties of achieving political cohesion and stability during this period in Afghanistan's history. The lack of consensus and continued factionalism contributed to the country's continued instability, setting the stage for further conflict and the eventual rise of the Taliban.

Three years after the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, the Soviet-backed government also collapsed and the mujahideen attempted to form the government of their choice in Pakistan. As a result, parties and groups based in Peshawar, with the exception of the Hazaras and Uzbeks, met in Peshawar to determine the future government of Afghanistan.

Once again, however, differences prevented them from reaching agreement. Finally, under pressure from Nawaz Sharif, Saud al-Faisal and Arab sheikhs, they agreed to form an interim government for two months with a new

leadership that would take power in Kabul. After two months, power would be handed over to Rabbani for four months. Rabbani was to chair the Leadership Council (or Shura-e-Qiyadi) during this period and hand over power to the council, which would then determine the future government. During this period, Hekmatyar would be the prime minister of the Islamic government. In this way, the Third Mujahideen Government was formed and prepared to move to Kabul to take power.

As the Mujahideen prepared to move on Kabul again, the city had already been taken by the Mujahideen on the fifth of Sawr (25 April). Upon the entry of the Mujahideen, different areas of Kabul were divided between different Mujahideen groups, each controlling its own area within the city. The army, the Ministry of Interior Affairs and other government agencies aligned themselves with one of these groups on the basis of ethnic, religious, regional and personal affiliations, and handed over government resources such as government buildings and weapons to their chosen factions. As a result, different parts of Kabul and government resources were divided among rival groups.

Sibghatullah Mojaddedi and his companions were unable to enter Kabul by air and had to travel to Kabul by land. Upon their return to the city, the transfer of power took place that same afternoon. Sibghatullah Mojaddedi assumed the role of the first leader of the Islamic government and began his work in the Golkhana Palace.

The victory of the mujahideen opened a new chapter in Afghanistan. The war against the Soviet Union and its allies came to an end in the country, and for a limited period, stability and prosperity prevailed in the nation. The world and the people of Afghanistan celebrated the defeat of the Soviet Union, and the mujahideen were proud of their victory. But this celebration and triumph did not last long. Soon, different parts of Kabul and the country as a whole became the scene of power struggles among the mujahideen, leading to civil war.

After two months in power, in accordance with the Peshawar Agreement, Mojaddedi handed over power to the Leadership Council on April 28, 1992 1992, and this Council elected "Burhanuddin Rabbani" as President of the country (Azimi, 1997).

The fourth Mujahideen government, led by Burhanuddin Rabbani, was formed in Kabul in 1371 (1992), but it too failed to resolve the conflicts between the Mujahideen, instead intensifying factional warfare. His government became known as the "Four-Way Intersection Government" due to the increased factional fighting and instability within Kabul.

After four months in power, Rabbani's presidency came to an end. The "Leadership Council" extended Rabbani's term for another 45 days at a meeting on 17/7/1371 (9 October 1992). They instructed his government to conduct negotiations during this period and to transfer power to the council, which would then decide on the future government.

However, the process of holding elections was not completed and various political parties and groups accused Rabbani's government of electoral fraud and imposed sanctions on it. Sibghatullah Mojaddedi said: "Rabbani's supporters were trying to create an artificial leadership council that would not be legitimate. "I strongly believe that if a council is formed, it will be a fabricated and fraudulent council." The Hezb-e Islami (Islamic Party) considered the formation of the

council an 'act of war', and the Hezb-e Wahdat (Unity Party) and the Junbish-i Milli-yi Islami-yi (National Islamic Movement) rejected it.

Rabbani's government insisted on the validity of the election and the need for the council. In the end, the 'leadership council' was held, with over a thousand representatives in attendance, a day later than planned. Rabbani, as the only presidential candidate, was elected president for an eighteen-month term. This decision further intensified the conflicts between the mujahideen and ushered in a new era of fighting and violence in Kabul.

Fighting soon broke out between the Shura-e Nazar led by Ahmad Shah Massoud and the Hezb-e Islami led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar., and between the 'Alliance of the Sword' and the Hezb-e Wahdat. The situation in Kabul deteriorated rapidly, leading to intense fighting.

Despite efforts to form an acceptable and consensual government in Kabul, the ongoing conflict continued and numerous attempts were made to reach a consensus among all Mujahideen, both inside and outside the country. In Islamabad, the Islamic Unity of the Mujahideen signed a new agreement and regional countries provided guarantees. However, this government did not achieve a lasting solution, and the emergence of the Taliban meant that the conflict with the Mujahideen and the war in Kabul and other provinces continued.

Emergence of Taliban (1994)

The repeated failures of mujahideen groups to establish a widely accepted government in Afghanistan paved the way for the emergence of the Taliban. This new group, with a more traditional approach than most mujahedeen groups, took over Kandahar in 1994. They declared their objective as the rule of God on earth.

Taliban declared that by implementing the Sharia law, we have made millions of people from Herat to Jalalabad and Kabul feel safe. No one can engage in theft or other crimes. We did not create this law; it is a law revealed by God to the Prophet Muhammad. Those who label the enforcement of this law as inhumane insult all Muslims and their beliefs (Crews & Tarzi, 2008).

The leaders of this group received their education in religious schools in Pakistan. Mullah Omar and many members of the Taliban leadership council were graduates of religious schools established by the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam party. Many Taliban commanders and members of the leadership are graduates of such seminaries, which are affiliated with the broader Deobandi movement and often have ties to Pakistan's Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam party. The Deobandi movement is an Islamic revivalist movement that emerged in the Indian subcontinent. It was founded in 1866 with the establishment of the Darul Uloom Deoband seminary in Deoband, India. The movement was influenced by the teachings of the 18th-century scholar Shah Waliullah Dehlawi (1703–1762). According to him, Islam had lost its true essence, and it needed to be revived (Metcalf, 2014). They did not believe in mourning, praising, honoring the great men, building tombs, and the like (Roy, 1984).

The Deobandi School has a long history in South Asia and has had a significant influence on the religious beliefs and practices of the Taliban. The

school rejects innovation (bid'ah) in Islam and believes in the strict implementation of Islamic Sharia. They also consider saint worship as forbidden. Despite this, they have embraced Sufism, and many of their scholars are followers of the Naqshbandi or Qadri Sufi orders. They reject nationalism and believe in Islamic unity regardless of borders (Roy, 1990). According to Ahmad Rashid (2002), the Deobandi have a deep-seated animosity towards Shia Muslims, considering them as infidels, which extends to being anti-Iran. They targeted Iran and Shia Muslims and perpetrated the massacre of Shia Muslims in Mazar-e-Sharif. They also killed Iranian diplomats.

Some believe (Rashid, 2002) that many of the Taliban's beliefs, especially those concerning women, have tribal origins. The Taliban's interpretation of Islam Is heavily influenced by the Pashtunwali code, which is the tribal code of the Pashtuns. While some Muslim scholars banned women from participating in politics, the Taliban went further and prohibited women from education and work.

In summary, the Taliban's religious beliefs are rooted in the Deobandi school of thought. However, the Taliban's interpretation of this school of thought is tribal, and their nationalist beliefs strongly influence their religious views.

Political beliefs of the Taliban

The Taliban believe that the government should be exclusively under the control of religious scholars (ulema), and these scholars have the authority to make decisions on all matters. Amir al-Muminin (Leader of Taliban) believes that religious scholars have the capability to do any responsibility assigned to them. Their knowledge of religious sciences is a solid foundation, and they possess the understanding of what is permissible and forbidden in all areas of human inclinations. According to him, it is not impossible for a cleric to hold positions like the Minister of Commerce, Minister of Roads and Transportation, or Minister of Health because he believes that the head of an Islamic government should be appointed based on piety, righteousness, and knowledge of what is permissible and forbidden, not based on skills, expertise, or qualifications (Semple, 2014).

Taliban reject democracy and instead emphasize Islamic government should derive all its authority from God. According to them Islamic government means that all authority comes from God. Only God is the fundamental source of governance, and no one has the right to legislate except Him, in contrast to the democratic system, which derives authority from the people and allows the people to make laws. The basis of governance in Islam is faith and complete submission to Allah, not faith in the people. Those systems that are established based on democratic principles are different. The authority and duties of the Amir al-Mu'minin are absolute, and he has no obligation to accept the opinions of others or seek consultation. A group of scholars who always advise him accompanies him but the final decision lies with him. Because all of the Taliban have sworn loyalty to him, and he has been chosen as the Amir al-Mu'minin. So, no one has the right to oppose him, and if someone assigns a responsibility to him, there is no choice but to accept it (Haqqani, 1999).

Participation and competition have no place in the Taliban government. They believe that existing political parties should disband and that new parties have no right to emerge. In their view, the Taliban organization is the only legitimate group. According to Mullah Omar, Political parties are formed based on racial,

tribal, linguistic, and perhaps, pre-Islamic prejudices. This leads to problems, enmity, and division among the people. For these parties, divisions do not exist in the Islamic land because Muslims are brothers under the Islamic system and are equal before the law in terms of rights and obligations. The Taliban movement and the Islamic government welcome all sincere Afghan nationals, and what happened after the liberation of Afghanistan, such as civil wars and other problems, were all the results of the multiplicity of jihadist parties. Now, many true Mujahedeen have joined the Taliban, and other individuals can also serve their religion and homeland by joining us (Haqqani, 1999).

One of the Taliban's leaders stated, "Suspicion and slander against us, as we believe and as Ulema say, constitute disbelief because we seek to implement God's religion and the tradition of the Prophet (peace be upon him), and people speak ill of us. This is considered disbelief because vilification is regarded as opposing the way and tradition of the Prophet (Haqqani, 1999). According to Mullah Omar, the former Taliban's leader, the great responsibility (implementing the rules of God) lies on the shoulders of ulema, and if this movement is defeated or deviates, it will be due to the absence of ulema because they have not fulfilled their role. If ulema today recognize that I am obligated to resign or see that I bear a heavy burden on the Taliban movement, I will immediately resign. This pact is for religious students, not for sinful people. If ulema sees a mistake or error in one of the Taliban, he must correct himself or leave the ranks of the Taliban. Any word that comes out of the ulema's mind will be implemented immediately. If we deviate from the right path, ulema will take us out or remove us from the scene and remain steadfast in the path of truth (Haqqani, 1999).

However, the Taliban government did not last long, and it was attacked by the United States and its allies after the 11 September attacks on the World Trade Center in New York by the Al-Qaeda network. After about a month of resistance, their government collapsed.

Formation of a new government in Bonn, Germany (2001)

After the fall of the Taliban at the end of 2001, Afghan political groups and parties, in cooperation with the international community, held a conference in Bonn, Germany. They reached an agreement on the establishment of an interim government, led by Hamid Karzai, to manage interim affairs, draft the Afghan constitution and organize elections. On the basis of this agreement, the Transitional Administration led by Hamid Karzai took office at the end of 2001. The Afghan constitution was drafted in 2002 with the participation of various groups, political parties, the international community, academics and through public referendums. It provided an appropriate framework for public participation and political competition, and guaranteed individual and collective freedoms for Afghan citizens.

Return of the Taliban to power (2021)

By 2021, this government had also collapsed and the Taliban had regained control of Afghanistan. With the collapse of the democratic system in Afghanistan, the political parties and groups of the republican era scattered to different countries, and even after two years of exile they have not achieved the necessary cohesion. Most of them are in favor of holding elections in Afghanistan. They oppose the Taliban's conservative and anti-modern views and support democracy, the rule of law and the protection of the human rights.

Conclusion

The relationship between democracy and Islam has long been a subject of debate and discussion among Muslim scholars. However, their interpretations of the issue have varied and they have at times expressed different perspectives. Islamic groups in Afghanistan have emphasized competition and participation since their formation. However, their failure to strengthen and consolidate democracy in Afghanistan paved the way for the emergence of the Taliban, who were educated in Pakistani madrasas, adhere to 'Deobandi ideology' and have a Pashtun tribal background. They oppose modernity and democratic ideals, human rights, women's rights and the rights of minorities, seeing them as foreign and non-Islamic. The competition between these two groups continues and it is unlikely that non-democratic ideologies will gain ground in the long term.

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Chapter 3

Religious Education and Radicalization in Afghanistan

Mohammad Baqer Zaki & Uwe H. Bittlingmayer

Religious radicalization in Afghanistan has been a painful reality for over forty years, and Afghans are paying the highest price. Its relation to religious education is particularly significant. The Taliban are an example. All the leaders of this extremist movement studied in religious schools, and they have enforced some of the harshest forms of discrimination and violence, especially against women and ethnic and religious minorities. They justify these actions through an extreme interpretation of Islam. But the roots of religious extremism in Afghanistan go beyond religious education. The US led coalition's campaign against the Soviet Union in the 1980s played a major role. As part of that campaign, religious schools that often promoted hardline interpretations of Islam trained fighters to fight against the Red Army in Afghanistan. A new generation of graduates from those schools, the Taliban now use religious radicalization to sustain their power. Since reclaiming power in 2021, the Taliban have established more than 20,000 religious schools, much more than what the former Afghan government established over two decades.

Keywords: education, radicalization, Taliban, madrasa

Introduction

In Afghanistan, the Taliban have established a government known as the Islamic Emirate, which exemplifies religious extremism. This regime has banned women from education beyond the sixth grade, imposed severe restrictions on women's employment and activities outside the home, and prohibited them from traveling without a male family member. Furthermore, the government is mono-ethnic, with all key decision-making positions held by Pashtuns, and it practices widespread, multidimensional discrimination against other ethnic groups, including Hazaras, Uzbeks, and Tajiks (Bennett, 2024). This discrimination ranges from denying these groups political and social participation to more severe measures, such as land confiscation, arbitrary detention, and targeted killings (Amnesty International, 2023).

The Taliban took severe and violent actions during their rule in the late 1990s. For instance, on February 27, 1998, a woman accused of adultery was publicly whipped 100 times in Kabul stadium in front of 30,000 spectators. On the same day, two thieves had their right hands amputated, while three robbers had their right hands and left feet cut off in a public stadium in southern Afghanistan. Convicted murderers were executed publicly through methods like hanging, throat-slitting, or having walls toppled onto them. In March 1997, a woman accused of adultery was stoned to death. On March 13, 1998, a murderer was executed by the victim's brother, who shot him twice with a machine gun. The Taliban also carried out extrajudicial killings and massacres during their conflict with opposing groups. In August 1998, they perpetrated what is considered one of the worst ethnic massacres in Afghanistan's recent history, systematically killing between 2,000 and 8,000 Hazara civilians in Mazar-e Sharif(Human Rights Watch, 1998). In May 1999, they abducted and killed hundreds of Hazara civilians, including women, children, and the elderly, in the Hazara-dominated Bamiyan province (Amnesty International, 1999).

The Taliban justify their actions as the enforcement of Islamic law (sharia) (Mogul, 2022). The majority of their members and all their leaders are graduates of religious schools (madrasas). Therefore, the Taliban's violent extremism is introduced as a form of religious radicalism. However, their violent conducts stand in contrast to the historical legacy of Islamic culture in the region. Khorasan, the historical region encompassing present-day Afghanistan, has a distinguished history of religious tolerance. For centuries, this region, strategically located along the Silk Road, served as a hub for diverse cultures and religions. Prior to the advent of Islam, religious traditions such as Zoroastrianism and Buddhism were prominent (Yusuf, 2010). Following the introduction of Islam, Muslim scholars sought to contextualize Islamic teachings within the region's cultural and religious traditions, accommodating the pluralism that characterized their society. This intellectual environment gave rise to religious schools such as Sufism, exemplified by figures like Jalal al-Din Mohammad Balkhi (1207–1273), widely known as Rumi, whose thought is distinguished by themes of love and religious tolerance (Akhlaq, 2012; Ganji, 2019).

A region historically characterized by moderation and religious tolerance is now governed by a religious regime responsible for extensive human rights violations against its citizens, under the pretext of enforcing Sharia. Understanding the emergence of such a radical and violent interpretation of religious teachings, which is unprecedented in the history of this region and unique globally, requires an analysis of its social, political, and epistemological

background. I try to explain the epistemological sources of religious education and the processes through which extremist interpretations of religious texts in Afghanistan have developed, leading to the radicalization of a significant number of religious students who are now widely known as the Taliban. From a sociological perspective, religious knowledge, like all forms of knowledge, is shaped by the social and political contexts in which it arises. Therefore, I explain the historical processes that have contributed to the rise of religious extremism, grounded in radical interpretations of religious principles.

Historical context of the radical interpretation of Islam in Afghanistan

The religious extremism in Afghanistan has been significantly shaped by broader movements of political Islam within the Muslim world. The early leaders of the Islamic movement in Afghanistan, who sought to overthrow the Afghan government and establish an Islamic state, drew substantial ideological inspiration from the Muslim Brotherhood. Ghulam Mohammad Niazi, a graduate of Al-Azhar University in Egypt was an influential figure in this movement (Roy, 1984). Burhanuddin Rabbani, Abdul Rab Rasool Sayyaf, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and Ahmad Shah Masoud, who later led jihadi factions, were affiliated with this ideological network.

The Taliban are graduates of religious schools (madrasas) situated in the border regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Many of these madrasas follow the Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith educational frameworks (Palmer & Palmer, 2008). The Darul Uloom (= House of Knowledge) Deoband, established in 1866 by Mohammad Qasim Nanotawi in India, serves as an influential model for most of these institutions. Within these religious schools, Islamic studies are taught in accordance with the Deobandi curriculum.

It is surprising that the founders of Darul Uloom Deoband, in contrast to the violent extremism of the Taliban, sought to establish an Islamic educational system that would offer Islamic education to individuals pursuing Islamic studies while preserving the legacy of Islamic education in India. Their objective was to ensure that Islamic education remained active alongside the modern education system developed by British colonial authorities (Burkhanadin et al., 2023). Darul Uloom Deoband has historically refrained from endorsing acts of violence perpetrated by radical Islamist groups. In recent years, as the region has witnessed a rise in Islamic extremism, Darul Uloom Deoband has explicitly condemned violence committed in the name of Islam. In February 2008, Darul Uloom Deoband issued an official condemnation of terrorism, asserting that "the religion of Islam has come to eliminate all forms of terrorism and promote global peace". Furthermore, on 31 May 2008, the institution issued a fatwa declaring terrorism to be un-Islamic. Since then, Darul Uloom Deoband, in collaboration with its affiliated organization, Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind (JUH has continuously organized meetings and conferences to denounce terrorism and mobilize opposition against it (The Times of India, 2008).

The rise of violent religious extremism in the religious schools of Afghanistan and Pakistan today is largely a result of political developments and power struggles in the region. Over the years, different national and regional forces have competed for power, often using religion as a tool to further their political agendas. The involvement of religious schools in political conflicts goes back to the Indian independence movement, though at that time, it was largely a non-

violent struggle. However, things changed with the creation of Pakistan. While Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind and many other religious scholars opposed the idea of a separate Muslim state, a group of Deobandi scholars supported it and played a key role in promoting Islamization in Pakistan (Malik, 1998). These Deobandi scholars had an idea of a theocratic state in mind, but that vision did not realize after independence. Instead, Mohammad Ali Jinnah envisioned a Muslim-majority state that was not necessarily governed by Islamic law. It was only after Jinnah's death that Deobandi members in the legislature managed to pave the way for Islamization and strengthen the role of religion in the country's politics (Hashmi, 2016).

The rise of Zia-ul-Haq, an Islamist general in the Pakistan army, to power through a coup against the elected government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1977 created a unique opportunity for Sunni religious groups. With the backing of the Pakistani government, these groups rapidly expanded their religious schools, gradually transforming them into centers for radicalizing young people to serve their political agendas. During Zia's 11-year rule, significant political and geopolitical developments took place in the region, all of which fueled the spread of religious extremism in Afghanistan and Pakistan. As tensions between the West and the Soviet Union escalated, both countries found themselves on the front lines of this Cold War confrontation. In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. It was a move that the United States and its regional allies, including Pakistan, saw as a major threat and were determined to counter (Cohen, 2009). That same year, Iran underwent a revolution that led to the overthrow of monarchy and the rise of an Islamic state under Khomeini. This development was seen as a challenge by regional powers, the United States, and its allies, forcing them to take countermeasures in response.

Sunni religious extremism served a dual purpose for the U.S. and its allies in the region: it provided motivated fighters against Soviet forces in Afghanistan and functioned as an effective tool of soft power against Iran's Islamic revolution, preventing its spread to other Muslim countries. For Saudi Arabia, which saw Iran's Islamic government as both a rival and a security threat, supporting these extremist groups was a strategic choice. It allowed Saudi Arabia to promote its Salafi interpretation of Islam as a counterbalance to Iran's narrative of Islamic political thought, which was framed as a revolutionary interpretation of Shiite Islam.

After the Soviet Union occupied Afghanistan, the United States developed a strategy to counter it, consisting of four key components. First, the U.S. issued a strong warning to the Soviet Union, making it clear that any further expansion beyond Afghanistan, especially into the Persian Gulf, would be met with force. Second, Washington launched a diplomatic and propaganda campaign to undermine Soviet justifications for the invasion on the global stage. Third, the U.S. strengthened its alliance with Pakistan, viewing it as a critical partner in resisting Soviet forces. With American support, Pakistan played a central role in aiding Afghan resistance fighters. Fourth, the U.S. backed the use of Islam as a motivating ideology for resistance. Afghan fighters, along with Muslim supporters from around the world, framed their struggle as a jihad (holy war) against Soviet forces.[5] With financial and logistical support from Washington and its allies, Pakistan was able to organize a large-scale resistance movement.

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[5] Even the Hollywood industry supported this effort. In 1988 the movie "Rambo 3" was published, showing Sylvester Stallone who supported the Mujaheddin and defeated the Soviet army.

The border city of Peshawar became the central hub for coordinating Mujahideen operations. The CIA managed and supplied aid, while Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) distributed resources and oversaw recruitment from across the Muslim world. Among those who joined the Afghan jihad was Osama Bin Laden. Meanwhile, the ISI trained Pakistani militants, who fought not only in Afghanistan but also in Kashmir. With funding from Saudi Arabia and the U.S., the ISI helped establish Islamic madrasas (religious schools) across Pakistan. Many of their students, recruited from local communities and Afghan refugee camps, were taught the principles of jihad and prepared to serve the broader strategic objectives of their sponsors (Saikal, 2009).

In 1947, Pakistan had just 250 madrasas. By 1987, that number had reached 3,000, and by 2008, it had grown to over 40,000. Many of them were funded by Saudi Arabia to promote Wahhabi Islam. Nearly two million students are enrolled in these religious schools. More than a quarter of a million Pakistani women attend all-female madrasas, where a growing religious awakening, often accompanied by increasing intolerance, is taking shape (Mohanty, 2013, p. 168).

It is estimated that around $100 million per year flows to Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith clerics in the region through missionary and Islamic charities based in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, with direct support from their governments. Thousands of Deobandi mosques have further deepened divisions within the Muslim community, fostering isolation from the mainstream and fueling radicalization. This environment has given rise to hundreds of militant training camps, with many extremist madrasas serving as recruitment centers for Taliban jihadists (Roggio, 2011).

The Taliban studied in madrasas run by Fazlur Rahman and his Jamiat-e-Ulema Islam (JUI), a fundamentalist party with strong Pashtun support in Baluchistan and the North West Frontier Province (NWFP). Rehman, a political ally of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, had access to the government, military, and ISI, where he promoted this rising force.

After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Pakistan sought direct land routes to trade with the Central Asian Republics (CARs) but faced obstacles due to Afghanistan's civil war. Pakistani policymakers found themselves in a dilemma over whether to continue backing Hekmatyar in hopes of establishing a pro-Pakistan Pashtun regime in Kabul or to push for a power-sharing agreement to maintain stability. The military, influenced by pro-Pashtun factions, backed Hekmatyar. However, by 1994, his repeated failures had turned him into more of a burden than an asset. Seeking alternatives, Pakistan turned to other Pashtun proxies. Benazir Bhutto was eager to establish a trade route to Central Asia. The initial Peshawar-Kabul route was blocked by conflict. It led to a new plan supported by the transport mafia, JUI, and Pashtun officials. This alternative route ran from Quetta through Kandahar and Herat to Turkmenistan. By September 1994, Pakistani surveyors and ISI officers discreetly assessed the Chaman-Herat Road. Interior Minister Naseerullah Babar also visited Chaman, and in October, he led a delegation, including Western ambassadors, to Kandahar and Herat, seeking international funding to rebuild the Quetta-Herat highway. On 12 October 1994, Taliban fighters from Pakistani madrasas seized the Afghan border post of Spin Boldak, a key trucking and fueling hub controlled by Hekmatyar's forces. The transport mafia, reliant on secure roads, had already donated financial support to Mullah Omar and offered monthly payments if the Taliban could clear the roads of bandits and ensure safe trade routes. This

support played a crucial role in the Taliban's emergence and eventual dominance (Rashid, 2002).

Epistemological foundations of radical religious education

In Islamic studies, various schools of thought have emerged across the Islamic world, each shaped by distinct epistemological foundations and interpretations of Islamic teachings. Broadly, Islamic thought can be categorized into two major theoretical traditions: Sunni and Shia. Over time, both traditions have further diversified into numerous branches. The Sunni school, following the teachings of its foundational scholars, has developed into four major jurisprudential schools named after their respective founders Abu Hanifa, Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'i, Malik ibn Anas, and Ahmad ibn Hanbal as Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki, and Hanbali (Melchert, 1992). For centuries, the Hanafi approach has been the predominant tradition among Muslims in Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent and offered a relatively moderate interpretation of Islam within the Sunni school (Akiner, 1996; Schimmel, 1980).

The religious extremism that has been spreading in Afghanistan since the 1980s is largely a product of the Salafi approach, which has gained significant influence as an epistemological and methodological framework in Islamic studies and religious schools across the country. Salafism asserts that legitimacy in religious, social, and political domains must be explicitly grounded in the Quran, the Sunnah, and the practices of the *salaf al-salih* (the righteous early generations of Muslims). It does not constitute a fifth formal school of Islamic jurisprudence alongside the four established Sunni schools (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali) but is instead characterized as a methodological approach (Manhaj). Nevertheless, many Wahhabi-influenced Salafis, particularly those shaped by Saudi scholarship, predominantly adhere to the Hanbali school. Prominent scholars frequently cited by contemporary Salafis include Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim (Ali, 2019). While the Taliban currently suppress Salafis who identify as a distinct religious group separate from the Hanafis, Salafism as a methodological and epistemological approach has permeated a large number of religious schools in Afghanistan. As a result, the Taliban and other radical groups in the region frequently cite religious views that are fundamentally Salafi, rather than Hanafi, to justify their acts of violence. Their justification for the killing of civilians during the Taliban's two-decade war against the Afghan government and international forces, as well as their widespread discrimination against women and ethnic and religious minorities in Afghanistan, is rooted in strict Salafi interpretations of religious texts.

A core epistemological foundation of Salafism, one that often leads to extreme interpretations of Islamic teachings, is the rejection of reason as a valid source of religious knowledge. Salafis restrict religious knowledge exclusively to the Quran and Sunnah, with the latter referring to the practices of the Prophet Muhammad and the first three generations of his followers (Ibn Taymiyyah, 1421). In Islamic studies, this approach is known as relying solely on narrational evidence while rejecting rational reasoning. By dismissing reason as a tool for evaluating religious interpretations, Salafis eliminate the possibility of external critique and foreclose any meaningful discussion about their religious understandings.

Another epistemological principle guiding the educational centers of Salafis and other extremist groups is a strict textualist approach to interpreting the Quran and Hadith (the sayings of the Prophet). Among Muslims, three broad approaches can be identified in the modern period regarding the interpretation of the content of the Qur'an: Textualist, Semi-textualist, and Contextualist. This classification is based on the extent to which interpreters rely solely on linguistic criteria to determine the meaning of the text, and consider the socio-historical context of the Qur'an, as well as its relevance to contemporary society.

For Textualists, the Qur'an alone should guide Muslims, rather than any so-called modern needs. They regard its meaning as fixed and universally applicable. Religious seminaries (madrasas) and educational institutions influenced by Salafism adhere to a Textualist approach. They advocate for a strict, literal interpretation of the text, arguing that Muslims must follow the Qur'an exactly as written, without interpretation based on modern circumstances.

Semi-textualists follow the Textualists in their emphasis on linguistic interpretation and disregard for socio-historical context. However, they present the content of the Qur'an and Hadith in a more modern idiom, often within an apologetic discourse. Typically, they are associated with various neo-revivalist movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jama'at-e-Islami in the Indian subcontinent, as well as a significant segment of modernist thinkers (Saeed, 2006).

Contextualists emphasize the socio-historical context of the Qur'an's content and its subsequent interpretations. They advocate for understanding this content in relation to the political, social, historical, cultural, and economic contexts in which it was revealed, interpreted, and applied. As a result, they support granting modern Muslim scholars significant flexibility in distinguishing between changeable and unchangeable aspects of ethico-legal teachings. Contextualists are often associated with progressive Muslims and, more broadly, contemporary liberal Muslim thought (Taji-Farouki, 2006).

One of the controversial epistemological principles in the radical interpretation of Islamic texts is the taking the first three generations of Muslims (the Salaf) as valid sources of religious knowledge. The term Salafi, used by extremist groups in the region, originates from this principle, as they consider themselves followers of the earliest Muslims, referred to as Salaf in Arabic. According to this belief, the religious interpretations and views of the early Muslims must be accepted without criticism or question. This principle is widely implemented in religious schools that play a key role in the radicalization of youth in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Salafis often cite a hadith attributed to the Prophet Muhammad in support of their position: "The best people among you are those of my generation, then those who follow, then those who follow them (Al-Bukhari, 1993, Hadith 2652)."

However, some Muslim scholars, including Shiite scholars, reject the authenticity of this hadith, arguing that it is a fabricated statement falsely attributed to the Prophet. Additionally, critics point to historical events from the first century of Islam that contradict the notion of the early Muslims' infallibility. After the Prophet Mohammad's death, violent conflicts happened among his followers which led to the deaths of his successors of the Prophet such as Omar, Uthman, and Ali. Furthermore, the Prophet's grandson, Hussein, and his companions were brutally massacred by the Muslim ruler Yazid in Karbala.

These historical events provide strong evidence against the Salafi belief in the unquestionable reliability of the first three generations of Muslims.

The importance of early Muslim tradition for extremist groups is not limited to epistemology. Rather, they present the Islamic society of the first three generations of Muslims as an ideal type and emphasize that implementing their ideas will ultimately restore the social and political order that existed during the time of the Prophet Muhammad. The epistemological implication of such an ideal society is that all thoughts and actions are judged based on their conformity to a past model. Therefore, in extremist religious educational systems, any form of theoretical innovation is considered heresy (*bid'ah*) and strictly forbidden. Additionally, critical thinking regarding extremist interpretations of Islamic texts is framed as opposition to Islam, and extremists employ the notion of *takfir* against their opponents (Badar et al., 2017). Through *takfir*, extremist groups declare Muslims who criticize them, as well as those who neither oppose nor support their ideology, as apostates and thereby justify their killing. On the one hand, extremists reject the validity of reason, which is the most important epistemological and intellectual capacity of humans. On the other hand, to address the needs and challenges of life in the 21st century, they suggest adapting modern society to the norms of a society that existed 14 centuries ago. Since reproducing such a society is impossible, rather than critically evaluating their ideology and recognizing its incompatibility with contemporary realities, they view other Muslim groups as obstacles to achieving their ideal society. As a result, they resort to violence, seeking to eliminate those who do not conform to their beliefs and actions.

Religious education and radicalization

Decades of civil war in Afghanistan have both impacted and been influenced by the educational institutes (Bittlingmayer et al., 2019). On one hand, the prolonged conflict has severely damaged educational infrastructure and disrupted learning opportunities. On the other hand, some educational institutions, both modern, such as schools and universities, and traditional, such as religious schools, have served as recruiting grounds for extremist groups. These groups have radicalized young people, leading them to resort to violence in pursuit of political change. Radicalization has often occurred through the politicization of educational institutions to advance political agendas. Kabul University is a notable example, as it was used as a recruitment center for both extreme leftist and radical Islamic parties (Edwards, 1993). These factions eventually started a prolonged conflict that led to the destruction of the country's infrastructure.

During the war between Islamist groups and the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, religious schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan served as centers for radicalizing Afghan youth and recruiting them for the battlefield. After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 and the collapse of its supported government in 1992, Islamist parties turned against each other and started a bloody civil war. During the conflict, many educational institutions were shut down, while those that remained open operated under the control of the factions that held power in their respective areas. Most schools followed a curriculum developed in Pakistan.

In 1996 the Taliban captured Kabul and many provinces across the country and established their Islamic Emirate. This event was a significant achievement for radical madrasas in Pakistan, demonstrating that investing in radicalization

within traditional Afghan society could lead to major changes. During their rule, which lasted until 2001, the Taliban established religious madrasas similar to those in Pakistan. At that time, Mullah Amir Khan Muttaqi, who now serves as the Taliban government's foreign minister, converted the Institute of Social Sciences in Kabul into a religious madrasa and named it the Farooqiya Madrasa. He appointed a Pakistani as its director to run the madrasa using the curriculum of Pakistani madrasas. The primary goal of establishing such madrasas was to train motivated and disciplined fighters for the Taliban government (Mujda, 2003, p. 115).

After the Taliban government fell in 2001 and a Western-backed government was established in Afghanistan, the Taliban launched a bloody war against foreign forces and the Afghan government. The Taliban once again used the capacity of religious schools in Pakistan and rural areas of Afghanistan to fight against their enemy. In the late 1990s, non-Pashtun communities largely viewed the Taliban as a Pashtun movement, which restricted their ability to recruit from non-Pashtun communities in northern Afghanistan. However, after 2014, the Taliban successfully recruited militants from Tajik and Uzbek communities. Besides the centralization of political power and widespread corruption, one of the key factors influencing northern Afghans to support the Taliban was the radicalization of some of their youth in madrasas in Pakistan and in some private religious madrasas in Afghanistan, which operated without government oversight. This radicalization led them to view foreign forces and the Afghan government as threats to their interests and religious values, and to join the Taliban.

Since taking control of Afghanistan in August 2021, the Taliban have implemented significant changes in the country's education system to promote their ideology and consolidate their political authority. They have prohibited female students from receiving education beyond the sixth grade in general education schools. However, in a notable paradox, the Taliban actively support and promote women's education in religious schools without restrictions. This policy reflects a broader strategy that intertwines ideological control with selective educational accessibility. In religious schools under Taliban control, Islamic texts and teachings are interpreted to justify the Taliban's agenda, and students are expected to become faithful supporters of their government (Afghanistan Human Rights Center, 2024). They have removed subjects related to human rights, democracy, and sociology from curricula and replaced them with ideological topics. One such compulsory subject is a course titled "Introduction to the Islamic Emirate," which aims to present a favorable image of the Taliban government and reinforce its religious legitimacy among students. The Taliban have eliminated any perspectives that challenge their ideology. In line with this effort, on September 21, 2021, they removed Shia jurisprudence from the curriculum (Hozoori, 2024). They have targeted a Muslim minority group that has lived peacefully in Afghanistan for centuries. The implicit message of this move is that the Taliban reject this group's interpretation of religious texts and consider it un-Islamic.

With three decades of experience in using religious schools to radicalize students and recruit them for their extremist objectives, the Taliban continue to expand religious education across Afghanistan. In 2021, when the Taliban came to power, Afghanistan had only 1,038 religious schools. According to the Taliban's Ministry of Education, by 2023, they had established 20,219 additional religious education centers based on a decree from the group's leader. It brought

the total number of religious schools in Afghanistan to 21,257, with 3,687,200 students enrolled (see Figure 1) (MoE, 2024; Shinwari, 2024).
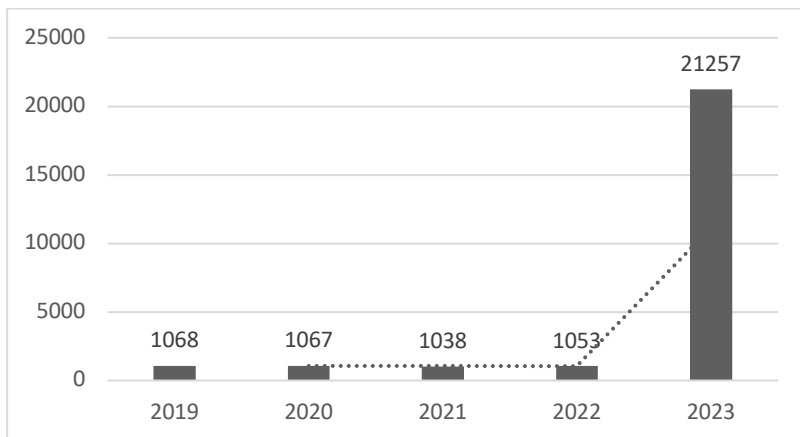
Figure 1: Number of religious schools from 2019 to 2023
(MoE, 2024; NSIA, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023)

The Taliban's Ministry of Education is recruiting 100,000 new employees, including teachers and administrative staff, for these institutions. In 2023–2024, they have already hired 50,000 employees, and the recruitment of the remaining 50,000 staff members is still ongoing.

In addition, the Ministry of Education of the Taliban government has planned to establish 15,000 new religious schools in Afghanistan, which will increase the total number of religious schools to more than 36,000. This increase in the number of religious schools is unprecedented in the history of Afghan education. Some of these religious educational centers may have been madrasas that were not registered with the previous Afghan government and were operating unofficially, but are now registered with the Taliban Ministry of Education. The number of religious schools now exceeds the number of general education schools (around 18,000). It is surprising that these general education schools in the country were established with extensive support from the international community over twenty years, while the Taliban government has managed to establish nearly twenty thousand new religious schools in a very short period of time.

What makes the Taliban's madrasas particularly alarming is that they have openly referred to these religious education centers as jihadi madrasas. Neda Mohammad Nadim, the Taliban's Minister of Higher Education, has said that this supports the idea of jihad and that as long as the Taliban maintain their jihadi spirit, they will not be defeated (Shayan, 2024). The jihadist spirit refers to the motivation to use violence against opponents of the Taliban in Afghanistan. While the Taliban publicly claim their activities are limited to Afghanistan and deny involvement in transnational jihad, their support for foreign extremist groups such as the Pakistani Taliban, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the East Turkestan Movement (Afghanistan International, 2024), indicates they are, in practice, engaged in a broader regional jihad. It is now evident that these madrasas will be used to radicalize the young population and will play a key

role in reproducing violence in Afghan society. The Taliban are trying to pass on their legacy of militancy to Afghan children and youth through religious education.

A review of the history of education in Afghanistan shows that education, especially religious education, has been part of the conflict for the past four decades. The groups and foreign powers involved in the Afghan conflict have used education as a tool to extend their dominance and influence in the country (Bittlingmayer et al., 2019). The radicalization of Afghan youth was included in the curriculum in the 1980s to encourage young people to fight against the Soviet Union. After the Soviet withdrawal and the fall of the government it supported, radicalization in madrasas continued uninterrupted in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. These religious schools receive financial support from individuals and charities in the region. It allowed them to remain sustainable. Over the past three decades, they have served as both a shelter and a recruitment center for the Taliban. Now, recognizing the strategic importance of these madrasas, the Taliban are working to expand them across Afghanistan.

Conclusion

In Afghanistan, people often talk about how education helps the country develop because it is believed that there is a positive correlation between education and development. However, in reality, education has been deeply affected by over four decades of conflict, and at times, it has even been used to fuel the conflict. This is because education has been controlled by those in power. Throughout the years of war, both the warring parties and the international and regional powers supporting them have used education as part of their political and military agendas. Education has been a soft power tool for Afghan governments to shape public attitudes and opinions. They have used it to portray themselves as legitimate. Meanwhile, anti-government groups have also used education, especially religious education, since the 1980s to radicalize young people and encourage them to fight against the government. A notable difference in this case is that opposition groups focused on religious education and used madrasas to oppose the government, while also trying to control formal schools to align with their ideology and political goals. In contrast, the government managed schools based on modern education according to its values and did not place much importance on religious education. For twenty years, the Western-backed government in Afghanistan developed its education policies based on donor priorities and did not sufficiently develop religious education. This neglect had serious consequences; many Afghans seeking religious education enrolled in Pakistani madrasas, where they became radicalized, and some later fought as motivated fighters against the Afghan government and international forces. Although around a thousand madrasas operated within Afghanistan with government support, their lack of quality prevented them from becoming credible and respected religious institutions in Afghan society. As a result, many private madrasas operated outside government control and educated a large number of young people. Many of these madrasas were run by graduates of Pakistani madrasas, and their curricula further contributed to radicalization.

The Taliban, who were radicalized in religious schools and have fought a bloody war in Afghanistan for years, have now formed the Islamic Emirate government and are attempting to replicate Pakistan's model of religious schooling on a larger scale in Afghanistan. So far, they have established about

20,000 madrasas, and their Ministry of Education has planned to establish another 15,000. As mentioned earlier, Pakistan has around 40,000 madrasas. With the Taliban's initiatives, Afghanistan will soon have 35,000 religious schools and it will lead to a further expansion and intensification of youth radicalization in the region. At the same time, the Taliban have banned women from attending formal schools beyond the sixth grade but are encouraging them to enroll in religious schools. This marks a significant shift in radicalization through religious education. Previously, Afghan men were the primary targets of radicalization, but with this new policy, it now includes Afghan women as well.

Financing such a large number of religious schools will be a major challenge for Afghanistan's already struggling economy. Over the past twenty years of international support, the country has faced difficulties in funding education. Teachers were paid around $100 a month, which was barely enough to support a small family. Now, with the addition of so many religious schools, the cost of education has more than doubled. The Taliban might shift funds from women's closed schools to newly established madrasas, but this still won't be enough. The Taliban may look to Pakistan, where religious schools are funded by generous donations from wealthy individuals and charities in Persian Gulf Arab countries.

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Chapter 4

Madrasas and Promotion of Violent Extremism: Counterterrorism and Freedom of Education and Freedom of Religion in the Afghanistan Context

Mahdi Zaki[1]

This chapter examines the complex relationship between counterterrorism, freedom of education, and freedom of religion in Afghanistan under the republic (2001-2021), with a focus on the role of madrasas. While madrasas have historically provided access to education in areas where state capacity is weak, unregistered institutions have also been linked to the promotion of violent extremism. Drawing on qualitative interviews with key stakeholders, the chapter analyzes the tensions between protecting the right to education and religious freedom and preventing the misuse of religious schools for radicalization. The findings underscore the need for strengthened oversight, depoliticization of religious education, and long-term strategies that align counterterrorism measures with human rights obligations, ensuring that education remains both accessible and free from extremist influence

Keywords: *Afghanistan, madrasa, violent extremism, freedom of religion, right to education*

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[1] This article was written before the Taliban's return in 2021, but its analysis remains relevant as madrasas have gained even greater importance under Taliban rule.

Introduction

Religious schools (*madrasas*) as educational institutions play an important role in Afghanistan's education system. Traditionally, people attend *madrasas* to get basic education and specifically religious education. Families send their children to *madrasas* before they attend the formal education system (school). Further, in areas where the Afghan government has failed to provide education to people, these *madrasas* have attracted thousands of students, mostly children. This is while *madrasas* are also a major source of promoting violent extremism in the country. Most of the Taliban leaders and members have attended *madrasas*, and several reports reveal the role of these *madrasas* in promoting violent extremism in the country (Azad, 2014; Mohammadi et al., 2015; Fazli et al., 2015).

Considering the role of *madrasas* in Afghanistan, the research question is: How can promotion of violent extremism by *madrasas* be countered without violating the right to education and/or religious freedom? In other words, how can counterterrorism and freedom of education and/or freedom of religion be balanced in the Afghanistan context?

To answer this question, the paper first provides a conceptual framework and explains key terms including madrasa, freedom of religion, right to education and violent extremism. The paper will then analyze freedom of religion and right to education in the Afghanistan context. Afghanistan's religious mixture and freedom of religion in Afghanistan national legislation, education in Afghanistan and right to education in Afghanistan national legislation are discussed in this section. The third section studies the role of madrasas in the promotion of violent extremism in Afghanistan. It is understood that unregistered madrasas that are run in areas under the control of Taliban are actively promoting violent extremism. The last section provides recommendations by interviewees to avoid promotion of violent extremism by these madrasas.

Theme: Limitation of Particular Rights in Counterterrorism/Analysis of Strategies to Diminish Radicalization/Extremism

Topic/Research Question: How can counterterrorism and freedom of education and/or freedom of religion be balanced in Afghanistan context?

Methodology

It is a qualitative research and the data is collected through in depth-interviews with a commissioner of Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, a member of Afghanistan Ulema Council, a former advisor to the Ministry of Education and member of the Curriculum Department at the Ministry of Education and a current member of Department of Monitoring at the Ministry of Education. The data has been collected between November 1-20, 2019. Further to these, relevant data and articles are also reviewed.

The data is analyzed through the use of *thematic analysis* based on Braun and Clarke's six-phase guide to doing thematic analysis including: 1) Becoming familiar with the data; 2) generating initial codes; 3) searching for themes; 4) reviewing the themes; 5) defining the themes; and 6) writing (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Conceptual Framework

Madrasa

The Arabic word *madrasa* (plural: *madaris*) has two meanings: 1) in its more common usage, it simply means "school"; and 2) in its secondary meaning, a *madrasa* is an educational institution offering education in Islamic subjects including, but not limited to, the Quran, *hadith* (the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and law. Madrasas offer free education, food and a place to live to their students, and thus they appeal to poor families and individuals. These institutions are supported by private donations from Muslims and as well as Islamic organizations (Balnchard, 2008). In Afghanistan, and this research, *madrasa* refers to Islamic religious schools.

Freedom of religion

The right to freedom of religion or belief is a fundamental human right recognized in all major human rights treaties. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and Article 18(1) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) guarantee freedom of thought, conscience and religion all three state that this includes freedom to change one's religion of belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or in private, to manifest one's religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance. In addition to these, Article 1 of the UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination based on Religion or Belief explicitly states that this right shall include freedom to have a religion or whatever belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

Freedom of religion or belief has two components: 1) The first is the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, which means the right to hold or to change one's religion or belief and which cannot be restricted under any circumstances. 2) The second is the right to manifest one's religion or belief, which, according to Article 29(2) of UDHR and Article 18(3) of ICCPR can be restricted but only if the restriction is prescribed by law and is necessary. The limitations shall be allowed only if they are solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society.

Right to education

Education has been formally recognized as a human right since the adoption of the UDHR (Article 26) and affirmed further in numerous human rights treaties including the 1960 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Convention against Discrimination in Education (CADE), the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (Articles 13 and 14), the 1981 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (Article 10), and the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 28 and 29). These treaties establish an entitlement to free, compulsory primary education for all children; an obligation to develop secondary education that is accessible to all children, as well as equitable access to higher education.

Violent extremism

In literature, the term violent extremism remains unclear and ill-defined and often used synonymously with terms such as terrorism and radicalization. However, Striegher in his article entitled, "Violent-Extremism: An Examination of a Definitional Dilemma," differentiates these in terms of process, ideology and act. According to Striegher, "an individual who justifies the use of violence is pursuit of ideological goals, typically does this once they have moved through a process of radicalization that leads to the adoption of violent extremism as an ideology; where terrorism is solely the act of violence carried out in pursuit of these goals" (Striegher, 2015, p.1).

Radicalization is a process by which individuals are introduced to an ideological message and belief system that encourages movement from moderate beliefs towards extreme views and who promote or engage in violence as a means of promoting political, ideological or religious extremism (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2009). This is while, violent extremism is the ideology that accepts the use of violence for the pursuit of goals that are social, racial, religious and/or political in nature and terrorism is the physical act or threat of act, use or threat of violence to advance a political, religious, or ideological cause (Striegher, 2015, p.6).

Freedom of religion and right to education in Afghanistan context

Afghanistan became member of the United Nations (UN) in 1946 and became party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 24 January 1983, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in 24 January 1983, the Convention on the Elimination of All Form of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 14 August 1980, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 27 September 1990 (Office of the High Commissioner, 2019). However, due to political unrest and civil war, it was in late 2001 that a US-backed administration was established, and its Constitutions was approved in 2004. Afghanistan's 2004 Constitution declares protection of the fundamental human rights and recognized international obligations. Article 6 of the Constitution obligates the state to a prosperous and progressive society based on social justice, preservation of human dignity, protection of human rights, realization of democracy, attainment of national unity as well as equality between all peoples and tribes and balanced development of all areas of the country. Article 7 further constitutes, "the state shall observe the United Nations Charter, inter-state agreements, as well as international treaties to which Afghanistan has joined, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights." The New Administration under direct international community support, for the first time established the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC). Parallel to these, Afghanistan ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) on 5 March 2003.

Religious mixture of Afghanistan

Muslims make up the majority (99.7%) of Afghanistan population with two main Sunni (84.7%) and Shia (15%) jurisprudences. A small number of Hindus, Sikhs, Christians and Baha'is also live in Afghanistan (The World Factbook, 2019). The populations of non-Muslim communities have decreased considerably in recent decades, with most leaving Afghanistan. Those which are still in Afghanistan,

face societal discrimination (Draft Country Information Report: Afghanistan, 2019, p. 26).

Freedom of religion in Afghanistan national legislation

The Constitution of Afghanistan fails explicitly to protect the individual right to freedom of religion or belief (U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2012). It identifies Islam as the country's official religion (Article 2) and specifies that "no law shall contravene the tenets and provisions of the holy religion of Islam in Afghanistan" (Article 3), and that "the principles of adherence to the tenets of the Holy religion of Islam as well as Islamic Republicanism shall not be amended." (Article 149). The Ulema Council is a group of influential Islamic figures whose senior members advise the President on Islamic moral, ethical and legal issues (Draft Country Information Report: Afghanistan, 2019, p. 27).

However, the Constitution also provides that "followers of other faiths shall be free within the bounds of law in the exercise and performance of their religious rituals." (Article 2). Individuals who dissent from the prevalent Islamic beliefs are subject to legal action that violates international standards, for example prosecutions for religious "crimes" such as apostasy and blasphemy. In addition, the Afghan government remains unable, as well as at times unwilling, to protect citizens against violence and intimidation by the Taliban and other armed groups (U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2012).

Education in Afghanistan

Due to four decades of civil war, Afghanistan's education system remains fragile; however, national and international efforts since 2001 have led to substantial progress. The number of school students has increased from around one million students in 2002 to more than nine million students in 2019 (USAID, 2019). However, education quality, equity, availability of qualified teachers and access to education remain serious concerns and corruption and mismanagement continue to place significant limits on the effectiveness of education services (Draft Country Information Report: Afghanistan, 2019, p. 15). 41% of all schools in Afghanistan do not have buildings. Many children live too far from the nearest school to be able to attend, which particularly affects girls (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

Right to education in Afghanistan national legislation

The Afghanistan Constitution gives considerable emphasis to the role of the state in providing education. Article 17 commits the state to adopt necessary measures to foster education at all levels, develop religious teachings, regulate and improve the conditions of mosques, religious schools as well as religious centers. Article 43 emphasizes that education is the right of all citizens of Afghanistan, that it shall be offered up to undergraduate level free of charge in state educational institutions, and that the state shall design and implement effective programs for delivering educational services in local languages. Article 44 commits the state to devising and implementing effective programs, fostering balanced education for women, improving the education of nomads, and eliminating illiteracy. Article 45 commits the state to devise and implement a unified educational curriculum based on the tenets of the sacred religion of Islam, national culture as well as academic principles, and develop religious subjects' curriculum for schools on the basis of existing Islamic sects in Afghanistan.

However, the Afghan government has not taken serious steps towards implementing national legislation that makes education compulsory. Although by law, all children are required to complete class nine, the government does not have the capacity to provide this level of education to all children and in practice, many children do not have any access to education (Human Rights Watch, 2017, p. 20).

Madrasas and promotion of violent extremism in Afghanistan

The role of madrasas in the Afghan educational system

The Afghanistan primary and secondary education system consists of four types of school: 1) Government schools are operated and staffed by the government. Currently, there are about 14658 government schools in the country. 2) Community-based education (CBE) remains entirely outside the government education system and is wholly dependent on donor funding. The government provides oversight as CBEs use the same curriculum as government schools, including the same textbooks. 3) Private schools are growing, providing families with better quality of instruction. 4) *Madrasas* that primarily teach religious education (Human Rights Watch, 2017, p. 7). Besides primary and secondary education, *madrasas* are providing education up to higher levels and certifications are accepted by the Afghan government.

According to Mohammad Fayaz, a member of Monitoring Department at the Ministry of Education, there are three types of *madrasas* in Afghanistan including:

1.   Public *madrasas*: These are established by the government and the Ministry of Education (MoE) provides funding, curriculum and teaching materials. Teachers in these *madrasas* are hired by the government. Therefore, MoE has direct oversight of these *madrasas*.

2.   Private *madrasas* that are registered with the MoE and the ministry provide curriculum for these madrasas. However, they can add up to 15% subjects of their choice. Their activities are regularly monitored by the MoE. Certificates of these *madrasas* are approved by the MoE.

These two types of *madrasas* cover religious plus secular education subjects such as reading, writing, math and science. According to government statistics, there are 805 registered madrasas in the country (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

3.   Private *madrasas* that are not are registered via MoE. These *madrasas* are mainly active in areas where the government has limited or no access and therefore, MoE does not oversee their activities (Fayaz, 2019).

Unregistered madrasas as a source of violent extremism

Mr. Asadullah Yusufi, a member of Ulema Council and Commissioner of Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), differentiates between the Shi'a and Sunni *madrasas* and believes that Sunni *madrasas* promote violent extremism not Shi'a's. According to him, although both madrasas teach the same subjects, they are different in:

1.   Eisegesis: In Shi'a jurisprudence, eisegesis (individual interpretation) is not an accepted rule and only interpretation of *mujtahid*[2] is considered as the right

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[2]. Mujtahid: A religious scholar who practices independent legal judgement and reasoning (ijtihad)

interpretation of *fiqh*[3], Quran and *sunnah*[4]; while in Sunni jurisprudence, each individual can state their own interpretation and others follow them.

2.   Reason: In Shi'a jurisprudence, reason is one of the main sources of *fiqh* and interpretation that is based on a reason can be accepted; while Sunni jurisprudence and *madrasas* do not consider reason as an independent source of interpretation of *fiqh*.

3.   Public Order: Public order is extremely important in Shi'a jurisprudence and *fiqh* is interpreted in a way to establish public order; whereas Sunni scholars and *madrasas* promote *jihad*[5] as the main pillars of religion.

Mr. Yusufi argues, "Shi'a *madrasas* follow curriculum that includes a variety of subjects and besides religious subjects, they study philosophy, logic and sciences. The interpretations provided in these *madrasas* are based on reason and public order. Therefore, we do not observe violent extremism in these madrasas." He, in the meantime, believes that individual interpretation of *sunnah* by Sunni scholars and the importance of *jihad* in Sunni jurisprudence provide the basis for violent extremism (Yusufi, 2019). Further to this argument, Afghan Sunni madrasas are part of a South Asian madrasa tradition and they are linked to the Deobandi school of thought. The *Dar ul Uloom Deoband* (established in North India in 1867) has influenced Afghanistan's religious education sector in two different ways. First, historically Afghan students have studied at the *Dar ul Uloom Deoband*, and the government of Afghanistan has relied on expertise from *Deoband* when establishing public *madrasas* in Afghanistan. Second, many private madrasas in Afghanistan have been associated with a Pakistani *Deobandi* tradition, with some of these schools growing increasingly political and militant during the Afghanistan jihad in the 1980s (Borchgrevink, 2010, p. 5).

The Afghan jihad in the 1980s brought thousands of jihadists from the Middle East and with them, they brought radical ideology and funding to madrasas. Kaja Borchgrevink in her article, "Beyond Borders: Diversity and Transnational Links in Afghan Religious Education," explains that *madrasas* were politicized during this period and it led to the growth and development of these *madrasas*. According to her, the contribution to the emergence and growth of the Taliban movement by certain *Deobandi madrasas* indicate strong ties between madrasas, radicalization and militancy. In her report, Ms. Borchgrevink, madrasas are used by militant groups for recruitment, as organizational base, as transit points, as contact points between leadership and militants and military training facilities (Borchgrevink, 2010, p. 6). Mr. Fayaz, who monitors *madrasas* agrees with this and argues that most of these madrasas are run under the control of Taliban and other militant groups. Therefore, the Afghan government does not have access to them to either provide finance or training materials or oversight them (Fayaz,

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to form a legal opinion; while ijtihad is independent legal judgement; in other words, it is the interpretation of law based on individual reasoning (Martin, 2004).

[3]. Fiqh: "Jurisprudence." The science of studying the *sharia* (Martin, 2004).

[4]. *Sunnah*: The practices, actions, and behavior of the prophet Muhammad. These are stories about him recorded by his companions and family in the same style as the hadith. The *Sunnah*, along with the Hadith and Qur an, comprise the main sources of Islamic law (Martin, 2004).

[5]. Jihad: "Struggle." Over time, the concept of a "jihad" has developed to include both the greater jihad, or the struggle by the individual to be a righteous Muslim, and the lesser jihad, or the struggle to fight oppression and defend the Muslim community. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Asia and Africa witnessed reform movements that embarked on jihads to reform the Muslim communities and to fight colonial rule. More recently, certain groups have interpreted the concept of jihad to mean to fight non-Muslims (Martin, 2004).

2019). According to Mr. Yusufi, these *madrasas* are funded by individuals in the Middle East and even the government of Saudi Arabia to fight the ideological presence of Iran in the region. They also provide curriculum and teaching materials for these madrasas and often, instructors of such madrasas are educated in Saudi Arabia (Yusufi, 2019). According to reports, hundreds of such *madrasas* across Afghanistan and Pakistan teach thousands of students.

Conclusion: Striking a balance

Afghanistan national legislation emphasizes on everyone's right to education and to an extent freedom of religion, specifically Islam. However, the government lacks the capacity to provide education to all citizens. Due to this situation, *madrasas* play an important role in the Afghan education system. Besides this important role, unregistered *madrasas* promote violent extremism and become a source of threat to the country's security. Although steps were taken by the MoE to extend government oversight of all madrasas in the country, these efforts were not followed. Afghan MoE, according to a former advisor to the ministry, had started providing curriculum to all madrasas across the country and at the next step, they were planning to train *madrasa* instructors. However, he also adds that the process was weakened after the government changed. According to him, the government lacks long-term strategies to oversee these madrasas and initiatives are individual (Bakhtiari, 2019).

To prevent promotion of violent extremism through madrasas, the interviewees recommend the followings:

- *Security*: As mentioned by the interviewees unregistered madrasas are run in areas controlled by the Taliban and other militants and the government does not have access to these areas. To avoid promotion of violent extremism by these madrasas, the government shall provide security and extend its oversight of these madrasas. This does not limit citizens' access to education and/or practice of their religion; rather it provides them better environment to get education and/or practice their religion.

- *Oversight of Madrasas:* The Afghan Government, and specifically MoE and Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE), shall increase its oversight of these madrasas through providing them financial support, teaching materials and training of their instructors. The books and material used in these madrasas shall be updated with soft understanding of Islam. In the meantime, MoE shall monitor activities of madrasas on a regular basis.

- *Depoliticization of Madrasas:* One of the issues mentioned by all interviewees is the use of madrasas for political purposes. They call on all the parties to recognize *madrasas* as educational centers and do not promote their ideologies through these centers. It is specifically important as foreign governments such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia seek to fight ideological influence of Iran and India in the region through these *madrasas*.

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UN General Assembly, *Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief*, 25 November 1981, A/RES/36/55

UN General Assembly, *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, 16 December 1966, United Nations, Treaty Series, Vol. 999.

UN General Assembly, *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, 16 December 1966, United Nations, Treaty Series, Vol. 993.

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Annex

International Human Rights Treaties and Afghanistan Ratification Status

Ratification Status for Afghanistan			
Treaty Description	**Treaty Name**	**Signature Date**	**Ratification Date, Accession (a) Date**
Convention against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment	CAT	04 Feb 1985	01 Apr 1987
Optional Protocol of the Convention against Torture	CAT-OP		17 Apr 2018 (a)
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights	ICCPR		24 Jan 1983 (a)
Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights aiming to the abolition of the death penalty	ICCPR-OP2-DP		
Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance	CED		
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women	CEDAW	14 Aug 1980	05 Mar 2003
International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination	CERD		06 Jul 1983 (a)
International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights	ICESCR		24 Jan 1983 (a)
Convention on the Rights of the Child	CRC	27 Sep 1990	

Chapter 5

How Misaligned State Building Efforts Led to the Collapse of the Afghan Government

Mohammad Baqer Zaki / Uwe H. Bittlingmayer & Mohammad Javad Salehi

On August 15, 2021, the government of Afghanistan collapsed, and the Taliban seized power for the second time. While Afghanistan's history is marked by frequent governmental changes and the fall of many regimes, the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is particularly significant. This is because the government, which was formed with international support, presented itself as a democratic political system with the backing of the Afghan people. However, once U.S. stopped its support, the government collapsed with surprising speed, and there was no significant popular mobilization to defend it. This study argues that one of the reasons for the government's downfall was the incompatibility of its centralized presidential political system with the needs of local Afghan communities. Afghan political elites exploited this centralized structure to monopolize state resources, often under the name of distributing power among various Afghan ethnic communities. This created numerous other challenges, including pervasive administrative corruption, government inefficiency, and widespread public dissatisfaction. Ultimately, the combination of declining governmental legitimacy, a lack of sufficient public support, and the final cessation of backing from the U.S.-led coalition led to the government's collapse.

Keywords: *state building, government, Taliban, centralization*

Introduction

Since its founding in 1747, Afghanistan has consistently faced political instability and the frequent collapse of governing systems. The most recent instance occurred in August 2021, when the republican system, which had been in place for two decades, collapsed, leading to the Taliban's return to power. This event signifies more than just the downfall of a political regime; it represents the failure of a political project that was designed, executed, and supported by a broad international coalition led by the United States and NATO. The involvement of this coalition in Afghanistan resulted in substantial human and financial costs for coalition members, Afghanistan's security forces, the Taliban, and Afghan civilians. Over the past two decades, 176,206 people have died as a consequence (Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, 2021). The coalition forces incurred 3,586 fatalities, while 47,245 Afghan civilians were killed. Afghan security forces suffered 69,000 deaths, and 51,191 individuals from the Taliban and other opposition groups also lost their lives (Al Jazeera, 2021). From the onset of the conflict with the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in 2001 until 2021, the United States spent $2 trillion. The United Kingdom and Germany allocated approximately $30 billion and $19 billion, respectively (BBC, 2022). Other coalition members also incurred significant human and financial costs in relation to their involvement in and support of the Afghan government.

There have been evaluations in different countries that were involved in the NATO-led ISAF campaign to estimate the commitment in such a long-lasting military intervention. Norway was the country that presented a report in 2014, showing that the only reasonable benefit for Norway was to present itself as a trustworthy ally in the concert of NATO-partners (NOU 2016; cf. Wilkens 2016). In the U.S.A., the ISAF-mission under the informal leadership of the U.S.A. was strongly scandalized and criticized that there was no plan or vision besides defeating the Taliban forces (Whitlock 2021). In Germany, a parliamentary commission was established and a report has been publicly discussed. As a resume, the commission stated that this campaign was no less than a total disaster, taken the strong normative goal of building a sustainable parliamentary democracy in Afghanistan (Enquete-Kommission, 2024).

Nevertheless, there has been some visible progress: The international community's support for Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021 brought about significant positive changes in the country. Access to education, healthcare, and telecommunications improved substantially (see Table 1), leading to notable progress in various Sustainable Development Goal indicators (World Bank, 2021).

Table 1: Positive developments in Afghanistan

Indicator	Before	After
Life Expectancy	56 years (2001)	64 years (2019)
Literacy Rate (% of people ages 15-24)	47% (2011)	56% (2021)
Maternal Mortality	15,000 (2001)	7,700 (2017)
Unemployment Rate	11.58% (2011)	8.84% (2017)
Standard of Living	0.37 (2001)	0.5 (2017)
Human Rights Scores	-2.51 (2001)	-2.31 (2017)

However, despite these advancements in education, health, and the economy over the past two decades, the collapse of the republican system highlights a clear failure on the part of both Afghanistan and its international partners in achieving effective state-building and establishing lasting political stability.

In explaining the return of the Taliban to power, analysts refer to numerous challenges that contributed to the eventual collapse of the Afghan government. These challenges include the statement from the then United States president Barack Obama in 2009 that the U.S.A. will withdraw its forces till 2014, the United States' agreement with the Taliban, the rapid and at the end chaotic withdrawal of American forces and their allies from Afghanistan, and the significant reduction in American military support for Afghan security forces (Najam, 2023). These factors strengthened the Taliban's determination to overthrow the Afghan government while simultaneously weakening the ability of Afghan forces to defend the country. Additionally, widespread administrative corruption within Afghanistan's governmental institutions eroded public trust and diminished the effectiveness of these institutions. Deep divisions among the Afghan political elite further hindered the formation of a strong political alliance capable of opposing the Taliban. Furthermore, the corruption-riddled presidential and parliamentary elections undermined public confidence in the government and the democratic process (J. B. Murtazashvili, 2022). These challenges, along with other existing problems, played a significant role in the collapse of the Afghan government and the subsequent return of the Taliban to power.

These explanations account for only part of the reality behind the failure of state-building and the collapse of the Afghan government. They do not address the primary factor influencing the downfall of Afghanistan's political system. We should still ask: Why were the United States and its allies unable to establish a stable political system in Afghanistan? Issues such as administrative corruption, corrupt elections, and the lack of unified support for the Afghan government against the Taliban are intermediate causes, not the root cause. Therefore, a more comprehensive explanation is needed to identify the underlying factors that led to these challenges and ultimately caused the collapse of the Afghan government.

In this chapter, we examine the sociopolitical contexts surrounding the collapse of the Afghan government and the resurgence of the Taliban, arguing that the efforts undertaken during the twenty-year presence of the United States and its allies—framed as state-building initiatives—were misaligned with Afghanistan's social realities.

The U.S.-led coalition in Afghanistan has adopted a state-building strategy that has been utilized by Western nations for many years in the region. Historically, foreign governments have frequently sought to impose governance structures on other states, either through force or diplomatic means (Owen, 2002). For centuries, European powers replaced indigenous governments in Africa, Asia, and Latin America in their pursuit of colonial expansion. The U.S. military occupations of Japan and Germany, alongside the Marshall Plan for Western Europe, marked the beginning of modern post-war reconstruction efforts (Montgomery, 1957). Following World War II, the United States took a leading role in military interventions across Latin America, Southeast Asia, and Africa, overthrowing hostile regimes and rebuilding war-torn countries as democratic, market-oriented economies (Schuller & Grant, 2003).

In the contemporary period, state-building efforts are undertaken not only by the United States and Western European nations but also by international organizations such as the World Bank and the United Nations (Harber 2014). From 1988 to 1998, more than 40 countries across Africa, Eastern Europe, Asia, Central and South America, and the Middle East were either in conflict or recovering from it, requiring peacekeeping operations and foreign assistance for post-conflict reconstruction (Patrick, 2000). Significant reconstruction programs were launched by the World Bank, the United Nations, and various national governments in countries like El Salvador, Nicaragua, Cambodia, the West Bank and Gaza, Lebanon, East Timor, Mozambique, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Rwanda, and others (Rondinelli & Montgomery, 2005). The World Bank's lending for post-conflict reconstruction alone saw an 800% increase between 1980 and 1998, reaching $6.2 billion (Kreimer et al., 1998). By 2002, 16% of the World Bank's total lending was allocated for this purpose (Newcombe, 2005).

There is hardly any example that a developmental strategy, initiated by the World Bank and the respective idea of a market-driven modernization had a sustainable impact on the countries of the Global South. Nevertheless, in Afghanistan the same socio-technocratic strategy has been implemented. Therefore, it was hardly surprising that State-building based on Western models was incompatible with Afghanistan's socio-political structures, and the efforts made in this regard largely represented a rudimentary form of democratization. A significant portion of the population, particularly in rural areas, did not perceive a sense of ownership over the political system established during this period. In southern Afghanistan, a significant portion of the Pashtun community actively opposed the programs implemented by the U.S.-led coalition, which were aimed at democratization, state-building, and nation-building.

Thus, the collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021 can be attributed more to the lack of widespread popular support for a government composed of former warlords and technocrats backed by Western allies, rather than to the military strength of the Taliban. Factors such as the withdrawal of U.S.-led international coalition forces undoubtedly accelerated the government's downfall, but – in our perspective – they cannot be considered the determinant cause. If Afghans had strongly supported the government, the approximately 250,000 Afghan security forces, along with popular mobilization forces, might have mounted a more robust resistance and potentially prevented the Taliban from returning to power. In the following section (II.), we will further expand a more social science-related approach and present some theoretical positions.

Prioritizing state-building over legitimacy

A characteristic common to all Afghan states that have collapsed is their reliance on foreign powers and their consequent lack of legitimacy and popular support. The Western-backed state that fell in August 2021 was established with the support of the U.S.-led coalition. Despite having military infrastructure and security forces far superior in number to those of the Taliban, the state's collapse was ultimately due to its lack of legitimacy and insufficient popular backing, leaving it unable to resist the Taliban.

The collapse of Afghanistan's political systems is commonly explained by state officials and scholars through reference to intrinsic factors, such as the conflictual and fragmented nature of Afghan society. The country's challenging

topography, ethnolinguistic and religious-sectarian divisions, and tribal allegiances are frequently cited as contributing elements. From this standpoint, the issues surrounding state-building are often detached from the broader economic and political contexts in which they are embedded, placing the blame primarily on Afghan citizens themselves. While the geophysical characteristics of Afghanistan and the sociocultural and social structural diversity of Afghan society have indeed influenced state-building processes, the transformation of sociocultural pluralism into forms of social fragmentation along ethnic, religious-sectarian, regional, and tribal lines must be understood as a calculated response to the imposition of an inappropriate nation-state. This governance model, with its discriminatory policies and practices, exacerbated divisions within Afghan society. It was the persistently centralizing state policies and the internal colonialism, often supported by external colonial powers, that cumulatively undermined state-building efforts in Afghanistan (Shahrani, 2002).

The collapse of the Afghan government in 2021 marked the failure of the state-building project undertaken by the U.S. and its allies in Afghanistan. This failure highlights the importance of legitimacy in governance, which was neglected in favor of prioritizing state-building objectives. Using a conceptual framework, we explain how the state-building efforts of the US-led coalition led to the fall of the Western-backed state in that country.

State-building is generally approached through two main frameworks: the institutional approach and the legitimacy approach. Each of these approaches has distinct implications for the resulting states, particularly in terms of their capacity for survival or vulnerability to collapse.

An institutional approach emphasizes the role of state institutions, while a 'legitimacy' approach focuses more on socio-political cohesion and the legitimacy that a state requires to succeed and be sustainable. While the former prioritizes the effectiveness of state institutions, the latter is more concerned with their legitimacy. The legitimacy approach highlights the need to consider the complex nature of the modern nation-state. A state encompasses more than the mere functioning of its institutions; thus, state collapse involves more than just institutional failure. Effective state-building must address not only the reconstruction of state institutions but also the broader issue of socio-political cohesion, often referred to as nation-building. When external actors engage in addressing state-building, their efforts without attention to nation-building are unlikely to succeed (Lemay-Hébert, 2009).

The institutional approach defines nation-building as an intervention in the internal affairs of another state with the objective of altering or restoring its system of governance. This process involves efforts to establish institutions that promote economic prosperity, social equity, security, the rule of law, and mechanisms that sustain democratic processes, including political competition and civic responsibility. Such efforts often include infrastructural reconstruction, humanitarian aid in the form of food and medical supplies, and the construction of essential facilities, such as roads, schools, healthcare, water, and sanitation systems. Furthermore, nation-building frequently entails the provision of technical and administrative expertise to restore accountability and efficiency in the delivery of public services (Carson, 2003).

According to modernization theories, the challenges faced by developing countries arise because traditional norms, values, and institutions continue to dominate these developing societies, even as modernization progresses (Loh,

2017). To address these issues, it is necessary to promote modern norms, values, and institutions within society and integrate traditional groups into the newly established national political systems (Bernstein, 1971; Goorha, 2010). Analysts use various terms, such as tribalism, regionalism, secessionism, parochialism, and particularism, to explain different problems in developing nations. They argue that these orientations are associated with traditionalism, which can only be overcome through modernization, as more individuals adopt the norms, values, and institutions of a modern nation-state (Tipps, 1973). Huntington (Huntington, 2006) argued that the challenges to political order were often intensified by the objectives of the nation-state. As the modern nation-state pursued socio-economic development namely urbanization, industrialization, the creation of a market economy, and the expansion and modernization of communication and education systems, social mobilization increased. This, in turn, led to rising demands for political participation, which often occurred more rapidly than political institutionalization. As a result, Huntington argued that political participation needed to be slowed while political institutionalization was accelerated. He recommended that power needed to be centralized initially before it could be expanded and shared, highlighting his emphasis on creating political order in changing societies.

In the context of legitimacy, the literature can be divided into two distinct categories. The first generation of state-building literature primarily focuses on the legitimacy of external interventions in state-building, particularly concerning the legitimacy of the "international community" in relation to weak but formally sovereign states. However, the external versus internal legitimacy debate is closely tied to a second generation of literature which concentrates on the legitimacy of the outcomes of state-building efforts (Andersen, 2012).

Legitimacy is not a static or singular event; rather, it is a process that must be continuously reproduced and negotiated over time. If the state does not play a significant role in the everyday lives of its citizens, it may fail to be perceived as legitimate. Conversely, if the state does not effectively penetrate society, it has little impact on people's lives, further undermining its legitimacy (Bellina et al., 2009).

The state-building efforts undertaken by the United States and its allies in Afghanistan primarily focused on constructing institutions that gave the appearance of democracy, without adequately addressing the issue of democratic legitimacy within the government. The initial rationale for their intervention in Afghanistan was the dismantling of the Al-Qaeda network, which had orchestrated the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States (BBC, 2021). Had the Taliban complied with U.S. demands to extradite Osama bin Laden and dismantle the Al-Qaeda bases in Afghanistan, the United States would likely not have initiated military action, nor would there have been a focus on state-building. Consequently, the primary objective of the U.S.-led coalition following the Taliban's defeat was to secure territorial control and preserve the integrity of Afghanistan, rather than to establish a genuinely democratic government. In practice, this strategy involved prioritizing the reaffirmation of Afghanistan's traditional territorial boundaries and extending central authority throughout the defined territory. This was considered the foremost objective, with the success of all other desired outcomes for the country deemed contingent upon its achievement. The emphasis on sovereignty-building as the initial step toward nation-building appeared so self-evident, both practically and theo-retically, that there was little perceived need to justify it or consider alternative

approaches. In fact, it was rarely acknowledged that any serious alternative strategy existed, let alone that it warranted consideration (Starr, 2006).

From the outset, Afghans were primarily concerned with the legitimacy of the new government, defined as the voluntary acceptance of the government's right to rule and the population's willingness to support it. This focus on legitimacy sharply contrasted with the views of the US led coalition and the United Nations, who prioritized sovereignty. While the international community did not deny the importance of legitimacy, their approach differed in two key ways: they believed sovereignty should be established first, followed by legitimacy, and that legitimacy could primarily be achieved through national elections. In contrast, most politically active Afghans argued that sovereignty could only be rebuilt by first addressing legitimacy, which required that the population perceive the government as fair and representative. They believed that elections were important, but their role was to confirm, rather than create, legitimacy. For Afghans, legitimacy depended on ensuring that all groups had a fair voice in the government and balanced representation in the administrative apparatus. Without this, elections would be ineffective in fostering legitimacy (Starr, 2006).

The United States did not pledge to transform Afghanistan into a model democracy. Rather, the goal was to eliminate the country's role as a sanctuary for terrorists and to establish a degree of stability for its population. In contrast, the situation in Iraq was significantly different. The objectives were far more ambitious, and the scale of intervention substantially larger. President Bush had articulated prior to the conflict that Iraq was to be transformed into a democracy, with the war representing the initial phase of a broader strategy aimed at reshaping the political landscape of the broader Middle East (Fukuyama, 2006, p. 12).

The different approaches taken by the United States in state-building efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan highlight that the Afghan government has lacked the requisite social conditions for achieving sustainability since its establishment. Although Afghanistan and Iraq share similarities as multi-ethnic societies, the equitable distribution of power among various ethnic and religious groups is a key determinant of governmental legitimacy in both contexts. Iraq's political system was structured as a federal parliamentary system, reflecting its social diversity. In contrast, despite comparable ethnic and religious heterogeneity, Afghanistan adopted a highly centralized presidential system. In a meeting held in Bonn, Germany, with the participation of representatives from various countries and Afghan delegates, the focus was on shaping the government in Afghanistan after the Taliban's fall. German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer proposed establishing a federal political system, citing Germany's successful post-World War experience with federalism. However, the suggestion was set aside, with the decision to revisit the topic at a later time (Starr, 2006).

The issue of centralization was further exacerbated by the adoption of a strongly presidential form of government, a model actively endorsed by the United States. The U.S. supported this structure, advocating for a president who could drive policymaking and serve as a single point of contact for international actors (Suhrke, 2011). However, this approach disregarded a substantial body of scholarship warning about the risks inherent in such systems, particularly the fact that they create a "winner-takes-all" dynamic (Fish, 2006; Linz, 1990; Sartori, 1997; Shugart, 1992; Stepan & Skach, 1993). This model is especially perilous in societies with diverse ethnic groups, as evidenced during the drafting of the

Afghan Constitution, where the push for a presidential system was viewed by non-Pashtun groups as a Pashtun power grab (Jamal & Maley, 2023).

This centralization concentrated political, administrative, and financial authority in the capital, effectively marginalizing local populations in provinces and districts, who were excluded from meaningful participation in governance. Under this system, local governance was minimal, with all affairs managed by the presidential office and ministries in Kabul. Moreover, the heads of all government departments at the national, provincial, and district levels were appointed by the president, further reinforcing the concentration of power. The powers of the President outlined in the Constitution of Afghanistan included the appointment of ministers, the attorney general, the head of the central bank, the head of national security, and the head of the Red Crescent, head and members of the supreme court following approval by the Wolesi Jirga. Additionally, the President was authorized to appoint, retire, accept resignations, and dismiss judges, officials of the armed forces, police, national security personnel, and other high-ranking officials. Other authorities included appointing the heads of Afghanistan's political delegations to foreign countries and international institutions, as well as approving laws and issuing legislative decrees (*The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan*, 2004, Article 64). Despite elections, the executive had powers that were nearly equivalent to those once exercised by Afghan kings (Murtazashvili, 2019).

Under the Afghanistan Constitution, the President had significant powers to enact laws and controlled appointments to all levels of the judiciary. This undermined both the separation and balance of power outlined in the Constitution. Additionally, the implementation of the Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) electoral system resulted in a fragmented parliament, unable to form functioning political alliances capable of holding the executive accountable in a coordinated manner. Similarly, the judiciary struggled to establish itself as an independent branch, due to both a weak constitutional framework and a historical lack of institutional capacity within the judiciary (Hamidi & Jayakody, 2015).

Unlike most countries, Afghanistan had no elected subnational governments. Instead, its central line ministries were as the main administrative bodies, with provinces merely acting as administrative subdivisions of the central government (See Figure 1). These provinces lacked autonomous executive or legislative authority and had no ability to set their own priorities or programs. The provinces were further subdivided into districts, both of which were under-resourced, with particularly weak administrative capacity at the district level. Without elected bodies at the district level, there was no formal accountability to citizens, leaving district officials dependent on higher authorities for resources. This organizational structure was characterized by vertical deconcentration, meaning that the public sector was highly centralized and hierarchical, but also fragmented by sector. Provincial governors, appointed by the president through the Independent Directorate for Local Government (IDLG), served as the highest representatives of central authority at the provincial level. However, their role was mainly administrative and coordinative, as sectoral line ministries and their district departments operated independently of the governor's authority (Boex & Cadwell, 2010).
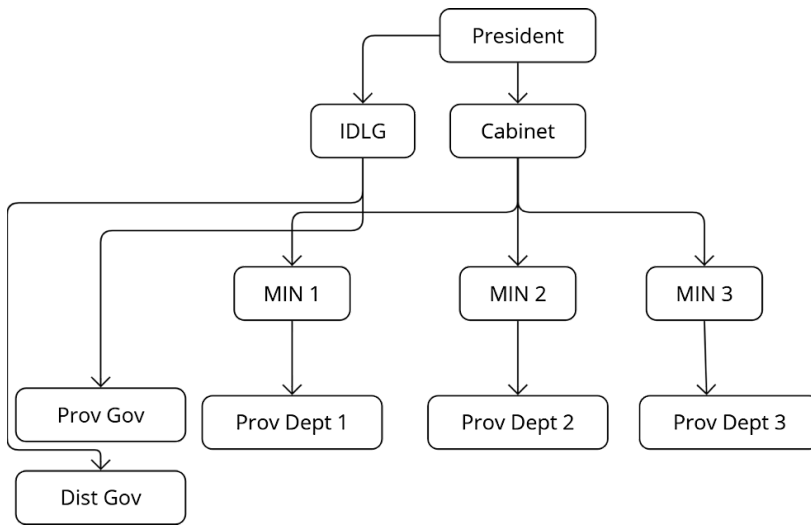
Figure 1: Afghanistan's administrative-territorial structure

The concentration of power in the executive branch, coupled with the president's extensive authority, resulted in a lack of accountability. Government officials were primarily accountable to senior officials and the president, rather than to the public. Additionally, key Afghan decision-makers prioritized pleasing the United States and its allies over being accountable to their own citizens, believing that their political survival depended on the financial, security, and political support provided by external powers. This dynamic eroded public oversight of government activities, laying the groundwork for widespread corruption. The political elite treated the state and its resources as personal assets, won through electoral victories.

Highly centralized governments often exploit their own citizens, rendering them susceptible to civil unrest, conflict, and eventual collapse. Many countries that have experienced protracted civil conflicts over the past several decades— such as Afghanistan, Libya, Myanmar, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen—had highly centralized governance structures prior to the onset of violence. Centralization risks diminishing the quality of public administration by making it largely unresponsive to local needs and demands (Murtazashvili, 2019). Furthermore, centralization can marginalize local elites, potentially leading to a resurgence of conflict and violence in states subjected to external state-building efforts (Myerson, 2011).

The presidential system poses significant threats to political stability in several ways. One potential issue is the overburdening of the office of the president, which can hinder efficient governance and service delivery. Another concern arises if the individual holding the office lacks the necessary emotional intelligence or political acumen to navigate complex policy issues. In contrast to parliamentary systems, where problems may be more readily dispersed, a presidential system often amplifies them, echoing the ancient adage that "a fish rots from the head down (Jamal & Maley, 2023).

The establishment of a centralized presidential political system in Afghanistan introduced numerous challenges that ultimately contributed to the collapse of the Western-backed government. In this system, the role of the populace was largely restricted to electing the president, members of parliament, and provincial councils. However, these elections were consistently marred by corruption, undermining any attempt to legitimize the political structure. The imbalance of power, with excessive authority vested in the president, disrupted the equilibrium among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. One of the most detrimental consequences of this centralized political system was the increasing gap between the central government and the rural population.

The media, non-governmental organizations, and civil society institutions—traditionally seen as pillars of democracy—were often co-opted by individuals with strong ties to Western countries or by warlords who shared power with technocrats returning from abroad. These individuals profited from development projects in sectors such as reconstruction, civil society, education, human rights, and governance reform, using the resulting financial gains to flaunt their luxurious lifestyles in front of Afghanistan's impoverished population. The expansion of telecommunications, alongside the proliferation of television and radio stations—many of which were funded by Western nations—exposed Afghanistan's rural poor to this stark class divide. This growing awareness of the socio-economic gap fostered widespread disenchantment with the government and the existing political order.

Bryan E. Carroll (2009), a former US Army Major who served in Afghanistan, considered the insurgency against the Afghan government to be a response to its excessive centralization. He noted that Afghanistan's local population had historically opposed strong central government intervention. From the reign of kings to the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), the Soviet occupation, and the Taliban regime, there had been widespread resistance to extensive central authority. Each of these periods fostered significant grievances against the central government, ultimately leading to insurgencies and the eventual overthrow of those regimes. He wrote that similar grievances were re-emerging in relation to the central government in Kabul, and that a federal system with autonomous regions, as demonstrated in other countries, had proven to be an effective governance model for mitigating such grievances.

The fall of the state due to a lack of legitimacy

As previously discussed, numerous factors contributed to the collapse of the Western-backed government in Afghanistan. It is essential, however, to highlight two critical aspects of these variables. Several of these factors—such as pervasive administrative corruption, significant divisions among political elites, and the government's inefficiency in delivering public services—emerged primarily due to the government's insufficient legitimacy. Consequently, these elements should be viewed as intermediary variables contributing to the fall of the Afghan government rather than direct causes. Variables, such as the reduction in financial and military assistance from the U.S.-led coalition, the signing of the U.S.-Taliban agreement, and the support provided to the Taliban by countries like Pakistan, contributed to the downfall of the Afghan state. However, these factors were not sufficient in themselves to precipitate the collapse of the Afghan

government; rather, they played a complementary role in relation to the more fundamental issue of the government's lack of legitimacy. In other words, had the Afghan population—particularly the rural communities, which have historically influenced the downfall of various Afghan regimes—a stronger sense of ownership toward the government and actively defended it, the Taliban would likely have been unable to seize control of the entire country. At worst, Afghanistan may have descended into a civil war, with none of the factions able to assert complete dominance over the nation.

The political system established in Afghanistan with the support of the United States and its allies can be characterized as a highly centralized presidential system. Political power and state resources were allocated under the title of ethnic inclusion, but in practice, they were controlled by western-backed technocrats and party leaders who had previously fought against the Taliban. The allocation of government positions based on ethnic quotas served less as a tool for genuine ethnic representation and more as a means for Afghan political elites to monopolize state resources and authority. Positions within the government were neither distributed in accordance with the actual size of ethnic populations nor based on meritocratic principles. Instead, Afghan political elites established networks of patronage, whereby government posts and resources were allocated to individuals loyal to them, further entrenching their power. This was a dyadic relationship and was characterized by hierarchical structures, unequal status, reciprocity, and personal contact. These relations served to connect factional elites and their ethnoregional or tribal clients to the state. This system effectively marginalized a significant portion of the Afghan population, particularly those in rural areas. Initially, the largest share of government positions was secured by leaders from Jamiat-e-Islami, many of whom were from Panjshir. Subsequently, Presidents Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, who both ascended to power with US support, gradually concentrated control over key government positions by appointing their own persons and close associates, sidelining individuals loyal to other political factions (Sharan, 2013). This highly centralized system, underpinned by nepotism and clientelism, contributed to the deepening of social and political divisions within the country, limiting opportunities for inclusive governance and weakening the state.

The monopolization of power and state resources by technocrats, supported by Western countries, alongside leaders of parties engaged in prolonged civil conflict, led to the concentration of key governmental positions within a circle of political elites. These elites, in turn, strategically placed their trusted affiliates in critical governmental roles. Similarly, economic opportunities were distributed among political elites and their loyal supporters; for instance, beneficial contracts for mining operations, development projects, and exclusive rights to import vital commodities, such as oil and gas, were allocated within this political class. This monopolization of power and resources emerged from the extreme centralization of the Afghan political system, which, as a structural framework, significantly contributed to systemic corruption and administrative inefficiency. These led to increasing public dissatisfaction with the Afghan government, leaving marginalized groups, mostly in rural areas, disappointed, and providing justification for the Taliban to intensify their fight against the government.

Public perceptions of corruption within the Afghan government gave some citizens justification to support the Taliban. According to an Integrity Watch Afghanistan survey, 60 percent of respondents indicated that the Karzai administration was the most corrupt in the past two decades, with the Ministry

of Interior (MoI) and the judiciary identified as the most corrupt institutions. Additionally, 50 percent of respondents emphasized that corruption directly facilitated the Taliban's growth, while a third mentioned that the Taliban presented themselves as fighters against corruption in the Afghan government (Integrity Watch Afghanistan, 2010). Engelhardt argues that corruption within the police force incentivized disloyalty rather than active resistance against the Taliban (Engelhardt, 2011). Many Afghans, particularly truck drivers who faced extortion and excessive taxes, have expressed a preference for the return of the Taliban regime as a solution for police corruption (Sands, 2007). Furthermore, the UNDP survey indicated the public's perception of police involvement in illegal activities, with 54 percent of respondents in Kabul and 61 percent in Paktika associating the police with the drug trade, while 44 percent in Kabul and 70 percent in Paktika linked them to broader criminal activities (UNDP, 2009).

To understand the abuse of power by political elites and the negative effects of widespread corruption on public trust in the government, we briefly narrate the collapse of Kabul Bank in 2010. It was Afghanistan's largest private bank at the time. The collapse happened due to large-scale embezzlement, illegal loan payments, and substantial bribes to influential Afghan politicians. At the time, approximately $1.3 billion in citizens' deposits were held in the bank. The embezzled funds were so substantial that President Hamid Karzai's administration had to allocate $825 million from Afghanistan's Central Bank to cover the depositors' losses (Kos, 2015). Among the key figures involved in the corruption only Sherkhan Farnood and Khalilullah Ferozi were arrested. None of the politicians or their family members involved in the scandal were prosecuted. For example, Mahmood Karzai, brother of President Hamid Karzai, and Haseen Fahim, brother of the Vice President Qasim Fahim, both of whom were deeply involved, were never arrested or tried. Hundreds of thousands of dollars were paid to President Karzai's election campaign and to his campaign fundraiser, former finance minister Omar Zakhilwal. Sherkhan Farnood presented a list of 227 individuals who had received approximately $250 million from the embezzled Kabul Bank funds. Among those listed were former vice presidents Qasim Fahim, Younus Qanooni, and Abdul Rasheed Dostum; President Karzai's nephew, Yama Karzai; Minister of Foreign Affairs Zalmai Rasool; First Deputy Governor of Afghanistan's Central Bank, Khan Afzal Hadawal; Mustafa Zahir, the grandson of Afghanistan's last king; and Gul Rahman Qazi, the former head of the Independent Commission for Overseeing the Implementation of the Constitution (McLeod, 2016).

Corruption was not limited to high-ranking officials in the central government; provincial and district-level managers, many of whom were part of the network of elite politicians, were also involved in it. According to a survey conducted by Integrity Watch Afghanistan, 26% of Afghans paid bribes in 2016, with the total amount exceeding $2.8 billion, considerably more than the $2.17 billion that the Afghan government projected to generate in domestic revenues in 2016. This pervasive corruption led to significant public disappointment, with 39% of respondents in the survey stating that, in their areas, people preferred the Taliban over the Afghan government due to the corruption among government officials (Integrity Watch Afghanistan, 2016).
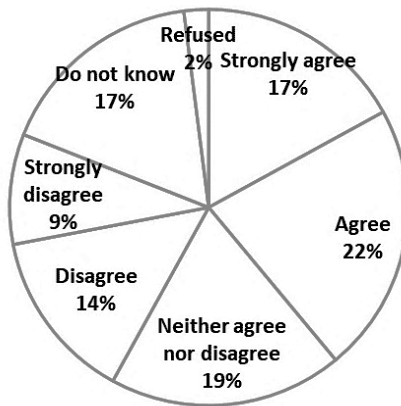
Figure 2: Due to corruption, people in our area prefer Taliban

Years before the fall of the Afghan government in August 2021, citizens' trust in the government declined, and the influence of the Taliban in rural areas of southern Afghanistan increased (see Figure 2). Corruption and inefficiency in government courts led people to seek justice from Taliban courts (Giustozzi & Baczko, 2014).

As we mentioned, during the formation of Afghanistan's political system, the need for a structure that would facilitate balanced political participation for all social groups was not adequately addressed. It was assumed that simply holding elections would be sufficient to ensure the legitimacy of the political system. However, the centralized political system became a platform for the monopolization of power and public resources by the political elites, which ultimately resulted in widespread administrative corruption and government inefficiency. Elections, the only democratic means of reforming the political system and replacing the corrupt ruling elite, were consistently marred by fraud and failed to gain the trust of the public (Johnson, 2018). In addition, Afghan elections as well as the broader electoral process, faced significant structural issues that ultimately eroded the credibility and legitimacy of the government. As the International Crisis Group (2011) noted, the 'prolonged crisis' surrounding Afghan elections was crippling the government and further destabilizing already fragile institutions. This situation was also heightening ethnic tensions and risked pushing disenfranchised Afghans toward the Taliban. The Afghan election process could drive the country deeper into not only political but also armed conflict.

During Hamid Karzai's presidency, despite these challenges, the political elite, including former Mujahideen leaders and Western-backed technocrats, reached an informal agreement to distribute political power and valuable resources among themselves without significant internal conflict. The 2014 presidential election was the beginning of an open conflict among the political elites, primarily between Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah, the two main candidates and their allies. Ghani claimed victory, but Abdullah and his supporters contested the results, citing widespread electoral fraud. Ultimately, the new government was not formed through the electoral process but through negotiations mediated by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and the United Nations representative in Kabul. The conflict was resolved by appointing Ashraf Ghani as president and Abdullah as chief executive, a position that did not

previously exist in Afghanistan's governmental structure and was created outside of the constitution. Ministries and government departments were then divided between Ghani's and Abdullah's supporters.

The 2019 presidential election in Afghanistan was marred by widespread allegations of fraud, with 11 out of 13 candidates rejecting the results. The election dispute escalated to the point where both Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, the two leading candidates, held separate inauguration ceremonies on the same day and at the same location, separated only by a wall. The United States ambassador and European Union diplomats attended Ashraf Ghani's inauguration, which strengthened Ghani's position. After being sworn in as president, Abdullah appointed governors for the provinces of Sar-e Pul, Jawzjan, Samangan, and Baghlan—an authority typically reserved for the president. Eventually, through the mediation of Afghan political leaders, including former president Hamid Karzai, Ghani and Abdullah signed a political agreement. This agreement established the High Council for National Reconciliation, chaired by Abdullah, while confirming Ghani as president. Government positions were subsequently divided between the supporters of both leaders (Adili, 2020).

The presidential elections in 2014 and 2019 failed to achieve meaningful democratic progress. Post-election governments were largely formed through political agreements between the leading candidates and their allied elites. Although the political elites reached an agreement on the formation of the government, their conflicts over the distribution of government posts and economic opportunities steadily intensified. This, along with other issues such as administrative corruption and government inefficiency, largely due to the centralized political system, further undermined the government's public image. A survey conducted by the Asia Foundation revealed that 58.2% of respondents believed the country was going in the wrong direction. See the changing directions of the national mood in Figure 3, derived from Akseer et al. (2019).
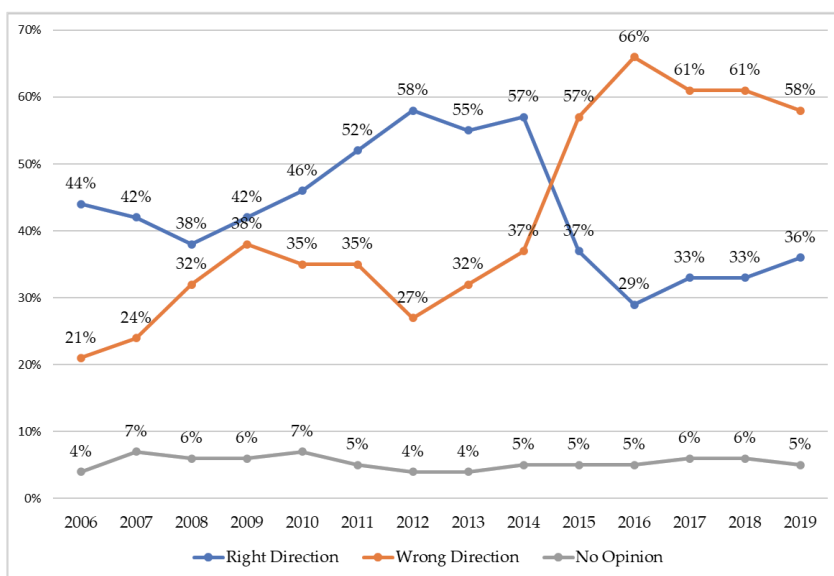

Figure 3: National mood: direction of the country

This indicates widespread dissatisfaction with the nation's macro-level governance, which was done by the central government and led by a president who has played a monarchical role and misused government resources for personal interests. The lack of government legitimacy in Afghan society, particularly in local communities and rural areas, should not be interpreted as a rejection of democracy by a traditional society. Instead, it reflects resistance to the centralized presidential system, which enabled the political elite to monopolize power under the name of democracy. The ruling elite, backed by Western countries, exercised their authority in an authoritarian manner. The opposition to this centralized political system can be better understood by comparing the levels of trust in informal local institutions with those in central government institutions. For instance, people trusted more in local councils and jirgas than in the ministers of the central government, see Figure 4 derived from Akseer et al. (2019).
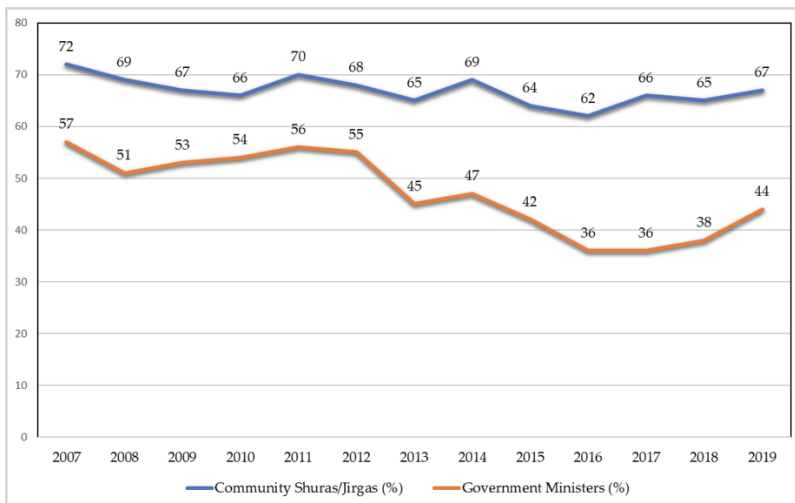
Figure 4: Confidence in community Shuras / Jirgas and government ministers

The confrontation between society and the government in Afghanistan was not limited to the public's negative attitude toward the government; sometimes, it escalated into armed conflict between the government and local opposition forces. In practice, the central government consistently faced resistance from local forces, which were often labeled by the government as irresponsible individuals or irresponsible armed groups. In some cases, the government used violence against local forces. For instance, as the Taliban gained control of numerous districts, the president deployed government forces to suppress local groups, perceiving them as a serious threat to his authority. A notable example occurred on November 25, 2018, when the National Security Forces arrested a local anti-Taliban commander named Abdul Ghani Alipour in Kabul. Subsequently, a large number of demonstrators took to the streets to protest against the government. In response to public pressure, the government eventually released him (Aljazeera, 2018). Later, in April 2021, just four months before the state collapse, the Ministry of Defense, acting on the president's order, launched a large-scale military operation in Behsud district in Maidan Wardak province against Alipour (Faiez, 2021). Hundreds of ground troops, tanks, and

helicopters were deployed, resulting in the deaths of dozens of people and the destruction of local homes. Another significant incident occurred in December 2019, when Afghan National Police special forces attacked Nizamuddin Qaisari, a former police commander, resulting in the deaths of seven people and injuries to two others (Rahim & Mashal, 2019).

The tension between local communities and the central government in Afghanistan has a long history. This is because the central government has often been in conflict with the tribal system that has traditionally governed rural areas of Afghan society (Sahrai 2018). People in these communities have consistently sought relative autonomy to preserve their tribal customs and manage their own affairs (Zaki & Saei, 2022). However, Afghan governments have insisted on controlling the provinces and districts from the capital, often relying on military force and repression to maintain their authority over these regions.

The Islamic Republic, established with the support of the United States and its allies, was presented as a democratic political system but ultimately failed to resolve the long-standing conflict between local communities and the central government. A flawed approach to state building distributed power among political elites based on ethnicity rather than true democratic representation. This resulted in a concentration of power and resources in the hands of a small elite, leaving local communities with limited opportunities for meaningful involvement in governance. The system also fostered widespread corruption and inefficiency, both of which played a significant role in the eventual collapse of the government.

Conclusion

The collapse of the Afghan government can be attributed to several key factors stemming from its centralized presidential political system. The centralized presidential system promoted by the U.S.-led coalition involved in Afghanistan's state-building, along with the Afghan political elite, followed a top-down approach to development and reform. This view assumed that Afghanistan lacked the social capacity for development due to years of civil war, widespread poverty, and high levels of illiteracy. Therefore, development and the establishment of democracy were seen as achievable only through a central government. However, Afghanistan's historical experience showed that this state-building approach has not been successful. This system lacked legitimacy and created numerous challenges that ultimately led to the government's downfall. These challenges included the concentration of power and resources in the hands of political elites, government inefficiency, widespread corruption, and escalating ethnic conflicts. Each of these factors contributed to the collapse, as they were products of the centralized political structure. Although the Afghan government had long been struggling with these issues, it managed to survive primarily due to the support of the United States and its allies. However, once the U.S. began negotiations with the Taliban, the government's stability began to erode. The situation worsened rapidly after the signing of the U.S.-Taliban agreement in Qatar, followed by a reduction in U.S. support for the Afghan government, which ultimately led to its collapse.

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Part 2: Education in Context

Chapter 6

Can a Society Survive Without Higher Education in the 21st Century?

Abas Basir

This chapter examines the critical role of higher education in Afghanistan within the context of the country's ongoing polycrisis, emphasizing how education shapes economic growth, social cohesion, and democratic governance. It highlights the devastating impact of the Taliban's restrictive education policies including the exclusion of girls and women, the narrowing of curricula, the expansion of madrasas, and the erosion of academic freedom on Afghanistan's societal development and stability. These policies deepen gender inequality, undermine economic progress, foster radicalization, and isolate Afghanistan from the international community. Addressing this challenge requires responses from the Afghan diaspora and global actors, who are seeking remedies through online education initiatives, scholarships, leadership programs, and conditional engagement with the Taliban. Without inclusive and accessible higher education, Afghanistan risks losing an entire generation's potential and weakening its prospects for peace, prosperity, and modernization.

***Keywords**: higher education, gender inequality, Afghan diaspora, online education*

Introduction

Afghanistan stands at the nexus of multiple, intersecting crises—a polycrisis—that deeply affect its social, economic, and political fabric. Among the most pressing issues is the Taliban's stringent policies on education, particularly the ban on women's education, coupled with the promotion of radical Islamic teachings. This chapter first explains the role of education in our life and then explores the current educational landscape in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime, the impact of these policies on Afghan society, and the responses from the Afghan diaspora and the international community in addressing these challenges.

The role of higher education in developing a prosperous society

The 21st century is marked by rapid technological advancements, globalization, and a knowledge-based economy, making higher education increasingly indispensable. In Afghanistan, a country beset by prolonged conflict, political instability, and social upheavals, the role of higher education is crucial for its development and integration into the global community.

Economic development and welfare

Education is crucial to achieve sustainable development (UNESCO, 2016) and human capital is well-known as a key driver of economic performance and social well-being of countries in the modern global economy. The key feature that distinguishes between the economies of high-income countries, middle-income nations and low-income countries is the knowledge content of their production processes and economic activities. Agriculture, industry, and particularly the services sector, have become increasingly knowledge- and skill-intensive in recent years. The significance of knowledge and skills is growing at an accelerating pace. Among advanced countries, the educational attainment of their populations emerges as the most critical factor determining their economic performance (Hanushek & Welch, 2006; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2008). Similarly, in middle-income and low-income countries, economies that boast higher education levels experience substantial welfare benefits (Fasih, 2008; Patrinos & Psacharopoulos, 2011). Human resource development is especially vital for the economic advancement of low-income countries.

Investment in human capital has had a positive and increasing impact on economic welfare, at all levels of education from primary schooling upwards through higher education, in Afghanistan. This applies for both urban and rural populations in the country (World Bank, 2013).

Social stability and cohesion

Education is not simply, or primarily to educate people and equip them with necessary skills, but to develop shared attitudes and values (Heyneman, 2003) and therefore, education is a powerful tool for promoting social cohesion and reducing inequalities. Higher education institutions, along with other cultural organizations, play a crucial role in fostering social cohesion.

Social cohesion can be conceptualized as a process of building shared values and creating a sense of belonging among individuals who feel they are engaged in a common enterprise and share common challenges. This concept can also be viewed instrumentally, reflecting the nature and extent of social and economic

divisions within a society (Easterly, 2006). While various factors contribute to social cohesion, shared norms and values, as well as a collective sense of identity, are critical for cultivating a resilient and cohesive society. The higher education sector is instrumental in fostering these shared norms and values, ensuring that society has a common memory and identity (World Bank, 2000).

In Afghanistan, where ethnic and tribal divisions are pronounced, higher education has the potential to bridge gaps and foster a sense of national identity. It empowers women, enabling them to participate more fully in the workforce and contribute to the economy. Furthermore, education promotes critical thinking and problem-solving skills, essential for addressing societal challenges and fostering a culture of dialogue and understanding. Higher education institutions can serve as forums for dialogue and understanding, where students from different backgrounds can engage with one another and learn from their diverse perspectives.

As Afghanistan continues to develop as a nation, its higher education sector has a vital role in shaping, preserving, and transmitting its history and cultural heritage. Furthermore, by promoting inclusive policies and curricula that reflect the country's diversity, higher education can help to foster a sense of unity while respecting individual identities. Such efforts are essential for building a more integrated society, ultimately contributing to greater stability and prosperity.

Political governance and democracy

Higher education plays a crucial role in shaping informed and active citizens who can contribute effectively to democratic governance and in this way, education plays an important role in building a stable political environment. Educated citizens are better equipped to participate in democratic processes, advocate for their rights, and hold their leaders accountable. Moreover, universities can contribute significantly to policy research and development, providing data and analyzes that inform effective governance.

Education also fosters a culture of peace and conflict resolution, which is particularly critical in a country like Afghanistan, with its historical context of violence and division. Higher education institutions can promote reconciliation and unity by serving as platforms for dialogue and understanding among diverse groups (Bar-Tal and Rosen, 2009).

Beyond providing intellectual leadership within the democratic framework, higher education institutions play a pivotal role in promoting democracy. They create opportunities to instill democratic values in students, fostering a culture of tolerance and the rejection of discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, religious belief, or social class. By modeling these values, educational institutions prepare students to become active citizens who will carry these principles into their professional and personal lives. The impact of instilling such values can resonate throughout society, as graduates embody and advocate for these ideals.

The Taliban's education policy

When the Taliban first ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, their educational policies were characterized by strict adherence to a conservative interpretation of Islamic values. During that period, girls' education was largely prohibited, leading to the closure of schools and universities for female students. After the

fall of the Taliban in 2001, Afghanistan witnessed significant educational reforms and improvements, particularly in the participation of girls in education. International assistance and investment led to the establishment of numerous schools and universities, contributing to increased literacy rates and educational enrollment across genders.

However, with the Taliban's resurgence in 2021, the country has returned to a regime reminiscent of its past, raising alarms regarding the future of education in Afghanistan.

The key aspects of the Taliban´s education policy are the following:

- **Gender based education policy**

One of the most alarming aspects of the Taliban's education policy has been the outright ban on girls' education at the secondary school level. Although the Taliban initially indicated that they would allow girls to return to school, in March 2022, they suspended the reopening of secondary schools for girls, and this ban has continued since. This decision has effectively barred a generation of Afghan girls from pursuing their education beyond the primary level, raising concerns about the long-term ramifications for gender equality and societal development.

The impact of this ban goes beyond individual aspirations; it reinforces gender inequality and restricts women's rights in a country where educational attainment is critical for economic and social progress. As girls are systematically denied access to education, the prospects for their empowerment and participation in the workforce diminish significantly.

The Taliban's education policies have also severely restricted women's access to higher education. All universities have to implement policies that prevent women from enrolling, leaving those women who might have become leaders, professionals, and educators without opportunities to advance their studies.

This ban has resulted in the systematic exclusion of women from fields essential for national development, such as medicine, engineering, and law. The absence of women in higher education not only undermines the principle of equality but also deprives Afghan society of half its intellectual potential, which is critical for fostering innovation and addressing societal challenges.

- **Curriculum change and content control**

The Taliban has exerted significant control over the education curriculum, prioritizing Islamic studies and religious instruction over a more diverse and comprehensive academic approach. The curriculum reflects an ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam, with an emphasis on religious conformity and a possible reduction in subjects such as science, humanities, and social sciences, which are essential for a balanced education and critical thinking skills. The Taliban have already removed from curriculum all subjects deemed to be in contradiction to Islam to primarily focus on Islamic studies that adhere to their interpretation.

- **Escalation of religious schools**

In addition, since August 2021, madrasas are expanding in number and into the public school system. This is concerning because without an education programme focused on technology, science and mathematics students will not

have the skills necessary to earn a sustainable income and Afghanistan will not have the skilled workforce to grow its economy.

It is reported that in March 2023, the Taliban officials in the southern Afghan provinces were advocating to direct government resources toward religious schooling and to channel aid through religious mechanisms and away from existing Afghan public schools. Additionally, the Taliban Ministry of Education gave special attention to establishing madrasas. The Taliban have converted teacher training facilities and primary- and secondary level schools in several provinces into madrasas and have begun actively recruiting teachers for madrasas.

- **Academic freedom and institutional autonomy**

Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are foundational principles that ensure universities can operate independently, fostering an environment where critical thinking, inquiry, and scholarly discourse can thrive. These values are crucial for the advancement of knowledge and the cultivation of informed citizens capable of contributing to society. Academic freedom allows scholars and students to explore diverse viewpoints, challenge prevailing norms, and engage in open dialogue, which is essential for innovation, research, and the overall progress of society. During the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the higher education sector experienced a significant degree of academic freedom, flexibility and freedom in curriculum development and the Ministry of Higher Education took measures to gradually increase the autonomy of the higher education institutes through planning, regulations, decentralization, and by providing alternative sources of financial support.

However, under the Taliban regime, these principles face significant challenges and undermining. The Taliban's rigid ideological framework imposes strict limitations on the subjects that can be taught and the ideas that can be expressed. Universities that were once centers of diverse thought and critical engagement are now at risk of becoming tools for propaganda. As an example, the Taliban have taken action to cancel all courses perceived to promote westernization and democratization. They have also ordered all private universities to coordinate the hiring of their lecturers with a special unit in the Ministry of Higher Education. Professors and university staff may face censorship and restrictions regarding the content they can teach or discuss in their classrooms. This suppression of academic freedom stifles creativity and intellectual growth, undermining the mission of higher education to prepare students for a complex and rapidly changing world.

Impacts of the Taliban´s education policy on Afghan society

The Taliban's education policy has a wide range of impacts, including the following:

- **Decline in the access to education**

The Taliban's takeover triggered a decline in the access to education in Afghanistan. Prior to the Taliban takeover, educational access for girls and women had increased. Between 2001 and 2018, girls' enrollment in primary school increased from almost zero to 2.5 million girls. In addition, between 2001 and 2021, Afghanistan made significant progress in increasing access to higher

education for all Afghan students. By 2021, total student enrollment reached 410,000 at Afghanistan's 170 public and private universities where students studied diverse disciplines and were taught or supported by nearly 37,200 professors and administrative staff. Further, women made significant strides in attending institutions of higher education, with 90,000 enrolled women students in 2018, up from 5,000 in 2007.

Taliban's education policy, however, has negatively affected Afghan students' access to education at all levels. Women and girls have been the most affected, particularly because of bans on their access to education after primary school. A second factor contributing to the decline in enrollment of all levels of education is Afghanistan's deteriorating economic condition. Since August 2021, the Afghan economy has been in an economic crisis due to the reduced international support, and sanctions against the Taliban. As a result, many families have made the difficult decision to reduce spending on their children's education to help meet basic living needs.

- **Decline in the quality education**

The Taliban have rejected education policies and commitments established by the former Afghan government. The result has been a substantial decline in the quality of education at all levels.

Factors contributing to this decline in quality include but not limited to fewer qualified teachers, curriculum change and content control by the Taliban.

Afghanistan has seen a decrease in the number of qualified teachers since the Taliban returned to power. Due to the Taliban's harsh and restrictive policies, teachers are being fired or are leaving their jobs for their personal safety, and the teachers who remain are facing severe financial hardship. The Taliban harassed and intimidated university professors for perceived violations of religious edicts and other perceived infractions. On the other hand, the Taliban-led hiring process also reduced the quality of education. This policy favors candidates who adhere to Taliban ideologies rather than the most qualified candidate.

- **Deepening gender inequality**

The implications of the Taliban's education policy are severe for gender equality in Afghanistan. With the continued exclusion of girls and women from education, Afghanistan risks perpetuating a cycle of poverty, illiteracy, and limited economic participation. The education of women is vital for national development, and restricting their access to education undermines the progress made over the past two decades.

- **Economic implications**

The Taliban's educational restrictions have broader economic consequences. A less educated population limits the workforce's capacity to engage in development-oriented activities. Evidence suggests that investing in women's education significantly contributes to economic growth, as educated women are more likely to participate in the labor force, improve family health outcomes, and contribute to community development (World Bank, 2024).

- **Social cohesion and stability**

As mentioned above, education is a powerful tool for promoting social cohesion in a diverse society like Afghanistan. By restricting education based on gender and enforcing a narrow educational curriculum, the Taliban risks fostering division and resentment, undermining social stability. A generation deprived of inclusive education may lead to further marginalization and unrest.

- **International relations and aid**

The Taliban's education policy has significant implications for Afghanistan's relationship with the international community. Many nations and international organizations have conditioned aid on compliance with human rights standards, including the right to education for all. The exclusion of girls from schools and the emphasis on a narrow curriculum jeopardize potential humanitarian support, leading to greater economic hardship for the Afghan population.

- **A lost generation**

The bans on secondary and higher education for girls may result in a lost generation of Afghan women. With limited educational opportunities, young women may become increasingly dependent on traditional roles, leading to a decline in overall societal development. The long-term effects of this systemic educational deprivation could hinder Afghanistan's ability to progress and modernize, with implications extending across generations.

- **Radicalization of youth**

In many schools and universities, curricula are now infused with extremist narratives that glorify jihad and martyrdom, potentially radicalizing students and instilling a mindset focused on violence as a means of conflict resolution.

The radicalization of education has serious implications for youth behavior that extend beyond the classroom. These practices are not merely educational but have the potential to reshape societal norms, fostering environments conducive to violence and extremism. As students are taught to embrace extremist ideologies, the risk of recruitment into militant groups increases. A generation raised on radicalized curricula may be more willing to resort to violence to achieve political or religious goals, posing a direct threat to national and regional security.

The radicalization of education in Afghanistan does not have implications limited only to the country; it poses potential threats to regional security. As Afghanistan has historically been a hub for various extremist groups, the spread of radicalized teachings can embolden similar movements in neighboring countries, further destabilizing the region.

Diaspora response and the role of international community

The Afghan diaspora and the international community play crucial roles in addressing these challenges. Here's an overview of the diaspora response and the international community's role in providing remedies for education in Afghanistan:

- **Establishment of an online education platform**

The development of an online education platform presents a crucial opportunity to provide learning resources to Afghan individuals, particularly women and girls who have been deprived of traditional university education. This platform can help bridge educational gaps and empower these individuals with the knowledge and skills they need for their future endeavors.

The establishment of an online university could serve two main objectives: first, to ensure access to study and research for students and scholars in Afghanistan, especially women; and second, to provide a study and research space for the Afghan diaspora. The university could offer bachelor's and master's degree programs in both technical and social subjects, with opportunities for further doctoral studies. English may serve as the primary language of instruction.

The Afghan diaspora can play a vital role in establishing this online university through their expertise, networks, and advocacy. Many members of the diaspora are academics and researchers affiliated with reputable universities and research institutions worldwide, including in Germany. They can contribute to administration, curriculum development, and teaching. Additionally, many Afghans are employed in the tech industry, providing the necessary skills to develop and maintain an online learning platform.

While online education offers a critical lifeline for many Afghans lacking access to higher education, it is important to acknowledge the significant challenges within the context of Afghanistan. Online education relies on access to reliable technology and internet connectivity, and Afghanistan ranks among the lowest in the world in terms of connectivity. Therefore, while the emergence of online education as an alternative is commendable, it is essential to continue working toward creating more accessible educational opportunities for all Afghans.

The international community can play a significant role in this effort by supporting initiatives that expand access to digital tools and resources and by offering scholarships and grants to help Afghan youth pursue their education during this challenging period.

- **Online language course**

Online language courses in different languages could also help Afghan youth to harness international opportunities. With this initiative, we could connect the talented and determined youth to various universities and online opportunities across the globe. By leveraging the language skills they acquire, it is aimed to open doors for them to pursue higher education, scholarships, internships, and other opportunities that will enhance their personal and professional growth.

- **Support for higher education institutions in safe heaven countries**

Diaspora can advocate for the international financial support to students and researchers studying in Afghanistan's neighboring countries, as well as other secure regions such as Bangladesh, India, Thailand and Uzbekistan. I am very happy that the Government of Germany has already taken initiatives in facilitating such support. This, however, could be more strengthened.

- **Scholarships for students in Afghanistan who wish to pursue education at private universities**

This initiative aims to enable students to continue their education while simultaneously providing support for the survival of these institutions. Afghan Diaspora can seek financial support from governments and donations and endowments from successful Afghan entrepreneurs and professionals abroad to support these students. They can also partner with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that support educational initiatives to secure grants and funding.

- **Leadership programs for youth**

In light of the evolving socio-political landscape in Afghanistan, it is essential to not forget the implementation of leadership programs specifically designed to prepare the young Afghan generation and in particular the girls for a post-Taliban era. These programs should focus on equipping youth with the essential skills, knowledge, and mindset needed to contribute effectively to the nation's rebuilding and development efforts.

- **Conditional engagement with the Taliban**

Any engagement with the Taliban must be contingent upon their commitment to allowing girls to access universities and adhering to international standards for governing the education system. This conditionality is essential to ensure that educational opportunities are equitable and inclusive, thereby promoting a more just and progressive society. By establishing these prerequisites, the international community can support the development of a robust educational framework in Afghanistan while holding the Taliban accountable for their responsibilities to all citizens, particularly women and girls.

Conclusion

Despite being of strategic importance for Afghanistan's overall development, the higher education system is currently facing significant challenges. The Taliban's repressive education policies, especially those targeting Afghan girls and women have severely limited access to, and the quality of, education and have placed this system at risk of collapse, eroding the prospects for an educated middle class and stalling growth and development in the country.

The ongoing education crisis in Afghanistan is a multifaceted issue that demands coordinated efforts from both the Afghan diaspora and the international community. A united response, characterized by collaboration and commitment to establishing viable educational opportunities, is essential for remedying the damaging effects of recent upheavals. By working together, these stakeholders can help restore hope for the future and lay the groundwork for a more prosperous and educated Afghanistan.

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Chapter 7

Private Higher Education in Afghanistan: Current Trends and Prospects

Abdul Majid Majidi

With the arrival of the Taliban in Afghanistan, although all sectors of society have been affected, higher education has faced serious challenges and a worrying future. The challenges of education are partly due to the actions and policies of the Taliban, and some of them are the result of the Islamic Emirate System. The Ministry of Higher Education is currently pursuing the policy of Islamizing universities and the higher education system. The Taliban view the current education system as non-Islamic and in need of fundamental reforms. The creation of the Ministry of Guidance and Invitation in all universities and the appointment of its responsible person by the Taliban, the revision and review of the curriculum and the increase in Islamic subjects, and most importantly, the prohibition of girls' education, are examples of the policies of Islamization of higher education in Afghanistan. The prohibition of girls' education has deprived nearly half of the university students of their rights to study. This has caused irreparable damage to the higher education system, especially private universities. Additionally, factors such as poverty, unemployment, migration of professors and students, and general despair have further deteriorated the quality and quantity of higher education in Afghanistan. The current trend depicts a bleak outlook for the future of higher education in Afghanistan. The escalation of increasing constraints, negative attitudes towards higher education, especially private higher education, and, worst of all, depriving female students of education will lead to a darker future for higher education in Afghanistan.

Keywords: higher education, Taliban, gender inequality, curriculum

Introduction

Higher education and universities play a pivotal role in society as centers of knowledge creation, innovation, and critical thinking. They offer individuals the chance to acquire specialized skills and expertise in diverse fields, empowering them to contribute to the workforce and economy.

This study seeks to address the current state of private higher education in Afghanistan, its challenges, major obstacles, and most importantly, how to assist. This research is documentary in nature, with information primarily gathered through the internet and news websites due to the sensitive subject matter. Additionally, it is a descriptive study where acquired information is detailed and explained.

This article is divided into three main sections:

The first section deals with the problems and challenges directly created by the Islamic Emirate for private higher education in Afghanistan.

This section is further divided into two subcategories:

1) Challenges stemming from the pessimism of the authorities towards the education system in general, and

2) Challenges arising from their pessimism towards private higher education.

The second section covers challenges that are not directly created by the Taliban but are the result of the actions and consequences of the policies of the Islamic Emirate, which are currently turning into a challenge for private higher education.

The third section discusses the ways and methods that can help private higher education through these challenges. And finally, the conclusion

An overview of the history of higher education in Afghanistan

For the first time, higher education in the country was established on October 23, 1932, with the founding of the Faculty of Medicine in Kabul. In 1946, Kabul University was established, followed by Nangarhar University in 1964 and Kabul Polytechnic University in 1969 as the second important university in Afghanistan in Kabul. Kabul Polytechnic University was officially upgraded to university status in 2004. The third important government university in Kabul, Kabul Education University, was upgraded in 2003

The first private university named Kardan was established on April 18, 2006. A few months later, the private university of the American University of Afghanistan started its activities. Soon after, many private and government universities were established throughout Afghanistan (Ministry of Higher Education website, n.d.).

One of the significant achievements of the past two decades (2001-2021) in Afghanistan has been the quantitative and qualitative growth of educational institutions (Statistical Yearbook, 2015). Private educational institutions, which previously had no presence in Afghanistan, have experienced remarkable growth during the republican system. This transformation has fundamentally reshaped and revolutionized the entire Afghan education system (Statistical

Yearbook, 2016). For example, in the past twenty years, 140 private institutes and universities have been established in Afghanistan (MoHE, 2024), and more than 800 private schools have been active (Mehrdad, 2016). In addition to the mentioned quantitative growth, private educational institutions have shown promising qualitative advancements, which have eventually influenced government educational centers as well. Alongside the private sector, government educational institutions have also experienced unprecedented growth. According to officials, before the collapse of the system, there were over 16,000 active schools across Afghanistan (Mehrdad, 2016).

However, with the establishment of the Islamic Emirate in 2021, educational centers have faced numerous challenges, and the trend has taken a downward turn. According to statements from the Private School Union, more than 240 private schools have been closed in the past two years (Mehrdad, 2016). However, the head of the Private Schools Association says the number of closed schools is 250-300 schools (Azadi, 2023). Private universities also do not have a better situation than private schools. According to the Afghan and International Private Universities Union, currently, 35 private universities are on the verge of bankruptcy and closure in Afghanistan (Naseri, 2023).

The first section

Problems in higher education resulting from the Islamic Emirate's perspective on higher education and its policies towards it.

The first factor that has greatly affected higher education in Afghanistan and is confronted with it daily is the Taliban's pessimistic view of higher education, especially private higher education. According to the leaders of the Taliban and the current officials of the Ministry of Higher Education, most of whom are graduates of religious schools in Pakistan, Afghanistan's higher education system is considered a non-Islamic and Western system, and its graduates are seen as harmful and problematic rather than being beneficial to society (Haqani, 2021a).

Islamic fundamentalist systems in general have a very negative view of Western culture, and education and the educational system are one of the three main points (women, legislation, and education) where their clash with the modern world is most evident. Taliban leaders believe that those who have studied in schools and universities in Afghanistan over the past twenty years and have graduated did not receive an Islamic educational system and curriculum during this time. As a result, these individuals are not committed to the religious and societal values of their own culture and cannot be beneficial to their country.

The Former Minister of Higher Education Taliban regime explicitly stated, "We have no hope or expectation from the graduates of the past twenty years, as they have not graduated from an Islamic education system with an Islamic upbringing" (Haqani, 2021a). He had told reporters that the Taliban wants to "create a rational and Islamic curriculum that is in line with our Islamic, national, and historical values and, on the other hand, can compete with other countries" The Taliban's pessimistic view of higher education has led to the following actions, each of which poses a problem and obstacle to higher education in Afghanistan:

Challenges stemming from the pessimism of the authorities towards the education system in general,

Increase in Islamic subjects

Before the Taliban's takeover, most private university curricula in Afghanistan included around 4 credits of Islamic subjects. However, with the establishment of the Islamic Emirate system, the Ministry of Higher Education increased the number of credits for Islamic subjects to 24 and made their teaching mandatory in all semesters (Haqani, 2021b) while the total credits of the bachelor's course are 136 credits. On the other hand, Iran, which is the main model for the Taliban regime, and the Taliban takes many of its actions in the direction of Islamizing society and promoting religious and cultural values, takes 10 credits of Islamic subjects in their undergraduate curriculum. In comparison to Iran, the number of credits for Islamic subjects that a student in the Islamic Emirate must study during their studies is more than twice that of Iran.

Increasing the number of Islamic subjects to 24 credits and making their teaching mandatory in all semesters did not satisfy the Islamic Emirate regime. The Ministry of Higher Education took another step to revise and Islamize all curricula. In this plan, all curricula are being rewritten under the supervision of religious scholars. Some disciplines, such as law, have already completed and implemented their revised curriculum, while others are still under process. Curriculums of different fields are being rewritten. Some fields have been completed.

Gender segregation and ultimately the ban on women from attending universities

Fundamentalist ideologies have always been sensitive to women's issues, and the Islamic Emirate of the Taliban was no exception. One of the Taliban's initial actions regarding higher education was segregating classrooms for girls from boys. According to the Islamic Emirate, even the education of girls in separate classes and at separate times was considered un-Islamic. Eventually, they announced a ban on women attending universities. This action followed the prohibition of girls from attending schools and other restrictions, such as banning women from working, going to parks, and even closing beauty salons (Nadim, 2022).

Establishment of the Guidance and Invitation Department in the Ministry and creating the Guidance and Invitation Office in universities

As mentioned earlier, the education system in Afghanistan is not considered an Islamic and beneficial system for Afghan society by the Islamic Emirate. It is seen as a system that requires serious reform and Islamization. One of the measures taken by the Ministry of Higher Education in Afghanistan was the establishment of the Guidance and Invitation Department within the framework of the ministry. This department further established a Guidance and Invitation Office in all public and private universities. A religious scholar worked under the supervision of the Guidance and Invitation Department of the Ministry of Higher Education and reported on their activities. However, this individual was not a government employee and was recommended by the universities. Even this action failed to satisfy the Islamic Emirate. Recently, the Ministry of Higher Education has decided to officially employ a religious scholar recommended by the ministry and the Guidance and Invitation Department as a staff member for each private university. This scholar has the authority to even declare the

university president ineligible and remove them from their position. This action can be restrictive and intimidating to a significant extent (Rohani, 2022).

Restriction and Increased Limitations

One common issue that private universities in Afghanistan have always faced is the pessimistic view of the Ministry of Education towards them. Even in the previous Afghan regime, there was a clear pessimism among most education officials regarding private universities, and they believed that private universities, due to their pursuit of commercial goals, were more harmful than beneficial to the country. However, the general government stance was to strengthen the private sector and support deregulation, so there was no possibility of preventing negative-minded officials from implementing their views. With the advent of the Islamic Emirate system, the negative perception of private universities has increased further. The pessimistic view towards private universities, combined with the insufficient familiarity of the Emirate officials with laws and regulations in the Ministry, has resulted in increasingly imposing restrictions on private universities and making the procedures for educational documents much more stringent and lengthier.

Reevaluation of documents, establishment history, and suspension of some private universities

Another action taken by the Islamic Emirate is the reevaluation of establishment documents and the history of private universities. The Ministry of Higher Education, in a surprising move, has reexamined the establishment documents and the procedures of universities. As a result of this review, it has been stated that some universities, that have been operating for 13 or 14 years, were told that their operating licenses were only valid for one year, and they must comply with the criteria for establishing a university again according to the laws. Another action by the Ministry of Education is the suspension of several private universities. It is said that seven private universities have been suspended (Nadim, 2022).

Dissolution of the Association of Private Universities

The latest action by the Ministry of Higher Education to weaken private universities is the dissolution of the Association of Private Universities. In the absolute government of the Mullahs, who were Pakistani graduates themselves, occasional voices in support of private universities were raised, and questions were asked about restrictive decisions. The Association of Private Universities was one such organization. However, the Islamic Emirate of the Taliban did not even tolerate that weak voice and ultimately, with the order of the Ministry of Higher Education, officially dissolved the Association of Universities (Nadim, 2022).

The second section

The challenges and impacts of the Islamic Emirate System on higher education in Afghanistan

The second category of factors that have severely affected higher education in Afghanistan are the consequences of the implementation of the Islamic Emirate system, which are not directly caused by the policies of the Taliban but rather the impacts of the functioning of the Islamic Emirate system.

Increase in poverty and decreased economic capacity of the People

One of the general factors that has led to the decline and deterioration of higher education, especially private universities, is the increase in poverty and unemployment. With the implementation of the Islamic Emirate system, many private companies and investments have been shut down or significantly reduced. The blockade of foreign institutions and the prohibition of women from working have all contributed to worsening the economic situation of the people. The increase in poverty and unemployment in society has made higher education perceived as a non-vital and less essential need compared to other sectors. Gawharshad University, as a private university, had about 3000 students before the fall of the republican regime. After the Taliban came into power, approximately 700 students attended their classes, and, after the ban on girls' education, Now, according to the official statistics of Gawharshad University, in the fall semester of 2023, the total number of students at Gawharshad University was 254. An unbelievable drop from 3000 students to 254 students.

Extensive migration of professors

Another challenge for higher education in Afghanistan is the extensive migration of professors and intellectuals. Many university professors who have the means to migrate have left Afghanistan for various countries. It is said that more than 400 professors have migrated from Kabul University (the flagship university in Afghanistan) alone. Several faculties and departments in public universities have been completely shut down. The Faculty of Fine Arts and foreign language departments are examples of this claim. The migration of professors has also affected private universities, causing a shortage of qualified faculty members, especially in computer science departments, where most universities are facing a scarcity of experienced professors who have left the country (BBC, 2023).

Extensive migration of students

The extensive migration of students is another issue affecting universities, including public universities. For example, Ghazni University, before the fall of the regime, had about 13,000 students, and currently, it is said that only 3,500 students remain (Wahid, 2022). The official of a private university said: "In the 1401 spring entrance exam, 57 students participated in the first exam and 17 students in the second exam, totaling 70 students for the new year. If we compare this to last year, we have lost 90% of our students" (Wahid, 2022).

Spread of despair and general hopelessness

Alongside the aforementioned factors, another major challenge that the higher education system in Afghanistan, and the education system as a whole, has faced is the spread of despair and general hopelessness. In a country where women are officially prohibited from education and work, and where personal businesses and trade are on the verge of bankruptcy, it is difficult to expect people to still be interested in education and remain hopeful.

Youth disillusionment and student frustration

Another general problem that has affected higher education in Afghanistan is the disillusionment of the youth. Many female students who are currently barred from education and work and confined to their homes have experienced frustration and depression, with some resorting to suicide (Limay, 2023). The increasing restrictions imposed by the Taliban on employment and personal activities are causing a rising tide of youth unemployment. The lack of a bright

future, the lack of hope for career prospects, and the limitations imposed on the youth have all contributed to their frustration and despair. Ultimately, this has severely impacted higher education in Afghanistan, especially private higher education institutions.

The third section

How can we support the higher education system in Afghanistan?

When we talk about the failure and collapse of private universities, any help and support that can prevent this from happening is lifesaving support for private universities. According to the author, the following measures can be taken to support private universities:

Providing educational projects

In the current situation, where private universities have lost half of their students on one hand due to the ban on girls' education, and on the other hand are facing increasing restrictions by the Taliban, in addition to the general despair and hopelessness that has pervaded society and among young people, each of which is a severe blow to the higher education system in Afghanistan, any financial assistance that can help sustain private universities can be vital and lifesaving for these universities.

Providing research projects or implementing joint projects

One of the very good ways to help private universities and higher education in Afghanistan is to provide research projects or implement joint research projects with them. Institutions interested in supporting private higher education can also help in this way to prevent the higher education system in Afghanistan from further harm and to save private universities that have grown and flourished over many years at great expense from bankruptcy. In the current situation where the Taliban is not officially recognized by the international community and there are practically no grounds for the activities of foreign educational and research institutions in Afghanistan, the necessity of this action is doubled and multiplied. Research institutions can carry out their research work in collaboration with private universities.

Providing skill enhancement projects

Another area of assistance to private universities is providing skill enhancement projects to these universities. The widespread migration of experienced professors and individuals with previous university experience has left many universities facing a shortage of experienced and skilled professors. This shortage is much more pronounced in certain fields such as computer science and engineering. Providing skill enhancement projects for the professors of these universities is not only very beneficial but also very necessary. This is a task that has been carried out several times through the University of Faryab and the University of Gawharshad.

Supporting online education for female students

Supporting online education for girls in Afghanistan is no longer a choice but a necessity and the only way to help half of the Afghan society in the current situation. In conditions where the Taliban has banned girls from studying beyond the sixth grade and has closed educational centers and universities to

female students, the only remaining option is to support online education for girls. It is worth noting that after the ban on girls' education, many educational institutions have turned to online teaching, and today thousands of girls in Afghanistan are studying online, yielding acceptable results to a large extent. Currently, the University of Gawharshad is the only university that has continued online teaching for girls for a year, a move that has been well-received by the students. Interestingly, some girls who are outside Kabul climb high mountains to access the internet to pursue their studies, which is very motivating and hopeful. Hopefully, recently many institutions have put supporting online teaching for girls on their agenda.

Providing scholarships to motivate students

Allocating scholarships to girls who, despite the current difficult and exhausting conditions, have not lost hope and are fighting for their future destiny is the least that countries and human rights organizations can do. Providing scholarships to Afghan girls, besides being a humanitarian act, can boost the motivation of girls in Afghanistan and encourage them not to succumb to the current difficult circumstances and to strive harder to change their future.

Supporting professors currently residing outside Afghanistan to collaborate with universities and teach online

With the fall of the previous regime and the emergence of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, a large number of university professors have migrated to other countries. Most of these professors have high qualifications and very good experience and skills. Supporting these professors to collaborate with private universities in Afghanistan, especially in online teaching for students, is another option to support private universities in Afghanistan. This initiative benefits both the professors residing in host countries and supports higher education in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

One of the significant and remarkable achievements of the past two decades (2001-2020) in Afghanistan has been the unprecedented growth and rapid development of educational institutions, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Before the collapse of the regime in Afghanistan, there were 140 private universities and over 800 private schools in operation. Although the fall of the previous government impacted all sectors of society, the education and higher education sector may have suffered more than any other sector in the past two years. Today, the Afghan education system, in general, and higher education, in particular, are facing various challenges and an uncertain future. Some of the challenges in higher education in Afghanistan are influenced by the decisions and policies of the Taliban regime, while others are the result of the policies and functioning of the entire Taliban regime in this sector. The policy of Islamization of universities and the higher education system is one of the initiatives currently pursued by the Ministry of Higher Education. According to the Taliban, the current education system in Afghanistan is a legacy from Western countries that is fundamentally un-Islamic and requires fundamental reforms. The establishment of the Guidance and Invitation Directorate in all universities and the introduction of an official by the Taliban, reform, and revision of the curriculum, increasing Islamic subjects, and most importantly, the ban on the education of girls, are examples of the policies of Islamizing higher education in

Afghanistan. The ban on educating girls and closing the university gates to female students has deprived about half of the current university students of their education. This single act has been a devastating blow and irreparable damage to the landscape of higher education, especially private universities.

The spread of poverty and unemployment, unprecedented migration of professors, dropping out of school and migration of flood-affected students, general despair and hopelessness, and disappointment and pessimism about the future are all factors that have each posed a dangerous threat to higher education in Afghanistan and severely damaged it. Today, higher education in Afghanistan has severely declined both quantitatively and qualitatively, and according to officials of the Private Universities Association, 35 private universities are at risk of closure and bankruptcy. Even worse, the current situation is not the end of the road but only the beginning of a destructive and extremely worrying process.

It seems that the Taliban are seeking a highly ideological higher education system in the service of the emirate, limited and fully under the control of the Islamic emirate, which should not only be safe for them but also supported and backed by them.

Supporting private universities to prevent bankruptcy in the face of the current economic challenges can be summarized as any form of assistance that enables private universities to sustain themselves. Such support is beneficial for universities in the current circumstances.

As mentioned, higher education in Afghanistan in general, and private universities in particular, are facing major and numerous challenges under the Taliban regime. This has led to a significant decline and deterioration in higher education in Afghanistan both quantitatively and qualitatively. If this trend continues in the same manner, higher education, especially private universities, will face a worrisome future.

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Chapter 8

Academic Writing Skills of Students and Lecturers at Gawharshad University: A Needs Assessment

Stefanie Harsch / Khatira Khorami / Farkhonda Mohsini & Gerd Bräuer

Academic writing is a critical skill for students and lecturers around the world, and its importance has grown significantly in Afghanistan. As the literacy rate steadily increased in the first two decades of the 21^(st) century, Afghan universities were confronted with the fact that many of their students lacked the necessary academic literacy skills. To address this issue, universities worldwide have successfully set up writing centres to improve students' academic literacy. The faculty at Gawharshad University in Kabul, Afghanistan, were interested in implementing this approach at their own institution. However, no systematic survey had previously been conducted to assess the academic literacy of students and lecturers, or to explore their needs, besides anecdotal reports. Therefore, a research and implementation project was conducted in 2021 to enhance the academic writing abilities of students and faculty members at Gawharshad University. This chapter reports on the findings gathered from 250 students and 19 lecturers, presenting their insights into aspects such as previous experience of writing different genres and publishing, writing skills in different languages, and knowledge, abilities and aspirations relating to improvement in different genres of text. It also presents insights into the support provided by lecturers to students. Through open-ended questions, lecturers and students provided recommendations for a writing centre, including its purpose, general conditions, instructor qualifications, offered resources and support, formats, incentives, establishing a community of practice and dissemination opportunities.

Keywords: higher education, academic literacy, writing center, research

Introduction

Literacy is an indispensable skill that is crucial not only in primary and secondary education but even more in higher education and throughout one's lifetime (Farrell et al., 2022). Contrary to the narrow and often prevailing conception of literacy as merely the ability to read and write (Olson, 1993; Willinsky, 2017), the term can also encompass a wide range of skills and competences. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has proposed the following definition of literacy:

> „Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society. Generally, literacy also encompasses numeracy, the ability to make simple arithmetic calculations. The concept of literacy can be distinguished from measures to quantify it, such as the literacy rate and functional literacy." (UNESCO, n.d.)

In this chapter, literacy is defined in line with the UNESCO definition as a comprehensive set of skills and competencies that extend beyond the mere ability to identify letters, recognize words, comprehend sentences, and produce written texts. It encompasses the capacity to engage critically with texts, to understand them within their respective contexts, and to utilize this understanding to achieve specific objectives. Ultimately, this is relevant for human beings to understand themselves, within their culture, society, and the world. Accordingly, as Paulo Freire posited, the act of reading is inextricably linked to the comprehension of the world (Freire, 1996). Furthermore, literacy enables the active communication of ideas and arguments across a wide range of channels and communities. This is a particularly pertinent skill in higher education, where students of all disciplines are expected to read, analyze, and critically discuss academic texts, as well as produce their own academic texts (Hartley & Hartley, 2008; Lillis, 2019). As with any other skill pertinent to higher education, proficiency in writing is a requisite for all students.

Afghanistan has witnessed a substantial enhancement in literacy skills since the onset of the 21st century, a development particularly noteworthy given the nation's historical context. During the late 20th century, educational institutions in Afghanistan were known to prohibit female enrollment, and formal education was not accorded a priority status. Beginning in 2002, a significant investment was made by numerous international organizations and the government of Afghanistan to enhance access to education and to instruct children of all genders in the art of reading and writing. Notwithstanding the noteworthy advancements in enrollment and completion of education, as well as the substantial increase in literacy rate, the repercussions of prolonged periods of constrained schooling continue to manifest in higher education. Numerous universities in Afghanistan recognized that a considerable proportion of their students exhibited substandard literacy skills, particularly in academic literacy. This phenomenon can be attributed, in part, to the limited literacy levels that are still prevalent in Afghan society. Institutions of higher education are confronted with numerous challenges in cultivating their students' academic writing abilities. These challenges include the dearth of academic writing skills among the staff and the instructors' unawareness regarding the assessment and enhancement of their students' abilities (Conversations with GU

Representatives, 2020). A high level of academic literacy has been identified as a critical factor for success in academia (Glew et al., 2019; Van Dijk, 2015). Furthermore, an elevated level of academic literacy enables graduates to report on research to a high standard and seek better jobs. Consequently, numerous academic institutions have endeavored to implement strategies aimed at enhancing the academic writing proficiency of their personnel, both faculty and students. Moreover, it is anticipated that this initiative will foster enhanced reporting on Afghanistan by native Afghans, so from an emic perspective, leading to an increase in research and news production by Afghans.

This, in turn, can contribute to a more robust discourse on Afghanistan within the country that incorporates Afghan traditions and values. While Afghan students generally require support with their writing, greater attention should be given to developing proficiency in English writing. Conversations with lecturers indicate that a substantial proportion of first-year students exhibit limited or no prior experience with academic writing. Nevertheless, it has been demonstrated that students who have successfully completed secondary education possess fundamental competencies in writing topics, compositions, and paragraphs, primarily in their native language, Dari or Pashtu. Moreover, the majority of these students had not received any formal instruction in writing in the English language prior to enrolling in university. This is a notable limitation, given the abundance of academic and scientific publications available in English. In order to adapt to the university environment and improve their writing skills to a level suitable for national and international publication, students require the assistance of writing centers to facilitate their writing process. (McGurr, 2020; Murphy, 1995; Tiruchittampalam et al., 2018).

In an effort to align with international standards and enhance the academic system, Gawharshad University (GU), a private university in Kabul, Afghanistan, has strategically sought to establish collaborative relationships with numerous institutions of higher education worldwide. Consequently, a collaborative initiative was initiated between the Gawharshad University and the University of Education Freiburg, in Freiburg, Germany in 2014. In the very same year, several representatives of the Gawharshad University attended a conference on "Education in Afghanistan" that was organized by the University of Education Freiburg (Bittlingmayer et al., 2019). In 2018, the University of Education Freiburg received a delegation of staff members from the Gawharshad University (Bittlingmayer et al., 2018). The objective of the visit was twofold: first, to strengthen the collaborative relationships between the two institutions, and second, to facilitate the exchange of knowledge between them. During their visit, the GU staff conducted site visits to various institutions, centers, and services at the University of Education Freiburg and discussed the purpose, activities, and reach of these services. Among others, the delegation had the opportunity to visit the Writing Center at the University of Education, where they engaged in extensive discussions with the center's staff members. The visit to the writing center and the ensuing discourse prompted the GU staff members to consider establishing a writing center at Gawharshad University as well. Two years later, while preparing a proposal for the German-Afghan University Collaboration, the staff at Gawharshad University reiterated this desire for the establishment of a writing center at GU. This was attributable to the absence of a writing center or writing support at GU as of January 2021.

This report presents the results of our collaborative efforts to conceptualize a writing center for Gawharshad University that is customized to its specific needs.

To this end, an empirical needs assessment was conducted, in which students and staff at Gawharshad University were surveyed and consulted. The ensuing sections will commence with a comprehensive overview of the writing-related initiatives at Gawharshad University, followed by a concise summary of the writing center at the University of Education Freiburg. In the subsequent section, the methodology employed to conduct a needs assessment at Gawharshad University will be elucidated. In the following section, the survey's select findings will be delineated, accompanied by an overview of the writing center's framework at GU.

Context and status quo of writing centers at GU and UoEF

Writing at Gawharshad University

In 2019, the writing culture at Gawharshad University (GU) exhibited deficiencies among both students and lecturers. Prior to the establishment of an official writing center, GU lacked a formal support system to improve writing skills. There was limited experience with the effective training and empowerment of individuals in academic writing. Graduating students who were obligated to compose a thesis often encountered difficulties due to a paucity of guidance from their professors. New lecturers also encountered difficulties as a result of the absence of a structured platform and strategic methods to support them in guiding students. Additionally, lecturers found themselves unable to enroll in English language courses at the university, despite the fact that English is the most widely spoken language in academic settings worldwide. Consequently, a significant number of lecturers perceived themselves incapable of producing and disseminating academic papers in international journals with the desired success rate. The establishment of the Writing Center would therefore furnish indispensable resources and assistance, thereby enhancing the writing abilities of students and lecturers. This initiative has been demonstrated to be a remarkably efficacious solution in other universities worldwide and the faculty at Gawharshad University was optimistic that it would exhibit similarly good results at their institution.

Moreover, the establishment of the Writing Center was deemed imperative in response to mounting pressure from higher education authorities. In the year 2020, these authorities were urging universities to substantiate their quality through the development of comprehensive strategic plans and the fostering of research collaborations. As with other institutions, GU faced demands to improve its academic standards and participate in research projects. The Writing Center has the potential to play a pivotal role in enhancing the quality of administrative and organizational writing processes. This enhancement would contribute to the alignment of these processes with broader educational goals and national strategies.

Furthermore, GU's restricted academic affiliations with publishing entities, even within the regional context, have historically impeded avenues for publishing and collaborative endeavors. The writing center has the potential to ameliorate these endeavors by cultivating enhanced relationships and facilitating greater access to academic resources. The establishment of a writing center at GU could represent a substantial measure in confronting these challenges and enhancing the university's academic and research capabilities.

Writing at University of Education Freiburg and the role of the writing center

Writing is a crucial competence that any member of the University of Education Freiburg (UoEF) must possess and continuously develop in order to progress through academia. For instance, students pursuing a Bachelor's or Master's degree are tasked with a wide range of writing assignments, including summaries, essays, lesson plans, student papers, and master's theses. As academic language, particularly the academic language used in the humanities in Germany, is considerably more intricate and elaborate than the language employed in schools, universities cannot presume that every student has already acquired this skill. Conversely, universities are entrusted with the responsibility of cultivating students' (and staff members') familiarity with academic writing and fostering their continuous development in this area. The university's decision to establish a writing center specializing in academic literacy training was driven by the recognition that this particular skill set is not a prerequisite for all members of the faculty or academic staff. The Writing Center is a student-run institution dedicated to the field of academic writing. The Writing Center offers assistance and support to students, lecturers, and researchers throughout all phases of the writing process. Given the heterogeneity of students' needs, which are contingent on factors such as discipline, prior skills, personality, and learning styles, the writing center's team has adopted a multifaceted approach to meet these diverse requirements. This encompasses the provision of a range of services, meticulously tailored to address the distinct needs of individual students, thereby ensuring a customized and effective learning experience. A suite of self-study materials was developed and made available to support all phases of the academic writing process. The materials in question encompass a wide range of media, including but not limited to cards and leaflets. In addition, workshops, individual consultations, and drop-in hours are organized. The Writing Center has been shown to enhance its capacity through systematic training of writing tutors, who provide peer-to-peer support.

Moreover, the Writing Center and its members are engaged in numerous projects and provide counsel to other universities in Germany, Europe, and worldwide. To this end, the institution offers the continuing education course "Literacy Management." Gerd Bräuer, the head of the writing process, provided substantial support to the DAAD-funded cooperative endeavor between the University of Education Freiburg and the Gawharshad University. He drew upon his extensive knowledge and considerable experience in support of this endeavor.

Methods

The subsequent paragraph will elaborate on the methods employed in the needs assessment. In light of the paucity of extant knowledge concerning the contemporary state of writing experiences, writing needs, and perceptions of writing among students and lecturers, the research team determined that conducting a needs assessment employing a mixed-method research approach was the optimal course of action The objective of the present study was multifaceted. Firstly, it sought to investigate the prevailing self-reported writing competencies. Secondly, it sought to solicit feedback. Finally, it sought to compile recommendations for the establishment of a writing center at Gawharshad University. The research was conducted in the spring of 2021, and the process of

implementing the developed concept and establishing a writing center at Gawharshad University was to be completed starting in 2022.

The research data was collected via two questionnaires, which were administered to students and faculty members at Gawharshad University. Given the absence of a standardized questionnaire that encompassed all the topics deemed pertinent by the research team and other members of the Gawharshad University community, the team opted to devise their own questionnaire. The questionnaires were meticulously drafted to ascertain the needs, requirements, and expectations of a writing center at the GU. To explore the writing needs of students and lecturers, the questionnaires employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative research questions, comprising both open-ended and closed-ended questions.

The faculty questionnaire was divided into three sections. The initial section of the survey comprised 11 questions, the purpose of which was to collect demographic information. The second section of the survey included a series of 14 quantitative questions with closed-ended responses. The third section of the survey comprised qualitative inquiries with open-ended responses, encompassing four questions. The questionnaire administered to students incorporated an additional series of questions concerning their sociodemographic background, comprising a total of ten inquiries, in addition to five questions designed to elicit information regarding the family background of the respondents. Subsequent to this, a series of 12 quantitative questions with predetermined responses was administered, followed by four qualitative inquiries with open-ended responses.

The student questionnaires were divided into three sections. The first section contained five questions regarding the student's socio-demographic characteristics. The second section contained six questions regarding the student's academic background. The third section contained five questions regarding the student's family background. Furthermore, participants were asked to disclose information regarding their prior writing experiences, the quantity of papers they had published (or the rationale behind their lack of publication), their present abilities, their desired competencies, their perspectives on the prevailing writing support at the university, their strengths and weaknesses, their expectations, and their proposals for the writing center (open-ended inquiries). At the conclusion of the questionnaires, students and lecturers were requested to provide a succinct autobiographical piece of writing, which would assist in the identification of their current writing abilities. The questionnaires were made available to students and lecturers online via KoboCollect Forms, and hard copies were also distributed to other students and lecturers.

The data were collected during the 2021 academic semester, and the responses completed on paper were entered into KoboCollect and subsequently edited for analysis in SPSS. The quantitative data were subjected to descriptive statistical analysis using SPSS (Version 24), while the qualitative data underwent qualitative content analysis in accordance with the methodology proposed by Mayring (2014).

The study yielded valuable insights into students' attitudes and needs with regard to a writing center. The establishment of the GU Writing Center was anticipated to occur during the 2022-2023 academic period.

Sample

Nineteen lecturers and 250 students participated in the quantitative and qualitative survey with an average age of 22.05, ranging from 18 to 29 years of age. See the characteristics of the sample in Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of teachers and students of
Gawharshad University that participated in this study

Characteristics	Lecturers (N = 19)	Students (N = 250)
Gender (male)	16 (84.2%)	95 (38.0%)
Age (in years)	31.05 (range: 24 to 43)	22.05 (range: 18 to 29)
Place of birth	Ghazni (N = 8) Kabul (N = 6) Herat (N = 1) Maidan Wardak (N = 1) Quetta, Pakistan (N = 1)	*Not asked*
Ethnicity	Hazara (N = 11) Tajik (N = 2) Shia (N = 1) Afghan (N = 5)	*Not asked*
Native language	Dari 19 (100%)	*Not asked*
Highest degree	Bachelor: N = 5 (26.3%) Master: N = 14 (73.7%)	High School: N = 178 (81.2%) Bachelor N = 72 (28.8%)
Semester	Teaching 1 Semester (N = 9) 2 Semester (N = 5) 3 Semester (N = 6) 4 Semester (N = 7) 5 Semester (N = 7) 6 Semester (N = 10) 7 Semester (N = 7) 8 Semester (N = 2)	Studying 1. Semester N = 19 2. Semester N = 39 3. Semester N = 37 4. Semester N = 40 5. Semester N = 43 6. Semester N = 33 7. Semester N = 10 8. Semester N = 22
Study program	N/A	Computer science (N = 60) Law and political science (N = 97) Engineering (N = 10) Management and economics (N = 76)

A significantly higher proportion of female students (62.0%) participated in the survey. The majority of the students were pursuing a bachelor's degree, and although students from all semesters (1 to 8) participated, semesters 2 to 5 were particularly well represented. Three out of ten students (28.6%) stated that they had already completed their Bachelor's degree. With regard to departmental

representation, students from all four departments participated, with the departments of law and political sciences exhibiting particularly notable representation. A total of ten students from the engineering department provided responses to the survey.

Of the 19 lecturers, 84.2% were male, with an average age of 31.05 years. All lecturers reported Dari as their native language, and 14 (73.7%) had already completed a Master's degree. The lecturers reported teaching in all eight semesters, with the sixth and first semesters being mentioned most frequently.

Results

This section presents the core results of the empirical research, which served to concretize the needs assessment at GU. In the initial phase, the findings from the quantitative survey are presented using scales and closed-ended questions (4.1). In the second step (4.2), the results of the qualitative thematic analysis of the open-ended questions, which were also part of the survey, are summarized.

Quantitative Results

Students' family background

A total of 226 students (93.0%) indicated that at least one of their family members is literate, defined as the ability to write and read Among the 226 students, only 18 (7.96%) reported that their family member had not acquired literacy through formal education. The majority of respondents indicated that their literate family members had attended school (85.2%, N = 178), while 7.65% (N = 16) had received homeschooling and 7.18% (N = 15) had attended madrasas. Among the family members who attended formal education, 57.54% (N = 103) pursued higher education, 25.14% (N = 45) completed secondary school, and 17.32% (N = 31) completed primary school. A substantial majority of the students surveyed indicated that reading and writing were considered a significant value in their families. Specifically, 90.5% of the participants (N = 220) expressed this sentiment. The economic circumstances of the students' families exhibit considerable diversity, with a distribution across different income classes. The income of the students' families ranged from less than 5,000 Afghani (13.68%) to more than 15,000 Afghani (26.07%).

Previous writing experience

A request was made to the lecturers and students to identify the areas of life in which writing skills are most crucial (see Figure 1). The findings indicate that over half of all lecturers and students perceive writing as a significant determinant of scientific success. Conversely, while lecturers also consider it a relevant factor for career success, a greater proportion of students view it as a key element in personal success.
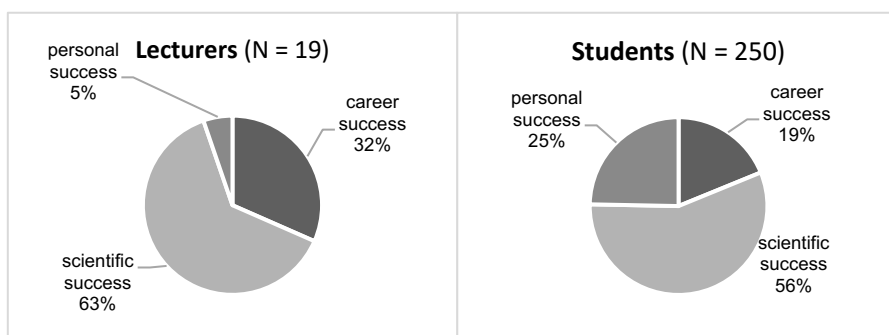
Figure 1: Lecturers' and students' perception of importance of writing

Lecturers and students were asked to provide information regarding their general writing experience. The majority of the lecturers (89.5%) reported having prior experience with writing. In contrast to the vast majority of lecturers, only one out of three students (33.3%) reported having previous writing experience. Regarding experiences with academic publishing, approximately half (52.6%) of all lecturers have already published a scientific article. It is noteworthy that also 19 students (7.8%) have also published a scientific paper.
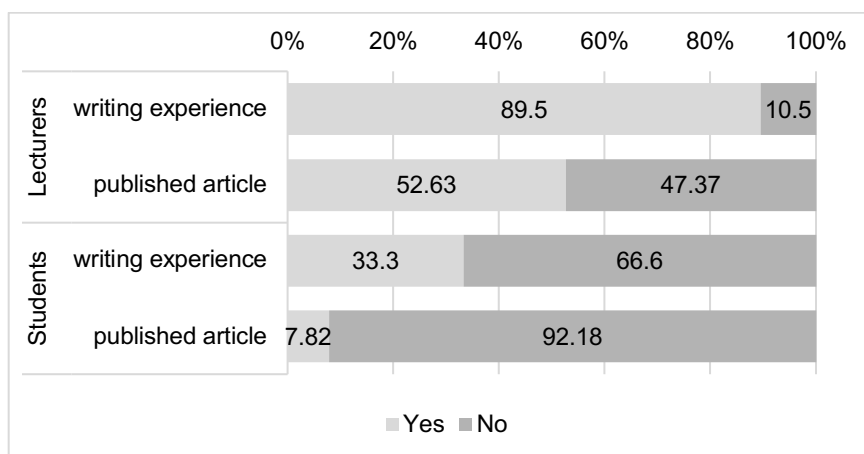
Figure 2: Lecturers and students experiences with writing and publishing an article

Asked for their experience in writing specific genres the genre most often written by lecturers were thesis and report writing followed by formal letter, paragraph and research article writing. In contrast, a far smaller percentage of students reported experiences with writing and among these the most commonly written genre were formal letter,articles in the internet, or research article (see Table 2).

Table 2: Lecturers' and students' writing experiences in different genres

	Lecturers		Students	
	N	%	N	%
Formal Letter	7	36.84	22	9.05
Report	8	42.11	14	5.76
Paragraph	7	36.84	20	8.23
Newspaper article	3	15.79	20	8.23
Research Article	7	36.84	21	8.64
Articles on the internet	1	5.26	21	8.64
Thesis	9	47.37	6	2.47
Blog	1	5.26	4	1.65

The predominant reason for the absence of writing experience among students is the dearth of writing tutors (25.10%), followed by the perception among students that they lack the requisite skills (21.1%). Likewise, the reasons provided by lecturers and students for the absence of published articles include the lack of academic writing skills, with 41.8% of students and 33% of lecturers reporting this as a barrier. Subsequently, structural impediments, including a dearth of time and avenues for publication, were identified by both sample groups. (see Figure 3).
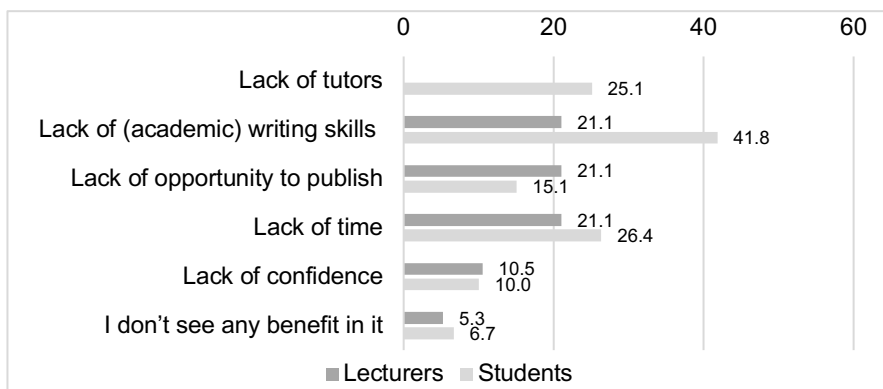
Figure 3: Reasons for not having published any article yet (%)

Writing skills in languages

In light of the increasing predominance of English as a medium of academic discourse across diverse scientific disciplines, this study also explored the self-reported linguistic proficiency of the student body and faculty in both their native language and English. A thorough examination of the data reveals four significant findings. Firstly, the findings suggests that proficiency in native languages consistently exceeds that of English across a broad range of categories. Secondly, the lecturers have indicated that the students display superior proficiency in their native language and Dari compared to their own skills.

Thirdly, both lecturers and students evaluate their proficiency in composing written texts on a given topic or in constructing sentences as being the highest. Fourthly, the lecturers and students consistently reported that their abilities in referencing are considered the lowest in all languages. (See Figure 4)
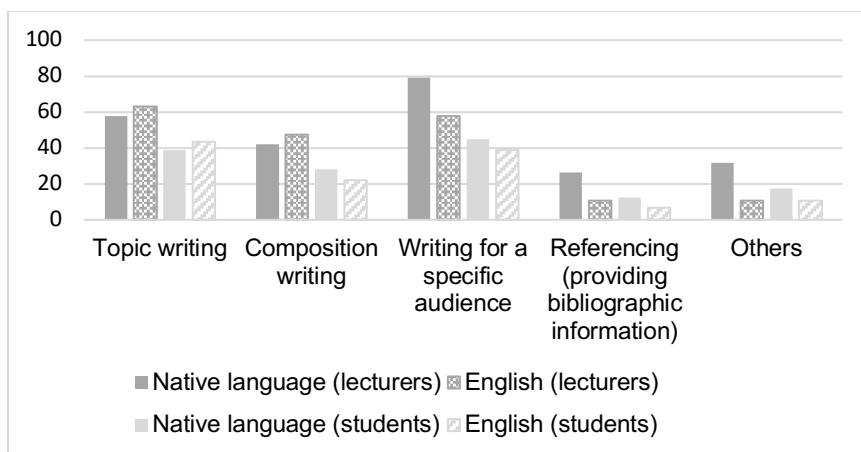
Figure 4: Self-reported writing skills of lecturers and students in different languages (%)

Furthermore, it is imperative to acknowledge the distinction between knowledge and abilities in the context of writing. The findings contradict the prevailing assumption that knowledge surpasses ablities in all domains. To illustrate, both lecturers and students assess their knowledge of topic writing to be inferior to their abilities in this domain. (see Figure 5).
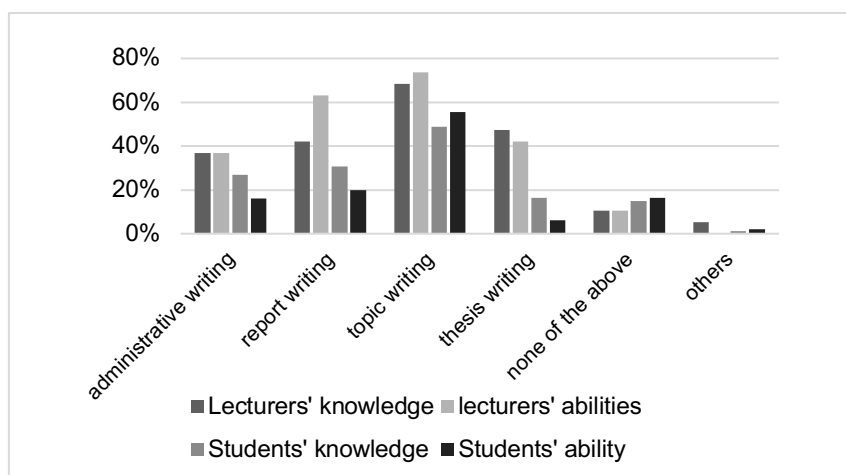
Figure 5: Knowledge and abilities of lecturers and students (in %)

In addition to evaluating the students' current writing abilities, inquiries were made of the lecturers and students regarding which particular aspects of reading and writing they wished to enhance and modify (see Figure 5). With respect to genre, the genre that received the most student endorsements was topic writing,

followed by business/administrative writing, reports, and thesis writing. The lecturers identified the genres of report, topic, and thesis as those which they would like to improve upon. Notwithstanding, scientific and research articles continue to comprise the majority of the writing that the lecturers would like to improve.

In order to adapt the writing services provided by the recently inaugurated writing center at Gawharshad University to the requirements of the faculty and students, an inquiry was conducted to ascertain the specific aspects of their writing that they wished to enhance (see Table 3).

Table 3: Aspects of writing lecturers and students wish to improve

Aspect of writing	Lecturers		Students	
	N	*%*	N	*%*
Business/administrative writing	7	36.84	94	38.68
Report writing	10	52.63	89	36.63
Topic writing	10	52.63	107	44.03
Thesis writing	10	52.63	88	36.21
Composition writing	5	26.32	61	25.10
Reading notes	5	26.32	51	20.99
Field notes	4	21.05	45	18.52
Protocol	8	42.11	37	15.23
Letter	8	42.11	49	20.16
Subject analysis	7	36.84	55	22.63
Abstract writing	6	31.58	44	18.11
Scientific / research article	12	63.16	56	23.05
Others			3	1.23

While both lecturers and students concur that the collection of ideas and the creation of an outline are of paramount importance, their responses to the remaining questions diverge significantly. While the majority of lecturers indicated a high need to provide feedback and revise for coherence, correct style, and grammar, the majority of students indicated that taking notes from what they hear and writing a reader-focused draft is of greater importance (See Figure 6).
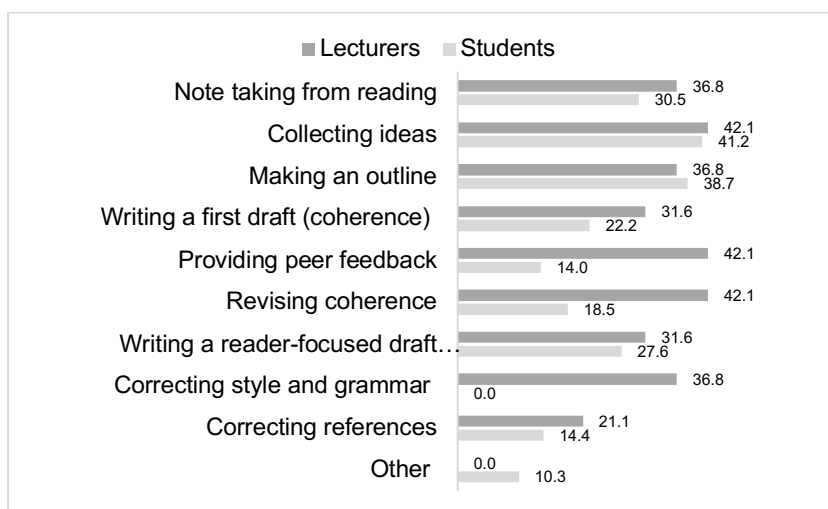
Figure 6: Preferred steps to improve in the writing process

Furthermore, the lecturers were consulted regarding the writing activities that are mandatory in their respective subjects. The respondents provided a variety of responses, including report writing (N = 3), book, journal activity, letter, thesis, topic, effective note-taking, essay, abstract, technical writing, and management. Subsequently, the respondents were queried about whether they had offered any assistance to their students in the writing process. The majority of teachers indicated that they provided assistance to their students in the development of their writing skills. Figure 7 presents a comprehensive list of the activities that have been employed by the teachers up to this point.
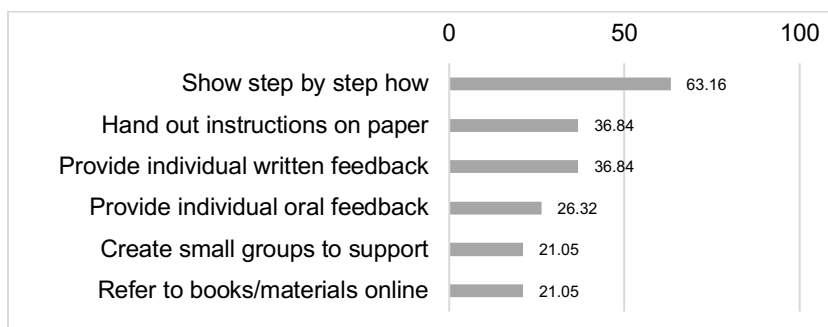
Figure 7: Different type of support that lecturers provide for their students (in percentage of all lecturers)

Only three (15.8% of all) teachers have thus far participated in any writing class/training on the topics of topic and essay writing, TOEFL IBT, and quantitative research methods.

As indicated by the preliminary assessment of the lecturers at the study's inception, a limited number of students have enrolled in a writing course (9.0%). Twenty-two students indicated that they had participated in such a course, while the majority of students who had already done so stated that their training lasted one semester (N = 10). Seven of the lecturers reported that the training program

took one month to complete, three attended two semesters, and the remainder (N = 9) completed the training over nine months. This duration is consistent with the typical length of courses at the university.

The survey results indicate a considerable interest in developing writing skills. This phenomenon is also observed among the teaching staff. The findings of the quantitative research indicate that there are two key areas that must be addressed in order to enhance writing skills. Firstly, it is necessary to organize a structured counseling program. Secondly, it is imperative to establish a system that systematically links writing opportunities to the available lectures and courses at GU.

Qualitative results

This paragraph will present an analysis of the content of one open-ended question in the questionnaire, which solicits expectations regarding the writing center. The incorporation of such an open-ended inquiry is indicative of a moderate participatory approach, wherein the objective is to solicit contributions from the extant expertise of staff and students at GU.

With respect to the expectations for the writing center, no significant systematic differences were observed between the two groups of students or lecturers. However, it is noteworthy that students contributed extensively to these open-ended questions. In sum, as illustrated in Box 1 below, a range of aspects have been identified, addressing various dimensions of the potential benefits of a writing center.

Box 1: Clustered Answers of open questions: Expectations for the writing center

- Location: Accessibility
- Conditions: Free to attend
- Overall aim: Supporting writing (general)
- & Support specific writing
- Language requirement: Support of Dari and English
- Requirements for instructors: Talented, experienced writers and instructors
- Incentives: Certificate
- Formats (1): Short courses
- Formats (2): Writing competitions
- Dissemination: Opportunity to publish

A series of expectations were articulated with regard to the structural and organizational framework of the writing center. These include the expectation that it should be accessible, free of charge, and offer assistance with both general and specific writing. Furthermore, respondents indicated a preference for a center that is organized by course and offers services in both English and Dari. In order to meet the organizational expectations, tutors must possess both talent and extensive experience as writers and instructors. In order to enhance the prospects of a successful uptake of the writing center, it is recommended that it confer credentials upon learners, thereby attesting to the diligence and

seriousness of their endeavors. It is important to note that another point that was raised pertained to the expectation that the writing center should organize writing competitions. A writing center should facilitate the publication of diverse forms of written work, including papers and articles, in order to provide concrete support for learners engaged in publication projects.

In order to facilitate students' acquisition of academic writing skills, it is essential to provide them with the following forms of assistance related to linguistics. For example, it is recommended that

- support should be provided to students who are experiencing difficulties in composing coherent sentences.

- assistance should be provided to students experiencing difficulties with rhetorical patterns in their initial forays into academic writing.

- guidance should be offered to second-year students who are navigating the transition from the five-paragraph essay format of their first year to the five-page research paper.

Concerns have been articulated by the lecturers and faculty regarding the potential perception of the writing center as a mere service for editing and rewriting documents by the students. It has been asserted that the writing center is not intended to function as a service for proofreading. While students should be assisted in identifying errors, they are nevertheless expected to edit their own work and perform the necessary corrections independently.

While these are the overarching objectives of the writing center, input from GU students and lecturers regarding the optimal organization of the writing center was obtained through a baseline assessment questionnaire at the outset of this research project. The objective was to ascertain who was expected to utilize the writing center, the nature of the writing assistance they had previously received, their perceptions of the writing center, and recommendations for its enhancements.

General recommendations for a concept of a Writing Center at Gawharshad University

In light of these findings and by drawing on empirical evidence of other writing centers (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2018; McGurr, 2020; Murphy, 1995; Tiruchittampalam et al., 2018; White & Lamson, 2017), a number of recommendations can be put forth for the establishment of a writing center at GU.

An innovative approach to enhancing students' writing abilities acknowledges the social nature of writing practices, which are often embedded within familial routines (Rankins-Robertson et al., 2010). If writing activities at Gawharshad University are considered to be a social practice, this could have an impact on the students' families. Conversely, the notion of designing writing exercises in an interactive manner, as opposed to merely evaluating and grading test results, merits attention (Dhanya & Alamelu, 2019).

In light of the conspicuous absence of instruction in research skills and academic writing in Afghan universities, GU is at the vanguard of this initiative, in collaboration with UoEF. The objective of this initiative was to introduce the

concept of a writing center within the framework of the Afghan higher education system and establish a writing center at Gawharshad University. The subsequent paragraph will provide a comprehensive overview.

The subsequent list of bullet points elaborates on the main insights of the empirical research previously illustrated and implements them. The writing center at Gawharshad University has been developed with the specific objective of providing assistance to students and lecturers in the following areas:

- *Aim*: Overall, it is imperative that the GU Writing Center provide opportunities and assistance to those who wish to improve their writing abilities.

- *Location*: These services should be made available at an easily accessible location (ideally in the main building), should be open most of the time and it should be available free of cost to staff and lecturers. This approach enables students' ability to return with greater frequency, engage with content and support on a more regular basis, and consequently enhance their writing self-efficacy.

- *Features of the environment*: The provision of a tranquil environment, conducive to both writing and motivation, is of paramount importance.

- *Instructors & Resources*: The provision of consultation and tutoring services to students encountering challenges with writing. The writing center can provide the necessary resources to facilitate improvement, and trained professionals can evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the students in order to assist them in becoming proficient writers.

- *Support offered*: The writing center can provide assistance with the drafting process. It can offer guidance on enhancing writing skills, provides advice on content, and facilitates the ongoing development of writing abilities.

- *Formats*: It is imperative that the writing center provides students with the necessary training, courses, and workshops to equip them with the ability to assess their strengths and weaknesses in writing. The realization of this objective may be accomplished through the implementation of a peer-to-peer support model or the guidance of an instructor.

- *Ways of offering support*: In addition to the presence of trained lecturers, the institution should also ensure the availability of trained student tutors. These tutors must assume responsibility for providing one-on-one consultations that are characterized by non-hierarchical, student-centered, and process-oriented approaches. In addition, it is advised to consult the extant literature on scaffolding theories and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development which can be utilized as the foundation for interaction. Furthermore, the emphasis should be shifted towards cultivating "learning through writing" and enhancing the proficiency of writers, as opposed to solely focusing on the development of well-written essays (Tusting et al., 2019).

- *Overcoming resistance*: A significant number of Afghan students reported feelings of insecurity when writing. To address this need, the program

offers assistance and lectures on strategies to overcome feelings of intimidation. The program can also encourage students to recognize that every experience, regardless of its quality, offers an opportunity for growth and development as a writer. It is imperative that students understand that there is no such thing as "bad writing." All writing, irrespective of its quality, possesses the potential for further development. It is imperative to cultivate a positive attitude towards writing, thereby fostering the creation of experiences that engender success and self-efficacy (Tiruchittampalam et al., 2018).

- *Community of practice*: The writing center functions as a venue where students can interact with a variety of writers, thereby acquiring insight into their respective writing processes. This interaction unfolds over the course of a series of sessions. The writing center provides students with a venue for refining their extant writing abilities. Peer-to-peer support is strongly recommended and should be supported. (Murray, 2014)

- *Languages and Literacies*: The content should not only focus on one language, such as Dari or Pashtu, spoken in Afghanistan, but also on the different literacies employed in various academic disciplines. (Lillis, 2019; Paltridge, 2004)

- *Publication*: The center should provide avenues for new writers to have their works published. This could entail providing the platform to students so that they can receive guidance from experienced writers and have the option of publishing their work in a journal, should they wish to do so.

Conclusion

This chapter presents a distinctive viewpoint on the function and perceptions of academic writing at Gawharshad University, along with the imperative for a writing center within an academic environment. The findings indicate that writing is regarded as a significant skill. Nevertheless, faculty members and students have identified numerous deficiencies, including the absence of objective standards to assess writing proficiency. The synthesis of quantitative and qualitative findings yielded a robust foundation for the development of a customized concept for the writing center at Gawharshad University, with subsequent implementation. The efficacy of this concept extends beyond the confines of the aforementioned institution, suggesting its generalizability to other academic settings in Afghanistan. Further research is necessary to investigate the evolving needs and priorities in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the Taliban's return to power and the subsequent modification of the curriculum. The necessity to enhance writing skills for the purpose of reporting on current events has not diminished since 2021; indeed, it has gained even greater urgency.

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Chapter 9

Assessment Strategies in Online Teaching Setting: The Case of the American University of Afghanistan

Asadullah Jawid & Sami Naji

This paper aims to initiate a discussion on a key concern in remote teaching and online learning, in the context of Afghanistan, that affects nearly all aspects of students' learning processes: assessment. To that end, we analyze data from 87 first-year undergraduate students at the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF) to explore students' performance under different assessment modalities. The results suggest a significant difference between the scores of Oral Exams and other assessment types. While several factors may contribute to this difference, one possible variable is the probability for cheating and misconduct. However, due to data limitations, we cannot conclude a causal relationship. Future research may focus on collecting experimental data from a representative sample to investigate this key and critical question.

Keywords: *Remote teaching; online learning; cheating; misconduct; assessment methods; Afghanistan.*

Introduction

Worldwide, the history of online education dates back to the 1980s. The first fully online course was offered in 1981. After the invention of the World Wide Web in 1992, online education was made increasingly accessible and a new pedagogical model emerged (Harasim, 2000). Since then, remote teaching and online learning has vastly developed (Harasim, 2006).

The utilization of online learning and remote teaching became a widely adopted measure in the education and higher education sectors during the COVID-19 pandemic, as a response to the unfolding crisis (Allehaiby & Al-Bahlani, 2021).

For the *American University of Afghanistan* (AUAF)[1], located in Kabul—known for its fragile security conditions—an alternative teaching model has always been a consideration. A basic form of remote teaching was implemented following a Taliban attack on the university on August 24, 2016[2]. After resuming the normal face-to-face teaching model in Spring 2017, the university's administration decided to systematically develop a remote teaching and online learning platform. A significant step in this direction was the introduction of a Learning Management System (LMS), Canvas. This alternative option was developed to increase the university's resilience facing fragile security conditions in Kabul. However, technological issues, such as access to electricity, internet connectivity, and basic hardware requirements had remained significant hurdles.

In response to the spread of COVID-19 in Afghanistan, AUAF has fully transitioned to remote teaching and online learning in March 2020. The measure remained in place until August 2021. As the preparations for the physical re-opening of the university were underway, Kabul collapsed on August 15, 2021 at the hand of Taliban (Sakhi, 2022).

Consequently, the entire university had to migrate and became the first university in exile, establishing a campus in Doha, Qatar. After intense discussions on whether to continue operations amid a developing crisis, the university decided to proceed with online teaching—soon becoming AUAF's new normal. The model that AUAF is implementing is a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous delivery, centralized in Canvas, and incorporating other applications such as Google Meet, Google Drive, Edpuzzle, and many others.

Canvas provides all the necessary facilities for remote teaching and online learning. Faculty can share materials, communicate with students, make announcements, take attendance, administer tests, assignments, and quizzes, and grade them, all in one place.

In the absence of this online platform, AUAF would not have been able to continue offering its much-needed services to students during this critical time period. Despite this fact, remote teaching and online learning have their downsides (Firmansyah, et al., 2021; Hashemi & Adu-Gyamfi, 2021). One of the main challenges in an online setting is the assessment of students' learning (Kearns, 2012).

Among other issues, concerns about academic integrity during online assessments have drawn significant attention from researchers (Simonson, et al.,

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[1] More on AUAF: www.auaf.edu.af
[2] Gunmen Attack American University of Afghanistan in Kabul (nbcnews.com)

2006). These concerns are becoming increasingly more relevant and urgent with the widespread use of artificial intelligence tools, such as ChatGPT and Google AI (Bin-Nashwan, et al., 2023; Naidu & Sevnarayan, 2023).

With remote teaching becoming a normal practice for AUAF, safeguarding academic integrity has been an ongoing challenge. Multiple approaches have been tested and implemented to address this issue. A continuous assessment modality and the diversification of assessment methods have been introduced.

However, concerns about cheating during assessments persist. Faculty worry about the originality of students' work, cheating during online tests, and the misuse of tools like ChatGPT.

One of the measures introduced to ensure integrity and mitigate cheating is the Oral Exam. Oral Exam is a one-to-one virtual assessment platform, where the instructor tests student's understanding and knowledge by asking them direct questions. During an oral exam students are normally obliged to turn on their video.

Oral Exams have shown positive effects on reducing plagiarism and misconduct (Sabin, et al., 2021). However, no study has yet investigated the issue of academic integrity, plagiarism, and the role of oral assessment in the context of remote education in Afghanistan.

In this paper, we use data on various assessment methods from four sections of the Statistics *1* (STA210) course to kick off an investigation on how students' scores change under different assessment methodologies. This will pave the way for further discussions and finding measures for mitigating cheating and reducing plagiarism. Multiple factors could be responsible for this difference. Due to data limitations, we are not able to investigate the entire model. However, one variable in this equation can be the chance of cheating and misconduct.

In this paper, we aim to start a discussion on this key issue (in the context of AUAF) which affects several aspects of the entire teaching and learning process, with ramifications extended far beyond students' undergraduate studies.

It's clear that the likelihood of cheating influences students' scores. In an exam with little to no supervision, it is reasonable to assume that the distribution of scores will be more left-skewed compared to the distribution when the same students take the same exam under strict supervision. However, whether this is supported by numerical evidence in a certain context (in our case AUAF) is yet to be investigated.

In this paper we aim to start a discussion on this matter by analyzing students' performance under different assessment methods. Before jumping into analysis, in Section 2, we give an overview of different assessment methods at AUAF. Section 3 then presents results and discussions. Section 4 concludes.

Assessment strategies at AUAF

At AUAF assessments are carried out to test students gaining knowledge against Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs). Table 1 below presents the CLOs-Assessment mapping for Statistics 1-STA210 course. Each course has its own set of CLOs, which contribute to one or more Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs). For example, "*Organize data using appropriate tables and graphs*" is a CLO of

STA210. To check whether students are equipped with the skill of organizing data using appropriate graphs and tables, different assessment strategies are conducted.

Table 1: CLO's mapping of STA210

Assessment	CLO1	CLO2	CLO3	CLO4	CLO5	CLO6
Discussion	√	√	√	√	√	
Edpuzzle	√	√	√	√	√	
Project	√	√	√	√	√	√
Quiz	√	√	√	√	√	
Oral Exam	√	√	√	√	√	√

After switching to remote teaching and online instructions, AUAF has adopted a *continuous assessment modality*. This had replaced the traditional assessment method consisting of midterm and final exams. In the continuous modality, a set of assessment methods has been introduced, all centered in Canvas. In the following we briefly go through these methods.

Online quizzes-Qu: Quizzes are small stake online tests, each carrying about 5% of the total mark. These tests contain mostly multiple choice questions. They are administered on Canvas. About 4 quizzes are given throughout a semester. There is no direct instructor's supervision while students are doing online quizzes.

Discussions-Dis: Discussions are another type of low stake, written assignments. Students are given a topic, about which they need to discuss, share their opinion, and comment on those of others. In certain courses discussions may not have a formal exchange format. For instance, students are given questions during asynchronous sessions and are asked to post their answers under an assignment created as a discussion.

Edpuzzle-Edp: Edpuzzle has been integrated to enable students to do interactive assignments. Instructors use Edpuzzle to create low stake assignments which are interactive and require the students to learn a topic before attempting this assignment. To make this working, instructors share the needed learning materials, video, presentation, etc. in advance. Students go through these materials, and then attempt an Edpuzzle assignment.

Projects: In certain classes, students are assigned with individual or group projects. For example in a statistics course, students need to create their own dataset, apply various analysis methods that they have learnt, make conclusions, and present their work.

Midterm and Final Oral Exams-OE: Midterm and final exams are still there but carry much lower weight, about 20-30%. Oral Exams are virtual individual tests, where students are asked to turn on their video. Students are challenged with questions that require an in-depth understanding of the subject. Some Instructors couple the oral exams with written exams.

Results and discussions

For our study, we use exams' data from four sections of Statistics 1 (STA210), a course offered in Spring Semester 2024 and taught by the same instructor. STA210 is an introductory course on statistics and probability theory. This is a General Education 3-credit hours[3] course and must be taken by all students, regardless of their major. Students usually take STA210 in their second UG semester.

We use data on students' scores under different assessment types to study distributional differences. In this section, we first give a brief statistical summary. Then move on to a more in-depth analysis of data on students' scores under different assessment methods.

Descriptive statistics

In total there were 87 first year students enrolled in the 4 sections of the STA210 course, serving as our sample. The size of the courses is nearly the same.

Table 3 provides the summary statistics of students' scores in these four sections scattered across different assessment methods. The score ranges from 0 to 100. Every score is then mapped to a grade, based on a mapping rule, specified by the university. Table 2 presents the mapping of scores and grades.

Table 2: Scores-Grade Mapping at AUAF

Score	Grade
[94,100]	A+
[90, 93]	A
[87,89]	B+
[84, 86]	B
[80, 83]	B-
[77,79]	C+
[74, 76]	C
[70, 73]	C-
[67, 69]	D+
[60, 66]	D
[0-59]	F

The summaries in Table 3 show systematic lower averages in Section 1. A noteworthier result is that the average scores of Online Quizzes and Oral Exams are lower than those of Discussion, Edpuzzle and Project.

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[3] For a normal 16-week semester, 3-credite hours correspond to two 80-minute lectures per week.

Table 3: Summary statistics of students' scores across courses and assessment types

	Discussion	Edpuzzle	Project	Online Quizzes	Oral Exam	Aggregate
Section 1	*85(13)	85(11)	83(8)	70(14)	65(15)	79(7)
Section 2	90(14)	91(16)	89(7)	86(9)	66(18)	85(7)
Section 3	90(14)	90(14)	80(17)	73(13)	54(16)	78(11)
Section 4	90(11)	91(11)	82(11)	79(14)	59(17)	80(11)
Aggregate	89 (13)	89(13)	74(22)	77(14)	61(17)	

mean (standard deviation). Scores in each category can be anywhere in [0,100].

Comparing the average scores of Online Quizzes and Oral Exams, it is evident that those of the Oral Exams are systematically lower.

When it comes to the spread of the scores around the mean, represented by standard deviation, the value is largest in the Oral Exam (except Section 3, where it is higher under Project). In other words, the students' performance in the Oral Exam is more heterogeneous compared to other types of assessment.

Comparison analysis of students' scores under oral and non-oral assessment methods

After shifting to remote teaching and online learning, AUAF has adopted a continuous assessment modality. Under this modality, the 100% score is broken down first to various types of assessment. Table 4 presents an example of this distribution. Most of these assessments are further divided into smaller assignments.

Table 4: Continues assessment modality example

Assessment type	Percentage*	Further distribution
Quizzes	20%	4 Quizzes throughout the semester
Discussion	20%	Weekly/Bi-weekly
Edpuzzle	15%	Weekly/Bi-Weekly
Oral Exam	30%	Midterm and Final
Project	15%	Submission and presentation
Class activity	10%	Weekly observed during synchronous sessions

These percentages represent the contribution of each assessment towards the total score (100%). The distribution of the total score can differ in different courses.

Due to the nature of the continuous assessment modality, throughout the semester, several assessment methods test students learning on the same topics. For example, in the first two weeks of the semester, Chapter 1, which is on basic terms and definitions, is covered. During this time span students get a Discussion and an Edpuzzle assignment. Moreover, this chapter will be a part of Quiz 1

which is then conducted in Week 3/4. The contents of this chapter are relevant to the individual project. The same chapter will be also a part of Midterm and Final Oral Exams.

Averages in Table 2 indicate that students perform much better in Discussions and Edpuzzle assignments compared to Online Quizzes and especially the Oral Exams. Various factors could be involved in creating such a significant difference.

One of the factors is time. In Online Quizzes students are given a tight and system administered timing to answer questions. The time limitation is imposed to reduce the chance of cheating. However, it can create anxiety among students, which could lead to a poor performance.

Moreover, the majority of our students are living in Afghanistan, where technical issues such as access to stable connection and even electricity present major challenges. These issues can cause disruptions, leading to a student missing the whole or a part of a quiz.

Oral Exam is a virtual one-to-one setting. Students naturally experience a certain level of anxiety here too. However, in terms of time and technical issues, Oral Exams are more flexible. For example, students, if needed, can get some extra minutes. Additionally, they can re-join the session in case they experience connection or electricity issues.

As far as Discussions and Edpuzzles are concerned, they are much more flexible in terms of time. Furthermore, the instructor does not have any observing control while students are doing these tasks. That is why these assignments are more prone to cheating and misconduct.

Referring to Table 2, we observe significant differences in averages of students' scores under different assessment methods. In the following, we first dig deeper into the data to discover other notable points.
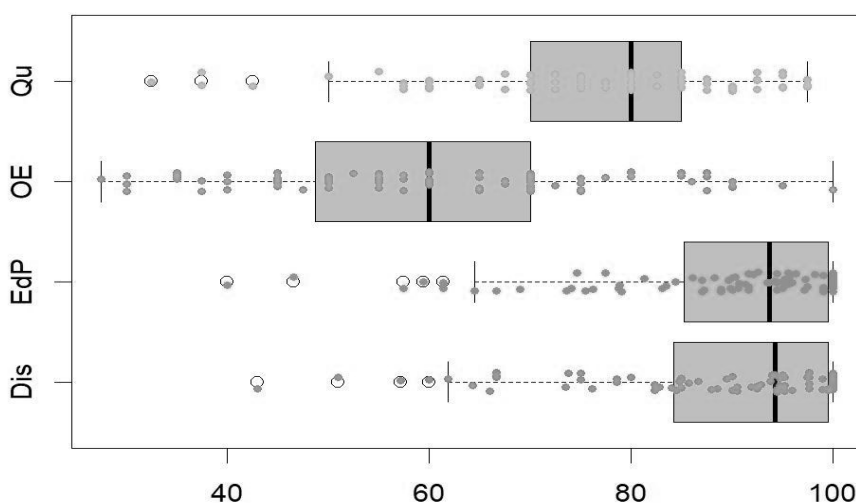

Figure 1: Scores' distribution under different assessment methods
(Legend: Dis: Discussion; EdP: Edpuzzle; Qu: Quizz; OE: Oral Exam)

Figure 1 suggests a remarkable difference between the scores' distribution under Oral Exam in comparison to other assessment types, especially, Discussion and Edpuzzle. A notable result that we see here is the existence of outliers (at the left side of distributions) under non-oral methods. Meaning that those with lower scores under these methods are rather anomaly.

Figure 2 indicates a near normal distribution of scores under Oral Exam, followed by Quizzes. On the other hand, students' scores have a highly (left) skewed distribution under Discussion and Edpuzzle.
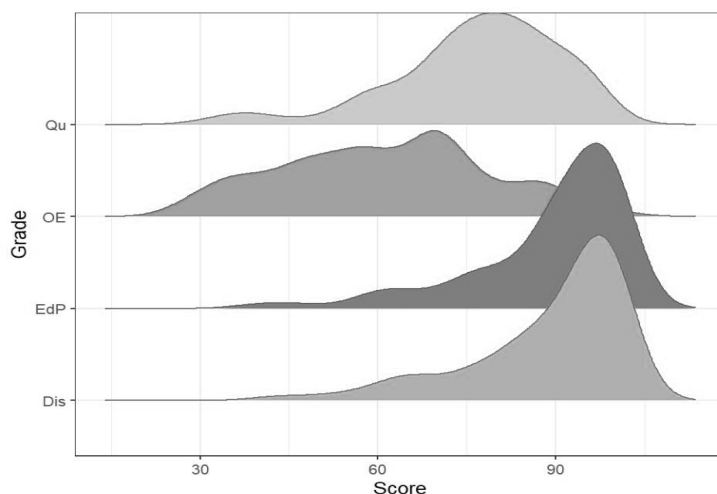

Figure 2: Students' Score Distribution

Under the Oral Exam, about 7% of students would earn an A grade. This would be about 19% under Quizzes and 64% under Edpuzzle. It is easy to conclude that in the absence of Oral Exams, even under Quizzes, one would see a high grade inflation, which is an indication of poor assessment at an institution.

An F-test rejects the null hypothesis of equal means (F.stat = 74.1, p-value<0.01) across all four types of assessment. Likewise, a t-test rejects the null hypothesis of equal means when students' scores from Quizzes and Oral Exams are compared (t.stat = 11.7, p-value<0.01).

Although students may experience higher levels of anxiety when they do Quizzes or Oral Exams, the magnitude of the difference is so high that one has to think of other factors too. One of the factors can be the lower chance of cheating and misconduct. In Quizzes, although there is no direct instructor's observation; due to the time limitation, random questions assignment, and shuffling the answers, the chance of cheating is relatively lower, compared to, for instance, Discussion or Edpuzzle assignment. In Oral Exams, the chance of cheating (of any form) is minimal.

Hence keeping other factors constant, the chance of cheating and misconduct would be lower in Oral Exam compared to other types of assessments, especially Discussions and Edpuzzle.

Sub-sample analysis

Following the analysis of students' scores in the entire sample, in this section, we analyze the scores in different sub-samples. Specifically, we explore the distribution of scores from different assessment methods for those students who secured A,B,C or D grades. That is, a sub-sample contains the scores of only A graders from all four sections. The same is true for the holders of other grades. To check the size of each sub-sample, using the data from the entire sample, we first check the distribution of grades. Figure 3 shows the distribution of grades in our sample.
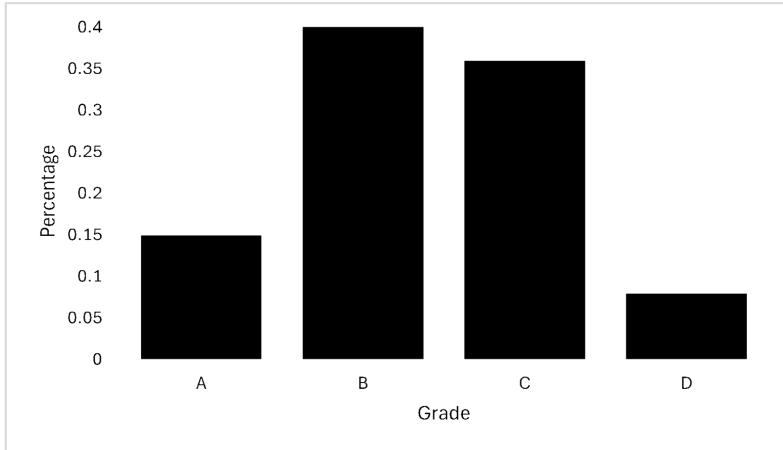
Figure 3: Students' grade distribution in the entire sample

Figure 3 suggests a balanced distribution of grades in our sample. The grades are calculated using students' final score. As expected, B and C are popular grades in our sample.

What we are interested in is to explore the performance of students in different grade categories under various assessment types. For example, we want to investigate whether A grade students were doing consistently good, regardless of assessment type.
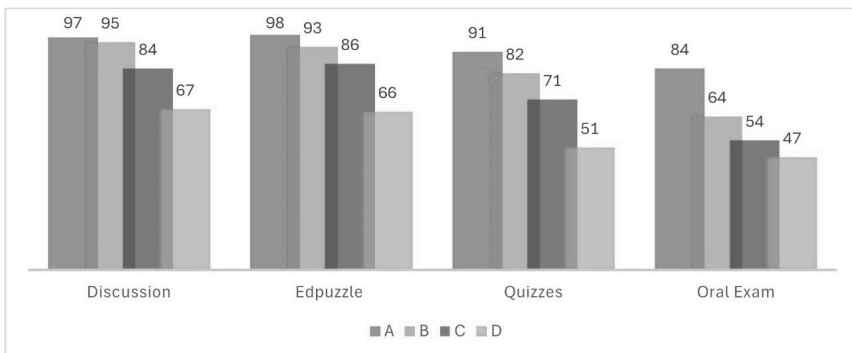
Figure 4: Joint distribution of students' grade and average score

In order to secure an A grade, a student has to earn a total score of at least 90 (out of 100). Checking the A graders, we see that in all assessment types except the Oral Exam, these students secure the minimum requirement. However, on average there is a 6-point deficit to securing an A grade, should the Oral Exam be the only means of assessment.

This deficit is much larger among B and C graders (16 points) followed by D graders (13 points). ´

Referring to Figure 4, it is evident that students in all grade groups are doing systematically worse under Oral Exam. If the Oral Exam were the only assessment type, no one would get A and the rate of failing the course (an overall score of 60 is needed to pass a course) was very high. Would this mean that students are underperforming (compared to what they actually can) in the case of an oral exam, due to factors such as anxiety? This could be the case. But the fact that students get used to this type of assessment and learn how to manage the relevant stress provides a counter argument. In addition, students know that during an oral exam they do not have as much time pressure as they face when doing an online quiz.

A different mechanism which could be active here is the adaptive behavior of students. Students may adjust their level of effort based on assessment type. In other words, if all assessments are conducted under strict conditions (like those of oral exams), students may adjust their level of efforts and preparations accordingly. In which case, one could expect a normal distribution for students' grade. If that would have been the case, the situation would result in a better learning experience.

On the other hand, if all assessments are conducted using Discussion and Edpuzzle (or under similar conditions), all B graders would get A and C graders would end up with a B grade. This would make the grade distribution far too left-skewed. This scenario is a false reflection of students' knowledge and skills that they can actually demonstrate.

To provide recommendations for a policy change, all of these scenarios should be further tested using for example experimental and quasi-experimental data.

Conclusions

In this paper we try to kick off a discussion on a key issue related to remote teaching and online learning in the context of Afghanistan, especially the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF).

AUAF has been a top higher education institution in Afghanistan and the pioneer in remote teaching and online learning. Due to its special circumstances, AUAF started exploring and exercising the option of remote teaching as early as 2016. The university however started implementing its remote teaching platform in full after the outbreak of the COVID-19 in spring of 2020.

After nearly 10 semesters of full utilization of the system, dealing with basic technical matters, testing different functionalities, troubleshooting, and educating faculty and students on the optimal usage of the system, AUAF has reached to a point to touch some deeper issues inherent in any remote teaching setting.

One of the significant concerns is students assessment and academic integrity. It is obvious that a thorough assessment is key for quality assurance and examining students' learning. In the case of remote teaching, especially with a wider usage of AI, quality assessment ensuring integrity is becoming a pressing concern.

In this paper we aim to start addressing this concern in the context of AUAF. It is worth noting that our results cannot be and should not be generalized across the board, as our sample of 87 students is not a representative sample of AUAF students' population and neither students' population in Afghanistan. Our main intention is to initiate the discussion, which will attract further inputs, research, and exchange, which will result in a better understanding of the drawbacks and address them.

For this research we have used data of 87 students, taking the Statistics 1(STA210) course in the Spring Semester of 2024. Almost all of these students are in their first UG semester. We have analyzed the students' scores earned under various assessment types, such as Discussion, Edpuzzle, Quizzes, Projects, and Oram Exam.

The results suggest a significant difference between students' score distribution under Oral Exam and other assessment types. Students have scored significantly lower in Oral Exams.

Many factors can explain this difference, such as, for instance, anxiety. One of the variables that can be responsible for the whole or part of this difference is the chance of cheating and misconduct. This is important to note that at this stage we do not suggest any kind of casual effects or contributions.

Future research may collect data from a representative sample (in any context) and possibly use experimental or quasi-experimental observations to find how the chance of cheating is related to students' score.

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Chapter 10

Quality in Teaching and Lecturers' Skills for Teaching in Higher Education: A Needs Assessment at Gawharshad University

Stefanie Harsch & Sharif Akbari

Successfully completing university depends on various aspects, including the quality of teaching and learning. In many countries, lecturers and professors receive little to no training in effective teaching methods, and many students have not learned how to study productively. To address this issue, some universities offer courses on academic teaching and learning. The Gawharshad University in Kabul, Afghanistan, always strives for excellence and embarked on a journey to develop a tailor-made course on university didactics with the support of the University of Education Freiburg. A mixed methods study was conducted in spring 2021 before designing the course to gain a detailed understanding of the current state of teaching and learning skills and needs.

This report provides novel insights into a mixed-methods study conducted in spring 2021 with 52 lecturers and 358 students. The participants shared their thoughts on several topics. These topics included their satisfaction with the available study equipment, students' behaviors, lecturers' instruction skills (see Knoll et al. 2014), and lecturers' characteristics. The lecturers also offered recommendations on how to improve pedagogical practices and the quality of instruction.

Keywords: higher education, university didactics and methods, survey, satisfaction

Background

"Education is an emergency" (Samar, 2019; Samar & Armstrong, 2024). In the early 21st century, the alternative peace prize awardee Dr. Sima Samar underscored the vital importance of education, particularly in Afghanistan, and also for the advancement of female students. Consequently, she places an even greater emphasis on the consensus among the global community that education is one of the most critical resources for the future and should, therefore, be addressed as one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 3) defined by the United Nations (UN) (World Health Organization, 2016). A comprehensive examination of the educational landscape reveals that the quality of education is as crucial as its accessibility or utilization. This is prompting countries to move beyond the establishment of educational institutions and the expansion of enrollment rates to a focus on the quality of the education provided. This leads to the question of what constitutes good education in general and what constitutes good teaching in higher education specifically (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Knowles, 1973).This question concerns not only what should be taught and how it should be taught but also addresses fundamental norms and values. It involves what a person should be, what the goals of educational programs are, and how these norms and values shape teaching and learning.

The majority of these inquiries are addressed by the pertinent ministries of education for (pre-)primary and secondary education in each country, including Afghanistan (Ministry of Higher Education, n.d.). However, the structure of tertiary education varies considerably from one country to another. It is less clearly defined, more differentiated into disciplines and specializations, and requires a more in-depth examination. While students enrolled in primary and secondary teacher training programs receive comprehensive instruction on didactics, teaching and learning methods, and receive numerous recommendations on effective learning and teaching strategies, the training of lecturers in other disciplines on methods and subject-specific didactics has been persistently overlooked. These lecturers are frequently selected primarily on the basis of their subject-specific expertise, with less frequent consideration given to their didactic and methodological skills. This represents a significant shortcoming, as not every subject expert possesses an aptitude for teaching or an understanding of effective pedagogical practices. Consequently, the quality of higher education is contingent upon the teaching abilities of the lecturers.

The recognition of the dearth of didactical training for university teachers has prompted a recent shift in focus within higher education. While initially characterized by a certain degree of reluctance, this shift has recently become more proactive, evolving from an emphasis on the mere imparting of information to a more effective approach to teaching content. Over the past three decades, there has been a notable expansion in the provision of university-level didactics for all lecturers as part of their qualification program for becoming a university professor (Fry et al., 2009). A considerable number of universities across the globe have established centers for higher education didactics, and structured certificate programs have been developed in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Germany (CILT, 2023; Deutsche Gesellschaft für Hochschuldidaktik, 2013; University of Gothenburg, 2024)). However, it is also evident that country-specific conceptions of teaching and learning have played a significant role. For example, Germany has developed state-specific training programs, including the Saxon and Baden-Württemberg Certificates (CILT, 2023; Hochschul Didaktik Zentrum Baden-

Württemberg, 2023). The state of Baden-Württemberg and its universities have implemented a plethora of offerings tailored to specific target groups. To illustrate, the University of Education in Freiburg has devised a gender- and diversity-sensitive university certificate tailored to the needs of graduates of teacher training courses (Pädagogische Hochschule Freiburg, n.d.). In other countries, the training provided to lecturers in higher education didactics varies, for example, depending on the discipline taught and the values espoused. The majority of training programs are developed in high-income countries with universities that have been in existence for over a century (see before). Nevertheless, there is a growing trend among low- and middle-income countries to enhance the quality of university teaching. Afghanistan is one such country. The Afghan education system has undergone substantial transformation over the past 25 years. During this period, there has been a notable expansion of educational opportunities, particularly in the past two decades (Jawid, 2019). However, following 2021, there has been a reversal of this trend, with severe restrictions on access to education being imposed. Prior to 2020, there was comparatively little attention devoted to the field of higher education didactics. Nevertheless, there was a discernible increase in interest in the quality of teaching, even at the tertiary level.

Gawharshad University (GU), a private university in Kabul, Afghanistan, has recently prioritized the improvement of its academic standards. In 2018, during a visit by a delegation from GU to the University of Education Freiburg (Bittlingmayer et al., 2018), the latter institution's Certificate of Higher Education was introduced to them. The representatives were particularly impressed by the content and implementation of the certificate, which inspired them to develop a similar one tailored specifically for GU. It was agreed that the University of Education Freiburg certificate would be made available to Gawharshad University. A group of lecturers from both universities implemented this plan with the support of a grant for Afghan-German University Collaboration provided by the German Academic Exchange Service (Deutscher Akademischer Auslandsdienst, DAAD). However, the university lecturers and researchers involved in this development were keenly aware that teaching and learning are profoundly contextual, socio-culturally influenced, and situation-specific, exhibiting considerable variation between countries, disciplines, and courses. Consequently, it is not feasible to translate a certificate program into another language and implement it at a different university without significant modifications. Instead, each case requires a comprehensive examination of the specific circumstances, a meticulous selection and adaptation process, and a determination of acceptability, feasibility, and efficacy.

In light of the aforementioned considerations, a research team comprising early-career researchers from Gawharshad University in Kabul, Afghanistan, with the support of experienced researchers from the University of Education Freiburg in Germany, set out to develop a certificate that would be tailored to the specific circumstances prevailing at Gawharshad University in Kabul. This process was conducted in three phases. In the absence of information regarding the characteristics of effective teaching in Afghanistan and a lack of comprehensive studies assessing the quality of teaching skills at Gawharshad University, we employed a multi-method approach to ascertain the needs for the first time. Firstly, as the concept of what constitutes effective teaching is culturally shaped and can vary significantly across different contexts, the initial task was to explore and understand what is considered effective teaching by the

faculty at Gawharshad University (qualitative survey). Subsequently, an assessment was conducted to determine the extent to which the various actors had already acquired the requisite skills and to identify any deficiencies and potential areas for improvement (quantitative assessment). Based on the findings of these two research phases, recommendations were formulated and an appropriate offer for a certificate course was developed in collaboration between representatives of GU and UoEF.

This chapter presents the findings of a qualitative and quantitative study exploring the characteristics of quality higher education in Afghanistan and provides baseline data on the status of teaching in Afghanistan in spring 2021.

The Gawharshad University and its situation in spring 2021

In 2010, Dr. Sima Samar, a medical doctor, established the Gawharshad University as an institute for higher education. Together with her co-founders, they sought to establish a private university in Kabul, Afghanistan. The objective was to make university education accessible to all students, regardless of gender. To accomplish this, a female student scholarship program was established. Subsequently, seven academic departments offering degrees were established, along with three departments (the Women's Empowerment Center, the International Relations Department, and the Professional Development Institute) offering seven bachelor's courses, primarily at the bachelor's level. In 2020, the institution was granted university status. As a private university, the institution is susceptible to the vicissitudes of political and social change. In 2020, students were unable to attend their scheduled semester courses due to the outbreak of the coronavirus (Covid-19) and the university's initial inability to provide the necessary online education infrastructure. Consequently, Gawharshad University, like the majority of other private universities in Afghanistan, encountered financial challenges. Therefore, the university's faculty members were obliged to make a challenging and obligatory decision. In accordance with this resolution, all personnel, with the exception of the faculty and departmental managers, were compelled to suspend their work for a period of several months, during which they did not receive any remuneration. As conditions of quarantine improved and suitable online teaching facilities were established, the university resumed its activities, and students returned to remote learning. By the conclusion of 2020, the circumstances had returned to a state of normalcy, and the university resumed its typical operations with in-person instruction. This was the period during which the survey was conducted. In the period preceding 2021, a total of 3160 students graduated from Gawharshad University, of whom 1200 were female (representing 38% of the total number of graduates). At the beginning of 2021, the university had an enrollment of over 2,000 students, of whom 940 were female. A total of 161 lecturers were responsible for teaching these students. Among the lecturers, 88 were employed on a full-time basis, while the remaining 73 were engaged on a course-specific basis. The experiences of the lecturers in teaching during the pandemic, along with insights gained from other countries, have highlighted the necessity for a more robust focus on higher didactic teaching skills. This context informed the initiation and conduct of the study.

Methods

This study employed a mixed methods approach, commencing with a qualitative open-ended questionnaire and subsequently proceeding with a quantitative study.

Qualitative exploration of what constitutes good teaching

In the initial phase of the study, the objective was to gain insight into the perception and meaning of "good teaching" at GU. To this end, a brief qualitative questionnaire was developed, programmed into Google Forms, and distributed to all employed lecturers for completion in written form. The questionnaire addressed a number of key topics, including the rationale behind the evaluation of teaching quality, the understanding and definition of quality in teaching held by lecturers, the dimensions and content relevant to teaching, effective teaching methods in their respective subjects, the differences between quality teaching in their subject and other subjects, the factors used to evaluate quality teaching (from the perspectives of both teachers and students), suggestions for improving teaching and the learning process, and the ways in which lecturers have learned how to teach. The responses were subsequently translated into English. A summative thematic analysis was conducted by three trained researchers. In the event of a discrepancy, the parties involved engaged in discussion until a consensus was reached.

In the year 2021, there was no established quantitative methodology for evaluating the quality of teaching skills at GU. As a result, the tool had to be developed from the ground up. This was achieved by utilizing the responses obtained from the exploratory qualitative questionnaire. Based on the findings of the survey, the core categories of factors influencing teaching were identified, and the questions were formulated accordingly. These questions were complemented by the Instructional Skills Questionnaire, developed by Knol et al. (2016). The final questionnaire was prepared in two versions, one for lecturers and one for students, and comprised questions across five dimensions: socio-demographic indicators, the general equipment of the university, student behavior in class, satisfaction with teaching skills, and questions about lecturers' characteristics. The lecturers' questionnaire included additional items pertaining to methods for enhancing teaching skills and open-ended questions. All questions were posed on a four-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating "not at all," 2 indicating "a little," 3 indicating "somewhat," and 4 indicating "very much." Additionally, respondents were given the option of selecting "I don't know" in instances where they were uncertain about their response.

The questionnaire was programmed and pre-tested in Dari and English in KoboCollect, a free survey tool designed for use in low- and middle-income countries. The participants were selected using purposeful sampling, and each was provided with a code and a link to the KoboCollect questionnaire. However, due to the low response rate, the data collection was based on a convenience sample. The research group employed a variety of strategies to engage the participation of lecturers and students in this evaluation.

1. The advertisement of this research was disseminated via the official pages of the university's virtual network with the intention of providing the lecturers and students with information and encouraging their participation.

2. The link to the evaluation form was disseminated to student groups constituted to coordinate online courses by each faculty, thus enabling students to complete the evaluation at their own discretion.

3. Through the meetings of the different faculties, the professors were apprised of the request to participate in this evaluation, and the link to the evaluation form was disseminated via the WhatsApp group of the professors of each faculty.

4. Two computers were made available for this research project in the university's IT department and computer lab, which were accessible to students and professors. If the professors and students desired to take part in the research project, they could utilize the university's computers and internet access.

The university was forced to close its doors due to a resurgence of the global pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, with all classes transitioning to an online format. Consequently, the response rate was low, prompting the project team to pursue an alternative strategy, namely, to encourage students to complete a questionnaire with a 5% activity score. The university's Institutional Quality Assurance Committee approved this approach by a majority vote. Students were given the option to participate in the evaluation, but it was not mandatory. The students were assured that their responses would be kept confidential and anonymous, as their names and personal details were not recorded in the questionnaire. The link to the questionnaire was distributed in collaboration with the instructors in various academic groups. Students were informed that upon completion of the questionnaire, each student would take a screenshot of the final text of the survey, which simply stated that "your evaluation has been completed" and contained no tracking information. Subsequently, the students transmitted the aforementioned screenshot to their respective lecturers, who then appended a 5% mark to the students' records in their presence. This strategy facilitated the expeditious collection of data for the survey.

The data was exported from KoboCollect to MS Excel and prepared for analysis in SPSS 22. Descriptive statistical analysis was employed to calculate means, standard deviations, and ranges, thereby presenting the participants' responses on a descriptive level. Additionally, scales were calculated for equipment, student skills, instructor characteristics, teaching skills, and subscales in accordance with the procedure proposed by Knol et al. (2016). Furthermore, the Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated to investigate potential associations. The findings from the two groups were presented separately and a comparison was made between the responses.

The central findings of the exploratory qualitative study and the quantitative survey are presented in the following sections.

Findings

A qualitative exploration of the quality of teaching at Gawharshad University

The qualitative questionnaire sample consisted of 11 experienced lecturers (10 men and one woman) from all four faculties (Engineering, Business Administration, Law and Political Science, and Computer Science and

Information Technology) with an average of 4.9 years (ranging from 1 to 9 years) of teaching experience. All participants completed the qualitative questionnaire in writing on a voluntary basis.

When prompted to identify the essential elements of good teaching and the factors that influence it, the lecturers identified seven key areas.

Firstly, the lecturers asserted that the context and framework conditions are of paramount importance for the delivery of effective teaching. Such factors include the availability of facilities and equipment/books, the efficiency of administrative processes, the quality of collaboration between administrative authorities and teaching staff, the optimal number of students per class, and the option for students to select their subjects.

Secondly, they enumerated factors pertaining to the planning and organization of instruction. The participants underscored the significance of an authentic curriculum aligned with national and international standards. They highlighted the importance of ensuring that the content is current, relevant, and clearly defined, with objectives that are transparent and achievable. They also emphasized the necessity for lectures to be structured, based on effective strategies and theories, and designed to enhance skills in a targeted manner. Additionally, they underscored the importance of including student evaluation and improvement as integral components of the learning process.

Thirdly, they referred to the methods of content delivery. This should be novel and efficacious, employing effective communication, the use of illustrative examples, problem-solving, group work/practical projects, and the provision of a content summary.

Fourthly, the participants identified factors related to interpersonal interactions. It is expected that lecturers will possess the requisite qualifications, expertise, experience, communication skills, and personal attributes, including good manners. Furthermore, they should demonstrate commitment, receptivity to students' inquiries, and openness to feedback and improvement.

In addition, the lecturers indicated that effective teaching is contingent upon the students' disposition. The aforementioned attributes were identified as punctuality, effective time management, discipline, preparedness, and active participation.

However, it is not only the individual actors that are decisive for learning success; the interaction between them is also a significant factor. Particularly conducive to positive outcomes are interactions that are free from discrimination, displays of friendliness, motivation, and the exchange of views on the quality of teaching.

Finally, effective teaching not only facilitates the acquisition of knowledge but also fosters the development of essential skills. These include the capacity to learn, to utilize information effectively, and to apply it in real-world contexts. Additionally, it contributes to the growth of personal attributes such as discipline, resilience, and responsibility.

A quantitative assessment of the didactical skills

Moreover, an evaluation was conducted to ascertain the perceptions of students and lecturers regarding the accessibility of the requisite skills and factors. Thus, students and lecturers were queried as to their level of satisfaction with the university's facilities (B), students' behavior (C), lecturers' teaching skills (D), and lecturers' general skills (E).

A total of 52 lecturers consented to participate in the study. Of these, 49 were male and three were female. The lecturers were teaching in the Department of Management and Economics (N = 12), Law and Political Science (N = 11), Computer Science (N = 8), Engineering (N = 10), and Business Administration (N = 4). Additionally, 358 students participated in the study, 184 of whom were female (51.3%) and 175 male (48.7%). The students were drawn from different faculties, with the majority pursuing studies in Management and Economics (N = 101), followed by Law and Political Science (N = 81) and other faculties (see Table 1).

Table 1: Sample description of lecturers and students

Indicators	Lecturers (N = 52)	Students (N = 358)
	n (%)	n (%)
Sociodemographic		
Gender (male/female)	49/3 (94.2/5.8)	182 (51.3)
Age	M = 37 (Range 24 - 53)	M = 22.95 (Range 17 - 40)
Field of Teaching/Study		
_Management & economic	12 (22.6)	101 (28.4)
_Computer science	8 (15.4)	64 (18.0)
_Engineering	10 (19.2)	61 (17.1)
_Law and political science	11 (21.2)	81 (22.8)
_Business Administration	4 (7.7)	32 (9.0)
_Completed study (yes)	/	63 (17.8)

Table 2 displays the lecturers' and students' satisfactions with different indicators. The students and lecturers expressed the lowest levels of satisfaction with the equipment available, while indicating the highest levels of satisfaction with the characteristics of the lecturers.

Furthermore, students expressed higher levels of satisfaction than lecturers across all scales. While there is a discrepancy between the ratings of students' behavior and lecturers' teaching skills, the difference in ratings is most pronounced in the domain of students' behavior. The majority of students expressed satisfaction with their own behavior, with the level of satisfaction

ranging from somewhat to very. In contrast, the lecturers surveyed expressed relatively low levels of satisfaction.

With regard to the overall score for satisfaction with the lecturer's instructional skills, students rate lecturers significantly higher than lecturers themselves. Both groups concur that structure, explication, and validation are the best, but they diverge significantly in their assessments of the outcome, stimulation, and comprehension.

Table 2: Distribution of satisfaction with indicators (scale variable)

Indicator	Lecturers (N = 52)	Students (N = 358)
Equipment	2.39	2.98
Satisfied with students' behaviors	2.65	3.34
Satisfied with lecturers' instruction skills (overall)	**3.19**	**3.35**
_Structure	3.33	3.44
_Explication	3.30	3.45
_Stimulation	3.13	3.31
_Validation	3.26	3.38
_Instruction	3.19	3.34
_Comprehension	3.22	3.22
_Activation	3.12	3.29
_Outcome	3.04	3.35
Lecturers' characteristics	3.32	3.35

Note: scale from 1 to 4, 1 indicating not at all, 2 = "a little,"
3 = "somewhat," and 4 = "very much"

While the majority of students expressed at least some satisfaction with the facilities, the same was not true of the lecturers. Students indicated the highest levels of satisfaction with the suitability of the facilities for the courses they were taking, and the lowest levels of satisfaction with access to online learning materials. In terms of satisfaction levels, lecturers expressed the highest levels of satisfaction with their ability to effect change within the university, while they also reported the lowest levels of satisfaction with the availability of relevant books in the library. Please refer to Figure 1 for details.
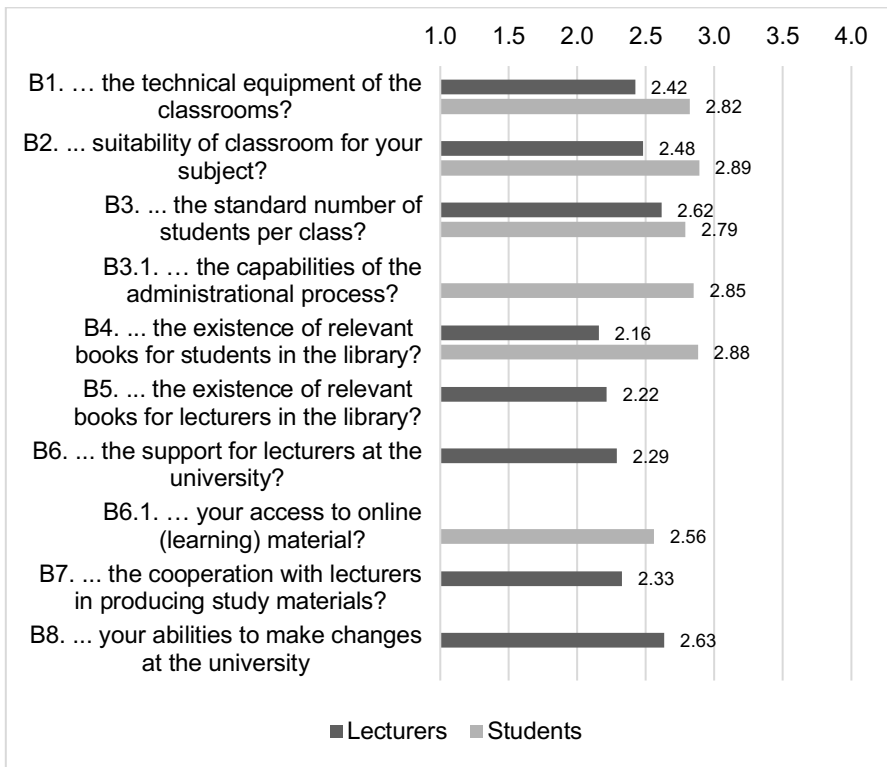
Figure 1: University stakeholders' satisfaction with the availability of facilities and equipment („How satisfied are you with …?")

It is notable that there are discrepancies between **students'** self-ratings of their **satisfaction** with their own behavior and their lecturers' ratings of the same behavior. While the majority of students indicated that they were "somewhat" satisfied (M = 3.34), the ratings provided by the lecturers were consistently lower across all items, ranging from "a little" to "somewhat" (M = 2.65).

The topics that received the lowest approval ratings and thus indicated a need for improvement are as follows:

The lowest rates of satisfaction among lecturers were observed with regard to the students' preparation for class (M = 2.46), their abilities to develop more technical skills (M = 2.53), punctuality for class (M = 2.63), and their ability to stay focused (M = 2.63). Additionally, the lecturers expressed the lowest level of satisfaction with the students' desire to learn more about the subject (M = 2.98). Overall, students expressed satisfaction or high satisfaction with their own behavior. With regard to the various items, students expressed the least satisfaction with their capacity to develop additional technical skills throughout the course (M = 3.25) and their own preparedness for class (M = 3.34). (See Figure 2).
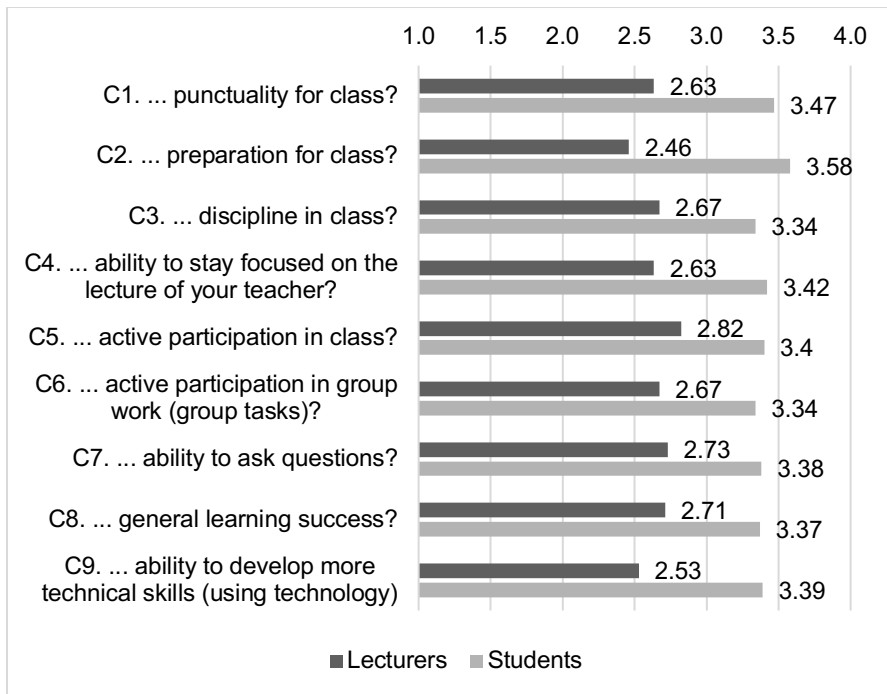
Figure 2: Satisfaction with students' abilities
(„*How satisfied are you with your students' …?*")

With regard to the skills of the lecturers, students expressed the greatest dissatisfaction with the lecturers' ability to provide sufficient occasions for students to ask questions (M = 2.52) and to offer adequate opportunities for discussion and for the subject matter (M = 3.0). Conversely, the majority of students expressed satisfaction with the lecturers' capacity to provide illustrative examples (M = 3.66) and to motivate students to inquire about the subject matter (M = 3.65). It is notable that not all lecturers expressed satisfaction with their abilities to provide sufficient opportunities for discussion of the subject matter (in terms of time and opportunity), to communicate expectations clearly to students, or to engage students in a lively manner. Additionally, the ability to utilize group work for learning is rated as moderately satisfactory. The majority of lecturers are satisfied with their ability to respond to students without any discrimination based on color, ethnicity, or nationality (M = 3.54), their own preparedness (M = 3.51), and their own ability to encourage students to learn (M = 3.50). (Please refer to Tables 3 and 4. Note: Questions with an asterisk are presented in reversed order in the students' questionnaire. Answers varied from 1= strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree 4= agree, and 5 = strongly agree. The darker the color the more difficult the stronger the disagreement).

Table 3: Satisfaction with lecturers' instructional skills

Item „How strongly do you agree/disagree with the following statements about your /your lecturers' ability to …?"	Lecturers	Students
D1. … provide a clear structure?	3.24	3.51
D2.… give a clear summary?	3.32	3.58
D3. … present the subject matter coherently?*	3.42	3.21
D4.… organize the lecture?*	3.33	3.48
D5. … explain the subject matter clearly?	3.20	3.59
D6. … be clear?*	3.32	3.16
D7. … give explanation that are easy to follow?*	3.30	3.27
D8*… give clarifying examples		3.66
D8. … make interesting lectures?	3.16	3.34
D9. … enliven the subject matter?	3.08	3.46
D10. … help students to stay focused?*	3.22	3.18
D11. … arouse students' interest in the subject matter?	3.14	3.57
D12. … explain the students the applicability of the subject matter?*	3.30	3.03
D13. … indicate relevance of the subject matter?	3.24	3.61
D14. … discuss the utility of the matter?	3.17	3.13
D15. … show why the subject matter is important?	3.30	3.6
D16. … be clear about which aspects of the subject matter are important?*	3.23	3.2
D17. … be clear about what the main and side issues are?*	3.22	3.2
D18. … be clear what you require of the students?	3.10	3.39
D19. … be clear about which parts of the subject matter are essential?	3.24	3.56
D20. … provide sufficient occasion to ask questions?*	3.16	2.52
D21. … encourage students to ask questions?	3.28	3.65
D22. … check whether students understood the subject matter?	3.20	3.52
D23. … address the student's comment frequently?*	3.12	3.2
D24. … help students to think along?	3.16	3.61
D25. … provide much opportunity to discuss the subject matter (time and opportunity)?*	3.02	2.99
D26. … include many occasions to discuss the subject matter?*	3.00	3.01
D27. … involve the students in the lecture?	3.20	3.55
D28. … the amount of learning (of new things) that has occurred in your class?	3.08	3.68
D29. … your students' desire to learn more about the subject?	2.96	3.72
D30. … your students' awareness of what they have yet to study?	3.06	3.42

Note: 1 = not at all, 2 = a little, 3 = somewhat, 4 = very much

Table 4: Lecturers' and students' satisfaction with the lecturers' characteristics

Item „How satisfied are you witht your /your lecturers' …?"	Lecturers	Students
E1. ... punctuality?	3.46	3.43
E2. ... discipline?	3.49	3.5
E3. ... preparedness?	3.51	3.43
E4. ... qualification ?	3.22	
E5. ... mastery of the subject?	3.43	3.42
E6. ... mastery of the subject / commitment?	3.41	3.45
E7. ... moral behavior and principles?	3.31	3.63
E8. ... communication style?	3.33	3.44
E9. ... evaluate your own teaching (didactics / methods)?	3.26	3.5
E10. ... your ability to assess the students' basic knowledge of the subject?	3.24	3.33
E11. ... use good references (books, articles …) for teaching?	3.18	3.32
E12. ... use group work for learning?	3.14	3.3
E13. ... use problem-solving activities for learning?	3.16	3.33
E14. ... use conceptual rules and frameworks for learning?	3.24	3.38
E15. ... provide good summaries…?	3.31	3.49
E16. ... ask students about their opinion about the teaching quality (student feedback)?	3.25	3.42
E17. ... respond to students without any discrimination of color, ethnicity and nationality?	3.54	3.6
E18. ... encourage the students to learn?	3.5	3.48
E19. ... ability to foster mutual understanding between teachers and students?	3.37	3.46
E20. ... develop your students' ability to use information?	3.39	3.28
E21. ... support your students in applying the knowledge and skills in real life?	3.22	3.32
E22. ... cultivate your students' personality?	3.29	3.35
E23. ... foster your students' discipline?	3.35	3.39
E24. ... create a spirit of hard working in your students?	3.22	3.37

Note: 1 = not at all, 2 = a little, 3 = somewhat, 4 = very much

Association between scales, sociodemographic characteristics, and program

We conducted further analysis to investigate the association between the different scales and socio-demographics and the program (see Figure 5). Among students, there is a statistically significant association between gender and satisfaction with lecturers' teaching skills, whereby women report higher satisfaction than men. Students who are more satisfied with the facilities also report higher satisfaction with their behavior. Generally, students who are more

satisfied with their behavior are also more satisfied with the lecturers' teaching skills. In addition, students who are more satisfied with lecturers' teaching skills and abilities report better learning outcomes.
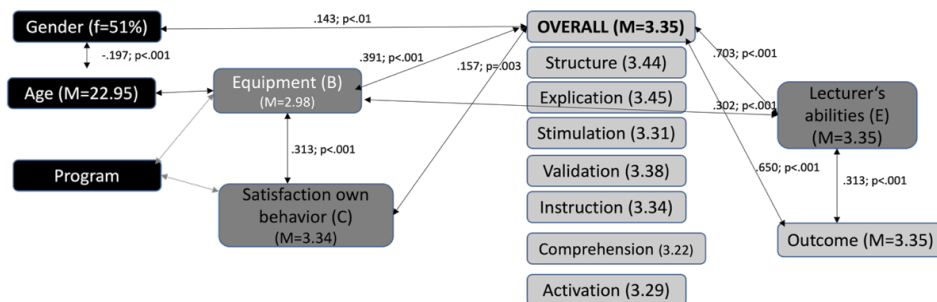

*Figure 3: Association between the different scales and
sociodemographic data and program*

In general, the associations observed for lecturers were fewer in number and of a weaker nature. The correlation between satisfaction with equipment and student behavior is moderate ($r = .411$; $p = .003$). Correlations exceeding $r = .52$ were observed between student outcomes and satisfaction with lecturers' teaching skills and abilities. No significant correlations were found between any of the demographic variables, including gender, age, teaching experience, or the respondents' own level of education, and the levels of satisfaction expressed with regard to the lecturers' skills and abilities, the equipment provided, or the students' behavior.

In addition to the aforementioned inquiries, the lecturers were requested to respond to a few more questions related to their preferences in learning / skill development.

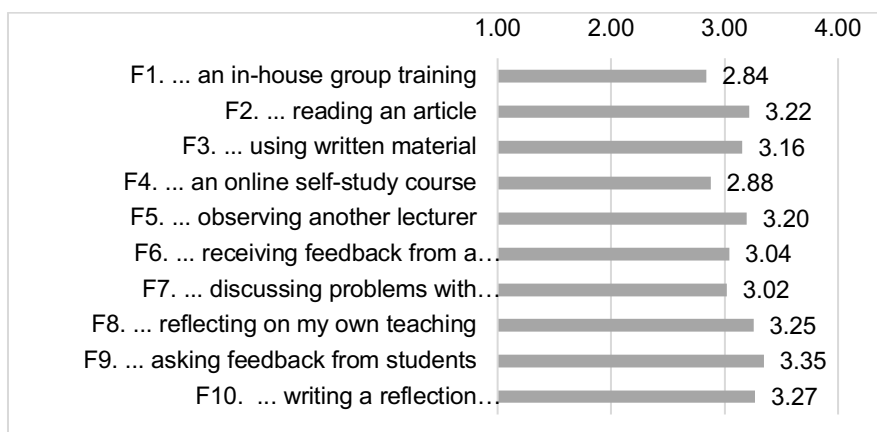*Figure 4: Lecturers expressed preferences of learning and
skill development approaches*

First, the respondents were asked to identify the strategy that had been most effective in facilitating their development of teaching skills. The responses indicated that all of the strategies had been beneficial to the lecturers, although a few were identified as being particularly impactful. The aforementioned

strategies include soliciting student feedback, maintaining a diary or portfolio, and engaging in reflective practice. Additionally, they indicated that observing other lecturers and reading articles or utilizing written material were particularly beneficial. In-house group training was the strategy least endorsed by the lecturers. (See Figure 6.)

A total of thirteen lecturers responded to the question regarding their own tasks as lecturers. They stated that lecturers should study, lecture, explain the subject, use current and objective examples, give homework, repeat, be up-to-date, and motivate the students. The lecturer should prepare with a lot of in-depth reading, identify effective methods of teaching delivery and exchange programs, utilize product-oriented methods/results-based approach and adopt a student-centered approach (N = 2), be research-oriented, facilitate working groups, employ question and answer, debate, and provide practice/practical activities. Lecturers' objectives should be to encourage students to learn state-of-the-art education with great interest and understanding and to encourage students to learn more about the subjects.

A total of twelve lecturers provided commentary on the skills that they believe are required of students: working a lot, working on their specialty and knowledge, preparing for a topic, additional and supplementary studies, following instructions given by lecturers, additional reading, and applying in the field. Such activities as completing exercises, conducting research, reading texts, and asking questions. Individual study methods, limited research and studies, keeping up to date, problem-solving skills, participating in group discussions and working groups.

Nine responses were provided regarding classroom management. The quality of the environment was described as fine, good, and excellent. It was noted that creating an enabling environment is essential for ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, or race, feel comfortable participating in discussions and expressing their opinions. However, some challenges were also identified, such as a lack of adherence to the rule of law by the administration and a lack of strictness regarding student attendance. Additionally, the university's policies on student attendance and classroom capacity were perceived as irregularities.

Seven responses include the use of technology by lecturers. One student expressed satisfaction, while others noted deficiencies in the lecturers' use of technology. These included the use of PowerPoint, a lack of fixed projector placement, inaccessibility to the electronic library, a lack of LCD usage, and a lack of LCD equipment.

Eight lecturers responded to the inquiry regarding the integration of theoretical and practical elements. One respondent indicated that the course was primarily theoretical, while another stated that there was limited opportunity for a combination of theoretical and practical elements during the students' work placements. The remaining six lecturers indicated that they occasionally integrate these two approaches in certain subjects. This is achieved through an allegorical court, where theories are analyzed in conjunction with current global issues. Additionally, the lecturers employ a sequential methodology, initially presenting theoretical concepts and subsequently introducing practical applications in the form of homework assignments and their subsequent correction. Furthermore, they utilize a combination of practice and evaluation.

Eight lecturers were queried as to whether they addressed students' subject-related problems. The responses to this question were highly variable, ranging from a negative answer (i.e., only the monograph is consulted, with no input from other sources) to a positive one (i.e., answering students' questions personally via virtual means, conducting research, and providing advice on how to solve the problem). One of the respondents expanded on this point, noting that "Guild problems related to the topic can be solved in the form of questions and answers."

Seven lecturers offered recommendations for enhancing pedagogical practices and the quality of instruction. They proposed a range of strategies, including:

1. Shadowing (exchange of lecturers, observation, and feedback)

2. Training on course design and delivery

3. Support and motivation for lecturers

4. Workshops on evidence-based teaching methods

5. Provision of valid sources and resources

6. Student access to the Internet and current articles

7. Updating course materials and activities to align with global issues

Discussion

This mixed-methods needs assessment is the first of its kind to be conducted at Gawharshad University. The assessment facilitated the identification of the university's strengths and concrete areas requiring improvement, as identified by both students and faculty. Furthermore, this study can serve as a model for other Afghan universities. Furthermore, the survey itself has initiated discourse regarding the defining characteristics of good quality of pedagogy. The items provide insight into potential areas for enhancement within the domain of teaching.

Limitations: It should be noted that this study is not without limitations. First, due to the existence of other studies on teaching in higher education in Afghanistan, it is not possible to make comparisons with the results of other universities and to assess whether they are higher or lower in the Afghan context. The gender disparity observed is challenging to interpret, given the limited representation of female lecturers in our study, with only three participants. Moreover, as our objective was to develop a conceptual framework for what constitutes effective teaching and to evaluate it, the scope of our study is limited, and our findings cannot be generalized to all Afghan universities. In contrast with the previous iteration of the Knol et al. Instructional Skills Questionnaire, we employed a 4-point Likert scale analogous to the conventional response format utilized at Gawharshad University. Furthermore, due to the difficulties encountered in attempting to reach the students, the skills were not measured on three occasions as proposed by Knol et al. (2016), but rather on a single occasion only. Additionally, the students were not asked to evaluate a specific course, which would have enabled us to conclude whether individual lecturers demonstrated particular strengths or weaknesses in their teaching skills. Instead, the objective was to obtain a general assessment of the teaching skills of the

lecturers at GU in order to identify topics for the certificate. Finally, we did not employ videographic tools to assess the efficacy of the teaching methods; instead, we relied on self-assessment. The same is true with regard to the self-assessment of the suitability of student conduct.

Notwithstanding these constraints, the study offers valuable insights that can inform further research.

The lecturers illustrate that the quality of teaching is a multifaceted concept, with numerous factors influencing it (see also Biggs et al. 2011). This comprehensive perspective on teaching quality enables the differentiation of key features pertaining to lecturers' and students' characteristics and responsiveness to learning and questions, teaching competencies, and the learning environment. The findings echo the various aspects necessary to be included in didactic trainings such as teaching, learning planning and curriculum development, interaction with a specific focus on counseling and mentoring, the use of methods but also multimedia, feedback, appraisal and quality development, examination and assessment, but also social-culture specific teaching e.g. gender- and diversity sensitive teaching) (HDZ Baden-Württemberg, 2023).

Both lecturers and students concurred that the activation, understanding, and stimulation dimensions warrant improvement. Future research is needed on the reason for this poor performance of activation and didactics training should focus on the proactivity in learning.

It is noteworthy that while all of the reported strategies for enhancing lecturers' competencies were rated as somewhat or very satisfactory in terms of learning outcomes, the most prevalent strategy—providing in-house training— was rated as the least satisfactory in terms of learning outcomes. This requires further exploration. Specifically, as one important component of all university didactic courses are in-house workshops.

Conclusion

This study is distinctive in that it offers original insights into the realm of higher education in Afghanistan, with a particular focus on the private university Gawharshad University. The study employs a two-stage approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods and examining both faculty and student perspectives. With a participation rate exceeding 80% of permanent faculty and 25% of students, the study offers a comprehensive understanding of faculty skills, strengths, needs, and opportunities. The data enables a more profound investigation into the underlying reasons for the comparatively low satisfaction levels with specific indicators and the formulation of strategies to enhance them. In particular, the qualitative data enables the identification of the principal areas that should be included in a certificate course on higher education, together with concrete suggestions as to how these might be addressed. Moreover, the study has yielded a tool that is sensitive to the specificities of teaching at the university in Afghanistan and can be utilized by other academic institutions. Moreover, the findings can be employed as a benchmark for monitoring the university's development. The findings may also serve as a source of inspiration for other universities in Afghanistan and beyond, facilitating the enhancement of their lecturers' teaching skills. It is recommended that particular attention be paid to the teaching of students how to learn. These concepts can assist Gawharshad

University and the Afghan nation in enhancing the quality of university education, thereby better preparing graduates to utilize their competencies and expertise for the benefit of their country.

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Chapter 11

Why the Taliban Prevent Afghan Girls from Access to Education? A Discourse Analysis Approach

Mohammad Davood Sokhanwar

Taliban, an armed religious and military group, has taken control of the Afghan government twice. One of the most significant features of their rule is a strong opposition to women's education, which has been evident during both periods of Taliban government. This raises the question: What motivates the Taliban to treat girls so harshly in this country? And why have they taken this action? The necessity of this research lies in providing solutions that can clarify the future path and help address the problems and shortcomings of the educational system in Afghanistan.

Using discourse analysis, this study aims to identify one nodal point and several floating signifiers to explore the semantic system of Taliban discourse. Research data were collected from documents produced during both Taliban rule periods (1996–2001 and 2021–present), including books, articles, and lectures on women's education.

Taliban follow Deobandi and Salafi religious schools, which offer specific interpretations of islamic tradition. Since the group opposes all modern symbols and believes the modern world leads humanity astray, women's education is officially considered one of these Western symbols that must be stopped. However, this issue is not solely religious; tribal and political factors also play a significant role. Taliban's discourse on the education system, especially regarding women's access to education, stems from the real conflict between tradition and modernity in Afghanistan. Women have been the primary victims of this discourse.

Introduction

The Taliban, an armed religious and military group, has twice taken control of the Afghan government. The first period was from 1996 until 2001. The second began on August 15, 2021, when Ashraf Ghani, then Afghan President, fled the country, and Taliban forces entered Kabul, gradually consolidating their government, which continues today.

This group, composed mainly of religious students trained in Saudi-backed schools in Pakistan (Bruno, 2008), was founded in 1994 by Mullah Mohammad Omar in southern Afghanistan. They began their activities with the slogan of "jihad" against "shirk" (blasphemy), promising that those killed would be sent to heaven. With this slogan, they quickly gained many followers in Afghanistan and Pakistan. After capturing most provinces of Afghanistan, they declared their government as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and announced it through the media (Thomas, 2021).

One of the most significant features of Taliban rule is their strong opposition to women's education, repeated during both periods of their governance. Shortly after their first takeover, they issued a statement ordering the closure of girls' schools until further notice. This blockade continued until their government was overthrown. The closure of schools and universities led to a dramatic increase in illiteracy, especially among females. By 2001, when the Taliban regime ended, the number of female students in Afghanistan did not exceed one million. By contrast, the student population had risen to ten million by 2018 (UNESCO, 2023). In 2001, there were fewer than 1,000 primary school girls nationwide, rising to 2.5 million by 2018. In August 2021, four out of every ten students were girls—a significant figure. Female enrollment in higher education also increased markedly—from fewer than 5,000 during Taliban rule to over 100,000 in 2018 (UNESCO, 2023). This data reflects the status of women's and girls' access to education under Taliban rule.

During the second Taliban term, only girls in sixth grade or below were allowed to attend school, while public and private universities were closed to women. The Taliban justified its decision by claiming that these restrictions are intended to protect the "national interest" and safeguard women's "honour." (Al Jazeera, 2022). Afghanistan has never been a safe place for women, especially regarding access to education. Girls had many hopes for their future—they dreamed of contributing to their country's development through education. As someone who taught both male and female students at Kabul Education University for many years, I witnessed firsthand how determined the girls were. Despite numerous challenges at home, their final scores often surpassed those of boys. Their efforts were fueled by hope for a better future after years of restrictions. However, with the Taliban's return to power, those hopes turned to despair, and the future became uncertain.

Thus, the question remains: What exactly motivates the Taliban to treat girls so harshly? Why have they taken such actions?

If this situation continues, it will have severe psychological, economic, social, and cultural consequences. Over the past 20 years, many girls have aspired to complete their education with great enthusiasm. Being confined at home and denied access to education will lead to significant psychological trauma.

Therefore, it is crucial first to analyze this problem and take fundamental measures to resolve it. Otherwise, this situation may lead to a social and humanitarian disaster in the future.

Theoretical foundation and research method

I used discourse analysis to examine the research problem. Because discourse analysis differs significantly from other research methods, I begin by outlining some of its key elements.

Three major approaches to discourse analysis have been identified. The first is the historical and genealogical perspective developed by Michel Foucault (Andersen, 2003). The second is the critical approach presented by Fairclough (Fairclough, 2001). The third, more recent approach, was developed by Laclau and Mouffe and first introduced in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau, 1985), later expanded in their subsequent works (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014).

Among these three tendencies, I have chosen the Laclau and Mouffe approach for this study for the following reasons: this approach provides the most suitable framework for understanding the dynamics of a political system. It allows the researcher to analyze the complex social and political structures influencing Afghan girls' access to education. Additionally, this method facilitates reaching the underlying layers of theory and uncovering the background context that often remains hidden.

Research model

The discourse analysis model proposed by Laclau and Mouffe was later modified by Thomassen in 2005. Figure 1 illustrates the Laclau pattern alongside Thomassen's modifications (Thomassen, 2005).
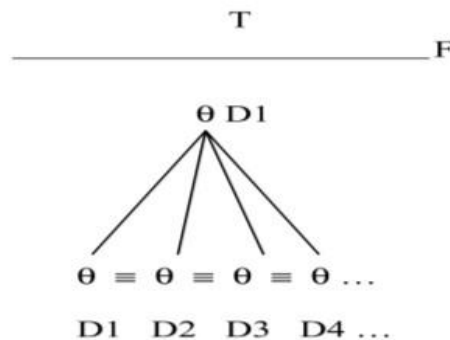
Figure 1: Research model based on Thomassen

Based on this model, Thomassen demonstrates the relationship between a semantic system within discourse and its structural components. ϴ has been used to show the moment and signifier. ⊟ has been used to show the relationship of the moments. On the basis of the logic of difference, each moment is positioned alongside one another. The line which is placed between others and the nodal point is called the antagonistic frontier, which is used to create hegemony.

However, implementation of this pattern will be done in three layers. Description, interpretation and explanation or analysis.

The purpose of the discourse analysis in this study is to examine girls' access to education as expressed through what can be termed the "Talibanism discourse." The first step in this process is to identify the key signifiers that help articulate and construct the semantic system. Next, a nodal point is extracted from these floating signifiers to anchor the analysis and guide the reader through the text according to Laclau and Mouffe's framework. In the final step, the researcher evaluates whether this discourse has become hegemonic. If it has not, the study explores the reasons for its marginalization.

Basic concepts in discourse analysis

Discourse analysis involves various complex elements. A proper understanding of a discourse—especially within a political structure—requires a correct perception of its foundational concepts. Describing these concepts at this stage not only familiarizes us with the approach of Laclau and Mouffe but also helps us understand how discourse structures are formed and function in later stages of analysis.

Articulation: In each discourse, new concepts are brought together through its own set of elements. Several signifiers, nodes, elements, and moments can be linked—or *articulated*—to create larger semantic units. These components are connected by a line, which Laclau and Mouffe refer to as an *articulation* (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Laclau, 2001).

Nodal Point: A *nodal point* is the key signifier that functions as the central axis or organizing center of a discourse. Other signifiers are arranged around it, and its centrality helps structure meaning within that discourse (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

Floating Signifier: A *floating signifier* is a term whose meaning is not fixed; it can have multiple signifieds across different discourses. Competing discourses try to incorporate such signifiers into their own semantic systems and assign them meaning based on their own ideological frameworks (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

Empty Signifier: An *empty signifier* reflects a perceived absence or void in society—a concept that is strongly felt as missing. For instance, when Thomas Hobbes described the political instability of his time, *order* functioned as an empty signifier, representing a desired but absent condition (Laclau, 2001).

This study addresses the Taliban's discourse, with particular attention to how women's education is positioned within its articulation. *Articulation*, in this context, refers to the process of organizing floating signifiers, elements, and signs into a new relationship—through which a new identity is constructed (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

Nodal point: Sharia-based education excluding women

Upon assuming power in 1996, the Taliban established a political and ideological framework grounded in a strict interpretation of Islamic Sharia law. This interpretation extended across the social, economic, and cultural policies of their regime. The Taliban leader, known as *Amir al-Mo'menin*, called upon the public to support the implementation of Sharia, framing their entire political program around the slogan of "implementing religious rulings." State-run institutions

reflected this discourse: Kabul Radio was renamed *Radio Shariat*, and the regime's sole governmental publication was titled *Shariat Publication*.

Women's roles, particularly in education and public life, were severely restricted. In a 1994 radio interview, the governor of Herat articulated the regime's gender policy:

"All of Afghanistan is proud to keep their women at home... Holy Shari'a determines how we behave. In fact, no country has offered them the rights we have offered. We have given women the rights set by God and His Prophet, which are to stay at home and observe the Islamic veil" (Herat Governor, 1994).

This discourse—*Sharia-based education excluding women (see Figure 2)*—remains a nodal point in the Taliban's articulation of governance and identity. In the second phase of Taliban rule (post-2021), this position was reaffirmed and institutionalized. On June 1, 2023, a Taliban spokesperson, in an interview with Qatar Television, justified the ban on girls' and women's education, stating that the regime was obligated to structure Afghanistan's education system in accordance with religious rulings (Al Arabiya, 2022).

In the face of domestic and international condemnation, the Taliban's Minister of Higher Education elaborated on the rationale for banning women from higher education. In a December 22, 2022 interview, explained the decision by pointing to several reasons. He argued that female student dormitories in the provinces violate "Afghan honor and Islamic norms," since girls would be studying away from their families and traveling "without a male relative." He also cited concerns about women not wearing "full hijab," co-education, and women studying in fields he claimed were "unsuitable" and damaging to their "honor and dignity." (BBC Persian, 2022).

Each of these justifications reflects the Taliban's rigid interpretation of Islam, reinforcing a discourse in which education is permitted only insofar as it conforms to their ideal of gendered religious identity. This construction positions Sharia-based education without women as the central nodal point in the articulation of the Taliban's political and religious discourse.

Floating signifiers: Taboo on women's education

The Taliban's approach to women's education has been marked by unilateralism, unpredictability, and retribution. Upon taking control of Kabul, the Taliban immediately closed all girls' schools, which remained shuttered throughout the duration of their rule. Although the regime introduced laws governing various sectors—including higher and vocational education—these laws failed to uphold gender equality in practice.

Articles 2 and 3 of the Education Law, enacted during both the first (1996–2001) and second (post-2021) periods of Taliban governance, declared primary education compulsory. However, the law made no explicit mention of education as an inalienable right for Afghan citizens regardless of gender. While Article 3 of the Education Act stated that "women's education is regulated within Islamic Sharia law by a special legislative document" (Justice, 1422 [2001]), such a document was never enforced, and its provisions were routinely ignored in practice.

The regulation of women's education extended far beyond the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education. The Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice played a central role in

monitoring and controlling female access to education. Modeled after a similar institution in Saudi Arabia, this agency employed thousands of young men, many of whom had only limited religious education acquired in Pakistani madrasas (Rashid, 2010). This institution, functioning as a de facto intelligence agency, was especially vigilant regarding the presence of women and girls in educational settings.

What emerges is a stark contradiction between the Taliban's formal legal language and their actual governance. Despite legal provisions stating that all Afghan citizens are entitled to education, these rights were implicitly and explicitly denied to girls and women. In effect, women were excluded from the definition of "citizens" deserving of educational rights. This exclusion reveals the Taliban's ideological manipulation of legal texts, transforming the concept of education into a floating signifier—a term that appears inclusive and universal but is reinterpreted in ways that reinforce patriarchal and theocratic control.

Floating signifier: Women's employment as taboo

Women's employment is closely linked to access to education, as education often paves the way for professional engagement. In underdeveloped or post-conflict societies like Afghanistan, women's employment is not only a right but a necessity for national development. However, under Taliban rule, women's participation in the workforce has been severely restricted and stigmatized.

From the outset, the Taliban prohibited women from working through various decrees, such as Article 4 of a directive broadcast via Sharia radio. These restrictions sparked concern among both domestic and international organizations engaged in women's work and education. Despite mounting pressure, the Taliban maintained that they had not banned women from working entirely but had limited this right to widows. Additionally, initial post-conflict decrees instructed women to remain unseen in public spaces unless fully covered and accompanied by a male guardian (mahram). These policies led to the closure of girls' schools and the prohibition of women's work outside the home (Dupree, 1989).

Mullah Omar, the Taliban's former leader, articulated the ideological foundation of these restrictions stated:

"In spite of the way that Western countries may react to our actions, you should know that we stand by the principle that the Great God created men and women from different parts of the world for different purposes. There is a proverb that: Working inside the house is a woman's duty, and working outside the house belongs to warrior men. Women are naturally weak creatures and fragile in the face of self-stimulation and seduction. And if they leave the house alone without the companionship of their brother, father, uncle, and husband, the men will be taken from them and released. Like women in the Western world who associate with foreign men, this is the first step towards prostitution." (Andishmand, 2011).

Mullah Omar's statement reveals three central justifications: first, that gender roles are divinely ordained and distinct; second, that the Taliban merely implement God's commands; and third, that Western social norms pose a threat to Islamic morality. His reasoning aligns religious doctrine with traditional customs and is used to legitimize control over women's public presence.

Further institutional enforcement of this ideology is found in Article 4 of the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice's operational guidelines:

"Any woman who leaves the house without a veil (*hijab*) or a burqa (*chadaree*) will be addressed at her home, and her husband will be punished. If the woman is in a car, the officers are obliged to imprison the car driver for one to five days." (Justice, 1422 [2001])

This provision shows how deeply embedded the surveillance of women's mobility and appearance became in Taliban governance, treating women's independence as a matter of public morality and male accountability.

Floating signifiers: Female student dress code

When discussing girls' education during the Taliban era, the type of clothing imposed on female students becomes an immediate point of reference. As such, it stands as a significant floating signifier, inseparable from the broader discourse on girls' education. While the hijab is legally required in many Islamic countries to varying degrees, the Taliban's interpretation is distinct both in its strictness and in the specific form of clothing mandated. According to Taliban directives, the attire must be black and must fully cover the female body.

Even female hospital staff were not exempt from these decrees. The head of Islamic Guidance within the Ministry of Health issued a letter demanding that female employees wear both a mask and hijab. Furthermore, a circular warned that women working in Afghan government agencies would be dismissed if they failed to comply with the hijab requirement. According to an updated directive by the Taliban leader, husbands are obligated to prevent their wives from appearing in public without proper coverage. Failure to enforce this rule could result in the husband's imprisonment (Anderson, 2021).

These decrees have serious implications for Afghan society at large. The Taliban have implemented a tiered system of punishment for noncompliance: women and girls receive advice, warnings, and punishment for a first offense. By the third offense, they may be imprisoned for three days, and by the fourth, they will face trial.
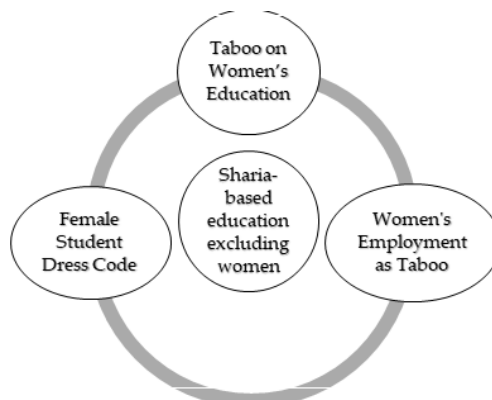

Figure 2: Articulation of the Taliban's Discourse on Women and Girls' Education

At this point, we begin to address the central question of this study: What motivates the Taliban's harsh treatment of girls and women in Afghanistan?

Based on the discussion so far, several key dimensions of the issue have already been clarified. To fully explain this phenomenon, however, we must now move into the third phase of research: explanation and analysis. This stage requires the researcher to explore the connections between social events and underlying social structures. Specifically, we must ask: Why did this event occur, and how is it shaped by broader social and ideological frameworks?

To answer this, one must examine the Taliban's ideological and intellectual roots, as well as the complex social dynamics that inform their worldview. One crucial factor is the Taliban's fundamentalist stance on women's education, which is deeply embedded in specific jurisprudential and theological traditions. The Taliban follow a radical interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence, drawing heavily from the Deobandi school and the teachings of Abul A'la Maududi (Rahman, 1995). Maududi's perspective on women emphasized strict domestic roles, full hijab in public, and strict gender segregation (Marsden, 2002). His ideas were later adopted and promoted by figures such as Maulana Fazlur Rahman, the leader of Pakistan's Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, which deeply influenced generations of religious students.

As Ahmed Rashid notes, the Taliban, with little exposure to the outside world, were trained in Pakistani madrasas affiliated with the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam. There, they absorbed the teachings of conservative, rural clerics, which shaped them into what Rashid terms a "hard-headed and fanatical Deobandi school" (Rashid, 2008). This ideological foundation had direct implications for education policy in Taliban-controlled areas. For example, the Taliban's Minister of Education took it upon himself to purge Afghan curricula of what he considered foreign influence and moral corruption (Koepke, 2002).

The foundation of the Taliban's restrictive stance on women's social roles is derived from a specific interpretation of a Qur'anic verse—Surah al-Ahzab (33:33). From this verse, it is inferred that women should not leave their homes for activities such as commerce, recreation, or travel, as these actions lead to the mixing of mahram and non-mahram individuals, which is forbidden from an Islamic perspective (Binbaz, 2019). According to this belief, a woman's duty is exclusively to nurture and care for children and to perform tasks traditionally associated with women.

Although many Islamic scholars have contested this rigid interpretation, the prevailing conservative view holds that women's primary responsibility remains the care of children and domestic work. The Saudi Mufti—a significant authority in fundamentalist jurisprudence—emphasizes the limitations placed on women, acknowledging their value and dignity but warning that female participation alongside men constitutes a serious threat. He asserts that the mixing of men and women results in dire consequences and violates Islamic principles (Binbaz, 2023).

A central religious figure for the Taliban, Abul A'la Maududi, strongly advocates that women's duties include managing the household, raising children, and providing their husband and family with "the greatest possible comfort and contentment" (Maududi, 2013). Maududi encourages women to pursue education only in religious sciences, stating that "Islam has not only permitted women to teach religious sciences but has also encouraged and praised them in this role" (Maududi, 2018). His writings suggest that while women do have the right to education and may leave the home to seek it, two critical conditions must be observed: women's education must be separate from

men's, and the educational environment must ensure gender segregation. In his view, free mixing of men and women was forbidden even in the Prophet's educational program (Maududi, 2016).

Based on these principles, the Taliban's discourse envisions women as obedient wives confined to the domestic sphere, responsible for child-rearing and home management. They do not categorically prohibit women from studying but mandate that their education be segregated, focused primarily on religious subjects, and limited to fields deemed appropriate for women. The Taliban interpret these positions as efforts to replicate the social norms of the Prophet's era and use them as models for contemporary gender relations.

Tribal and ethnic traditions further compound the Taliban's extremism. Originating from the deeply traditional southern regions of Afghanistan near the Pakistan border, the Taliban come from areas where fierce traditionalism governs gender relations. In these communities, women are strictly guarded by male relatives and traditionally excluded from public participation. The Taliban attempted to impose these localized customs on the entire Afghan population, enforcing a uniform, harsh cultural code. However, these beliefs were originally confined to specific regional contexts. As Ahmad Rashid notes:

"Taliban leaders were all from the poorest, most traditional, and least literate provinces in southern Pashtun Afghanistan. In Mullah Omar's village, women were always fully covered, and girls did not attend school because no girls' schools existed. Omar and his colleagues imposed their local cultural norms regarding women on the entire country, attempting to justify their policies through the Qur'an." (Rashid, 2002, p. 226)

Herat has historically been renowned as a city of art, music, and knowledge within Afghanistan, enjoying not only regional but also global recognition for its cultural contributions. However, with the rise of the Taliban, this rich artistic and cultural heritage was severely damaged. The Taliban destroyed numerous artistic and cultural artifacts, and even viewing cinema screens was declared *haram* (forbidden). This reflects the Taliban's deliberate blindness to the social realities of Afghan society, as they sought to impose their exclusive and rigid policies on the population.

This approach, however, cannot be understood solely through an Islamic lens. Had the matter been purely religious, endorsements such as the Islamic Conference on Women's Education in Afghanistan would have had a significant impact (Daryosh, 2022). Similarly, the visit of the Afghan delegation to the office of the United Nations Deputy Secretary-General, Amina J. Mohammed, would have yielded fruitful results (UN Women, 2023). Yet, these efforts failed to produce tangible change. This strongly suggests that the Taliban's agenda was driven primarily by a desire to enforce traditionalist interpretations of religious law across all segments of society. This brand of traditionalism has profoundly altered the fabric of the Afghan nation, leaving particularly Afghan women confused, marginalized, and misled.

A question that naturally arises is: Why does the Taliban regime uniquely restrict women's access to education when other non-democratic or Islamist regimes—some of which also possess tribal characteristics—do not impose such severe prohibitions? The answer lies in the trajectories of these governments, many of which have undergone significant modernization over the past century. Increased social and international engagement has positively influenced their

policies towards women's education. Furthermore, the religious frameworks informing their social policies differ markedly from that of the Taliban. The Taliban adhere to an interpretation of Islam that is fundamentally more rigid, exclusionary, and misogynistic than that of most Muslim-majority countries. Their extreme fundamentalism regarding social issues, particularly women's education, distinguishes them sharply from other Islamic regimes worldwide.

Political factors affecting women's education in Afghanistan

Political dynamics also play a critical role in shaping the landscape of women's education in Afghanistan. Pakistan, a neighboring country with a long history of political tension and conflict with Afghanistan, has been a significant site for the emergence and cultivation of fundamentalist ideologies. It is well understood that fundamentalism produced in Pakistan is strategically managed to influence Afghanistan, often obstructing any positive efforts toward social reform, including women's education For instance, the former head of Pakistan's army famously stated in an interview that fundamentalism in Afghanistan should be left "like a boiling pot that will neither be shed nor cooled," signaling a deliberate policy of perpetuating instability through ideological extremism.

Antagonism in Taliban discourse

The identification of any discourse is inherently linked to its relationship with other discourses, often manifesting through mechanisms of otherness and antagonism. Discourses typically create a sense of 'other' by defining what they are not, thereby constructing boundaries internally and externally (See Figure 3). In the case of the Taliban, this antagonism operates on two levels: external and internal.

External Otherness: The Taliban positioned themselves in opposition to Western powers, whom they viewed as antagonistic to Islamic Sharia law. Key Western signifiers such as modernity, women's rights, and human rights were explicitly rejected by the Taliban as antithetical to their worldview. For example, when UNICEF issued a statement on November 10, 1995, urging the suspension of aid to Afghanistan due to the Taliban's refusal to cooperate, the Taliban disregarded the warning and continued their policies unabated (ReliefWeb, 1997). As Dupree (1998) explains, "The Taliban only recognized Sharia law and did not consider themselves bound by UN human rights documents, which they regarded as tools of Western cultural imperialism." The Taliban regarded women's education as "acts of blasphemy and promotion of prostitution" (Esmatullahi, 1999, p. 134), fearing that educated women would adopt materialistic and Western ideologies. Since children are primarily influenced by their mothers, the Taliban perceived educated women as a threat to the Islamic identity of future generations. Accordingly, Mullah Omar declared that their sole objective was to "protect women from corrupt people" who posed a risk of moral decay without Taliban oversight (Dupree, 2010). Reinforcing this stance, the Taliban's minister of higher education stated in a 2022 video that women's education was "un-Islamic and Western," and thus incompatible with their interpretation of Islam (bbc.com, 2022).

Internal Otherness: Within Afghanistan, the Taliban's antagonism was directed at moderate Islamists who had participated in power struggles and, in the Taliban's view, corrupted society by diverting it from the path of Sharia. This internal conflict is exemplified in an interview with Mullah Omar, where he clearly articulated his opposition to these factions (Sajjadi, 2009).

In the second round, the otherness-related concepts and values that existed under the previous government were rejected by the Taliban. With the Taliban's rise to power, a process of exclusion from the former government's values began, accompanied by an emphasis on Taliban ideology. They opposed all forms of values associated with the previous regime. Officers of the former government were dismissed, punished, imprisoned, or even killed. During this period, women were confined to their homes and prohibited from working. Men were required to wear traditional local clothing and grow large beards. Afghanistan's calendar was changed from the Hijri to the Islamic Qamari calendar, and religious punishments were reinstated. University professors recently received a decree mandating that they teach in Pashto.

Another source of antagonism was groups that promoted women's participation in their organizational and party structures. One such group was Hizb-e-Wahadat. Within this group, twelve women played significant cultural and social roles. According to Ahmad Rashid (2002), the Taliban were deeply displeased with this because most of these twelve women held influential roles in society. Female professors founded Bamiyan University, which was one of the most deprived universities in the world.

At the religious level, their antagonism was directed towards the Shia. One of the Taliban's first actions after taking Kabul was to suppress religious diversity by annulling the Personal Status Law for Afghan Shias, a measure that was established under the former government's constitution (Danish, 2024).
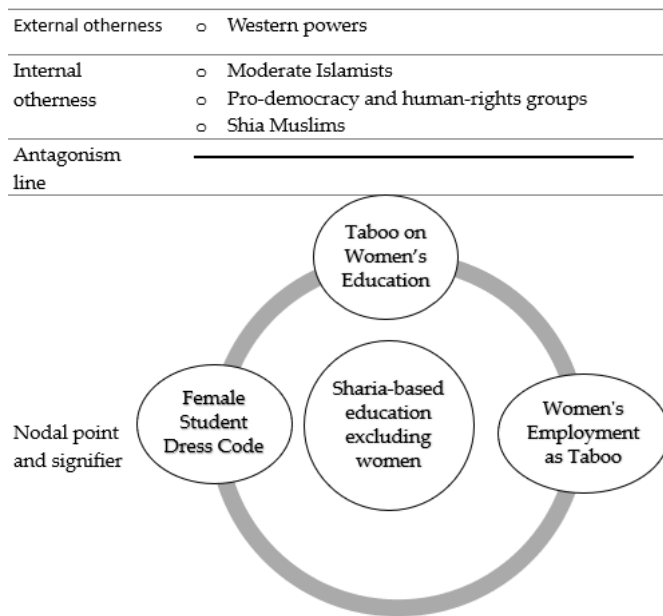

Figure 3: The articulation of Taliban discourse

Conclusions

Fundamentalists, specifically the Taliban in Afghanistan, have structured Afghan women's access to education around their interpretation of Sharia law. They constructed additional signifiers around this core principle, articulating a unique semantic system to justify their policies.

The Taliban's handling of women's education was unexpectedly harsh and deeply disappointing. During their rule, women's access to education became part of a dark and troubling chapter in Afghanistan's history. This movement also explicitly banned women's right to employment.

The reasons behind this extreme opposition to women's education are rooted in the movement's religious sources. The Deobandi and Salafi schools of thought strongly influence the Taliban, and these schools oppose modern forms of women's education, advocating instead that women receive only religious education. Influential figures such as Abu al-Ala Maududi, Ashraf Ali Thanawi, and Maulana Fazlur Rahman have shaped the ideology underpinning the movement.

Regional and tribal traditions have also played a significant role in the growth of the Taliban. The movement originated in the southern regions of Afghanistan, which are characterized by strong traditionalism and where women's access to education is often limited. According to local customs, women are traditionally protected and controlled by men. Taliban leaders, who come from this region, have sought to extend these traditions throughout the country.

Thus, the Taliban's discourse on education, particularly regarding women's access to it, reflects the deeper conflict between tradition and modernity in Afghanistan. This conflict is shaped by a specific interpretation of religious beliefs, entrenched tribal customs, and ongoing political struggles. Women have been the primary victims of this conflict. The semantic system governing the Taliban's discourse on women's education during both of their regimes can be understood within this complex nexus of religion, tradition, and politics.

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Part 3: Health in Context

Chapter 12

A Difficult Legacy:
Historical Challenges for Creating a Healthy Afghanistan

Uwe H. Bittlingmayer & Stefanie Harsch

In this short perspective, we want to provide general remarks on Afghanistan to familiarize the readers with this Asian country. This paper addresses the difficult legacy for establishing a healthy Afghanistan for the current rulers, gives some general socio-epidemiological background, and presents the start of the improvement of the Afghan health system in 2019. The paper aims to draw, albeit very shortly, a complex and contradictious picture of health in present Afghanistan.

__Keywords__: health system, social determinants of health, structure, health outcomes

Afghanistan – the impact of four decades of conflicts on the health of the Afghan population

For more than four decades, Afghanistan has predominately been featured in Western global media for negative news. Although Zaher Shah's reign from 1933 to 1973 was marred by oppression of the Afghan population and nepotism (1), it is often referred to as the Golden Age of the more recent Afghan state from today's perspective (2). This period was followed by a row of wars, conflicts, and violent regime change: the coup d'état by Zaher Shah's cousin, Mohammad Daud Khan (1973-1978), the communist 'Saur Revolution' and the proclamation of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, led by the Noormohammed Taraki and overshadowed by the internal struggle for power between different parties of the communist party (mainly Qalq and Parcham) (1978-1989). In 1979 the Russian invasion (1979-1989) followed and the communist regime ended by the reign of Mohammed Nadjibullah (1987-1992), a communist leader and the former head of the Afghan Secret Service. This row of violent conflicts continued by the Afghan civil war (1992-1996), the first reign of the Taleban under Mullah Omar and the continuation of civil war (1996-2001), the NATO-led invasion and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2001-2021), and finally the second reign of the Taleban and the establishment of the second Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (since 2021).

Over the past four decades, Afghanistan has been shaken by persistent mass violence, terrorist attacks, and ongoing fights for dominance and power. While it is impossible to address this topic adequately in such a perspective paper in a Special Issue with a focus on health in Afghanistan, it is important to acknowledge the *significant direct and indirect consequences* of this violent history on the health of the Afghan population. The most significant impact of these conflicts has been the loss of human life in the wars, civil wars, and uprisings. The estimated number of casualties during the Soviet-Afghan War between 1979 and 1989 differs strongly, but it is widely believed that there have been at least one million Afghan civilians killed, with an additional five to six million becoming refugees or internally displaced persons (Reuveny and Prakash, 1999; Collins, 2011; Aprill, 2017; Samimy, 2017). During the three years of the Nadjibullah regime following the Soviet-Afghan War, it is estimated that between 60,000 to 100,000 civilians were killed in the struggle for power (Parenti, 2012).

After the Mujahidin took over the city of Kabul in 1992, the so-called *Battle for Kabul* began almost immediately. From 1992 to 1996, 1.5 million of the city's 2 million inhabitants of Kabul fled, with 500,000 leaving in the first four weeks of the battle. As a result, one-third to half of the capital was destroyed. Estimates of civilian casualties during the Afghan civil war in this period vary from 35,000 (Samimy, 2017) to 80,000 (Schetter, 2004). In 1994, the Taleban entered the scene of the Afghan civil war and rapidly took control of Kandahar (1994). They continued their conquest by capturing Herat in 1995 and finally Kabul in 1996. From 1996 to 2001, they established the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and gained notoriety for implementing gender apartheid (Rashid, 2010). There are no reliable estimates of civilian casualties during the first reign of the Taleban. However, the United Nations has documented fifteen massacres committed by the Taleban alone (Gargan, 2001). The Taleban's atrocities were particularly directed towards Afghanistan's Hazara minority (Hakimi, 2023). From 2001 to 2021, an estimated 176,000 war-related deaths have been reported in Afghanistan during the period of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the NATO-led

campaign, with some estimates being much higher (Watson Institute, 2023a); against this background it is particularly ashaming for several countries that were part of the NATO-led coalition ISAF that in the national lessons learned-discourses predominantly the comparatively very small numbers of casualties of the NATO-country were mentioned while the casualties among the Afghan population is hardly a subject.

Beyond direct victims of wars and civil wars, landmines and remnants of war cause another direct impact on the health of the Afghan population. Afghanistan remains one of the most affected countries by landmines. Between 1979 and 2019, over 33,000 Afghans were counted as mine victims, with over 9,000 fatalities (International Campaign to Ban Landmines, 2023). In the last decade, there have been approximately 1,000 landmine victims each year. In 2022, the official number of land mine victims decreased from 1,071 in 2021 to 303 in 2022, primarily due to reduced monitoring (International Campaign to Ban Landmines, 2023). In 2019, Alberto Cairo, the head of the International Committee of the Red Cross rehabilitation program, estimated that around 200,000 Afghans need prosthetic limbs, and an estimated 750,000 are threatened by land mines and unexploded remnants (ICRC, 2019). The data on these topics is often contradictory.

Besides victims of landmines and remnants of war and more, Afghanistan has one of the highest per capita populations of persons with disabilities worldwide. More than one in five Afghan households has an adult or child with a serious physical, sensory, intellectual, or psychosocial disability. Over one million Afghans have amputated limbs and other mobility, visual, or hearing disabilities as a result of over 40 years of war (Human Rights Watch, 2020). In 2022, 1.5 million Afghans were living with physical disabilities (Watson Institute, 2023b).

Mental health is another challenging field in Afghanistan due to the high prevalence of psychosocial disabilities, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. These conditions are often a direct result of the protracted conflict (Human Rights Watch, 2020). In addition to family history, according to Kovess-Masfety et al. (2021) report that 64.67% of the Afghan population has personally experienced a minimum of one traumatic event, and 78.48% have witnessed such an event. One of the major challenges to the mental health of the Afghan population is the significant increase in drug consumers and people with addiction over the past two decades. According to the Ministry of Counter Narcotics of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, in 2015, almost every third household was affected by drug use (MCN-IRA 2015). A survey from Herat has affirmed this high number: "more than one-third of participants reported having a drug-using father and one-quarter stated they had an addict sibling, only one-tenth mentioned their mother was a drug addict." (Shayan et al., 2022, p. 75)

Furthermore, other determinants of health directly affect the Afghan population's health conditions. Afghanistan is a country with high levels of poverty and social and health inequalities. The situation for the Afghan population has worsened even more since the Taliban's second takeover of power. In 2022, over 90% of the population faced food insecurity, and about half of the children under the age of five suffered from acute malnutrition (Watson Institute, 2023b). Traditionally, Afghanistan has one of the highest shares of illiterates worldwide (Naumann, 2019; World Bank, 2023). Since the Taleban regained control, access to education has been severely limited, particularly for

girls and women. Considering the importance of education for health, as elaborated in concepts such as health literacy, education limitations are likely to negatively impact on the population's health (Harsch et al. 2021a, b, c). Particularly in rural areas but also in drastically increased informal settlements in Kabul and other big cities, the access to sanitation, clean water, and primary health care is very limited. The rapid and extensive urbanization in Kabul has resulted in the municipality being unable to provide essential services and health-supporting infrastructure for all residents (Hakimzai et al., 2023).

These statistics indicate that almost every family in Afghanistan has been affected by the loss of relatives, personal or familial disabilities, poverty and scarcity of resources, displacement, or forced abandonment of their homes over the past four decades. This should be considered a significant health burden of the Afghan population and used as a framework for organizing the results of epidemiological studies with more specific research questions. However, this negative portrayal of Afghanistan must be corrected in two respects – in terms of available data and data quality and in terms of issues that contradict this one-dimensional picture that has been drawn so far.

Data quality

Before the Taleban seizing power in August 2021, the data quality was often very poor. Even data presented by reputable organizations such as the WHO, UNESCO, or World Bank may contain questionable results. One problem is that data on Afghanistan is regularly based on the extrapolation from urban surveys. Conducting representative surveys in Afghanistan is highly complex and costly, posing significant health monitoring challenges. Data for rural and remote areas is often non-existent. Afghanistan has large regions that are inaccessible for months due to harsh weather conditions. The high illiteracy rate also makes data collection through questionnaires, mail, or email difficult. Moreover, informal settlements in large towns, particularly in Kabul, have increased dramatically. People living in informal settlements are rarely included in quantitative public health and social science research. The challenge of delivering valid data also applies to Kucchi-nomads or semi-nomads, estimated to be between one and two million people. Last but not least, it is even difficult to estimate the number the current population of Afghanistan. Keeping track of (re-)immigration to and emigration from Afghanistan is a challenging task, especially given the recent influx of approximately 700,000 to one million Afghans who were forced to return from Iran and Pakistan (Noor Nasar, 2023; Curtis, 2023). All these factors must be considered when dealing with statistics related to public health, medicine, education, or economy.

Following the second takeover by the Taleban, the availability of data, at least for Western researchers, worsened. First, the data quality decreased as it did not seem to be a top priority for the new leaders. This is particularly significant for public health and medical data due to the remarkable brain drain of academics from Afghanistan. An estimated fifty percent (!) of the lecturers from Kabul University alone fled from Afghanistan to Western countries (Dawi, 2023). The significant brain drain from Afghanistan is recognized as a problem, even by the Taliban. In May 2023, Amir Khan Muttaqi, Afghanistan's acting foreign minister since September 7, 2021, declared in Islamabad that the Taliban had called on Western countries to stop evacuating and resettling educated and skilled Afghans abroad because this practice was harming Afghanistan (Dawi, 2023). As

a result, health monitoring has become even more fragmented than before. Due to poor data quality, reports or research on Afghanistan, both before and especially after August 2021, may lack objectivity and should be interpreted with caution.

Contradictions

Next to poor data quality, some issues contradict a one-dimensional, homogenous picture of Afghanistan. A study about health literacy and well-being in remote areas in central Afghanistan (Harsch et al., 2021b) found that the average level of health literacy was very poor, even compared to other Asian countries of the Global South. Second, a considerable number of illiterates reported having moderate health literacy. This indicates that the direct relationship between health, health literacy, and education appears to be not complex enough, at least in Global South countries (Bittlingmayer et al., 2023). Third, although research in this area is limited, some Afghans report having adequate health literacy even without formal education and educational degrees. Results show that in Afghanistan's remote areas, people have higher health literacy and quality of life even without formal schooling (Harsch et al. 2021a, c). This suggests that in the Afghan context, health and health literacy are not solely dependent on formal education but also on other factors such as the availability of health services, material goods, health-related skills within the family, and perceived safety and trust in neighbors.

Although there is limited social science research in Afghanistan and no existing socio-economic database, exploratory research on Afghans' perceived quality of life shows that the self-reported quality of life does not simply mirror poor socio-economic conditions. Particularly in the social dimensions of quality of life, the values of Afghans living in rural areas in central Afghanistan and informal settlements in Kabul were surprisingly high (Shahraki et al., 2020; Harsch et al., 2021a). Without neglecting the harsh living conditions for most of the Afghan population, these results suggest that the common perception of Afghanistan as a country where the majority of the people are simply suffering may not be entirely accurate, we need a more complex story here (Adichie, 2020). The following section will briefly give an overview of health and healthcare in Afghanistan using key indicators in order to produce a kind of a baseline for evaluating the success in the health sector after August 2021.

The development of health and the health care system in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021

Significant progress has been made in the Afghan health sector since the fall of the first Taliban regime in 2001 until the withdrawal of the NATO-led military forces in 2021. Not only the Afghan Ministry of Public Health but also foreign GOs like USAID or the German GIZ or (more or less) independent NGOs such as the Aga Khan Foundation, the International Federation of Red Cross and Crescent Societies, and Care for Afghan Families (which plays a crucial role in local health service supply), along with the World Health Organization, Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, regularly publish reports showing continuous progress in a wide range of health outcomes (Aga Khan Foundation Afghanistan, 2015; NSIA, 2019; WHO EMRO, 2015, 2020, 2021).

To document this positive development, the most significant indicator is general life expectancy. Afghanistan's remarkable increase in life expectancy is due to several positive developments. Advances in healthcare between 2001 and 2021 have led to a sharp reduction in outcomes such as maternal mortality and infant mortality. For instance, the maternal mortality rate has decreased by over 50%, from 1,450 deaths per 100,000 live births in the year 2000 to 638 deaths in 2017 (Salehi and Akseer, 2020). Similarly, infant mortality has significantly decreased, having the greatest impact on increasing life expectancy. Infant mortality dropped from 96 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2000 to 47 deaths in 2020, and even lower at 41, according to the former government (Central Statistics Organization, Ministry of Public Health and ICF, 2017). As a result, life expectancy increased from 55 years in 2000 to 63.2 years in 2019 (WHO 2023).[1]

Between 2001 and 2021, the former government implemented a remarkable reform in the healthcare sector with the support of many donors, and governmental and non-governmental organizations. The healthcare system was designed to reflect the country's topographical characteristics and cultural attitudes, particularly in the remote areas where people may prefer seeking help in the village rather than going to a physician (Sahrai, 2018). A health system with multiple facets and levels has been designed to start at the local level, acknowledging that approximately 75% of Afghans reside in rural areas that are frequently inaccessible (refer to Box 1 and Figure 1 below).

Box 1: Afghanistan's Health System Pyramid (Salehi and Akseer, 2020, p. 18)

"The HP [Health Post; the authors] is the first point of contact for patients seeking health care services at the community level. The services are delivered by community health workers (CHWs) from their own homes, which function as community HPs. The HP is staffed with one female and one male CHW and covers 100-150 families. The SHC is the next level of contact. It covers a population of 2,000 to 15,000. It is staffed with one male nurse and one community midwife (CMW). The SHC provides some limited basic services to mothers and children including reproductive health services and management of acute respiratory infection and diarrheal diseases. The BHC covers a population of 15,000-30,000 people. The BHC is staffed with a nurse, a midwife, a community health supervisor, and two vaccinators. The BHC provides the same services as a SHC, in addition to covering relatively wider coverage of the population and having fixed and outreach vaccination services. The CHC provides the BHC and additional services including minor and essential surgery as well as comprehensive emergency obstetrics care services. The CHC is staffed with doctors, midwives, nurses, vaccinators, community health supervisor, and lab technicians. Some of the CHCs have up to 10 beds. The DH is staffed with doctors including female obstetricians/gynecologists, a surgeon, an anesthetist, a pediatrician, midwives, lab and X-ray technicians, a pharmacist, and a dentist and dental technician. Each DH covers 100,000-300,000 people."

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[1] It is necessary to note that even within the different publications of the WHO the values for life expectancy differ very much (cf. for instance WHO, 2023 and WHO EMRO, 2022); additionally, as mentioned above, it is risky to calculate average life expectancy when even the denominator of the whole population is speculative. Last but not least, and to be fair it should be mentioned that the increasement of life expectancy in Afghanistan was also visible during the first reign of the Taleban between 1996 and 2001.
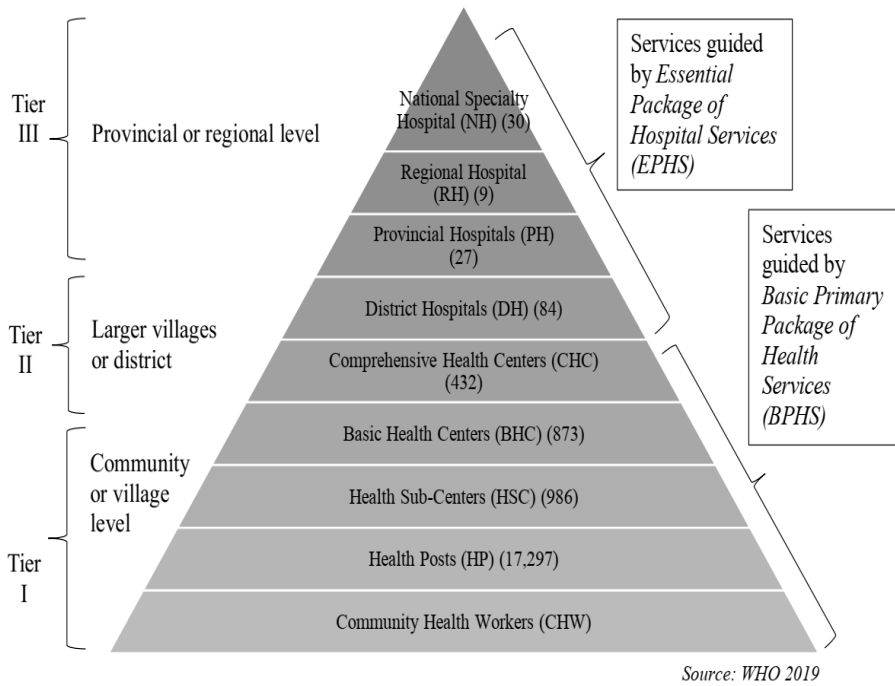
Figure 1: Afghanistan's 3-Tiered Health System, 2019

This health care system is designed to take into consideration that Afghanistan has one of the least levels of urbanization worldwide. As a result, many Afghan people living in remote areas are located hours away from the nearest health center or hospital (Harsch et al., 2021b). Additionally, a health care system was barely in place in Afghanistan in the 1990s. To illustrate these specific topographic conditions, it is worth considering the common definitions of healthcare access. By definition, having access to health care in Afghanistan is "measured by the share of population for whom treatment of common diseases and injuries, including essential drugs on the national list, is available within one hour's walk or travel." (NSIA, 2019, p. 256) or even two hours (USAID, 2022). According to USAID, 87% of the Afghan population has access to minimal primary or secondary care within two hours, while at the beginning of the first decade of the 21st century, only 8% had access to healthcare (USAID, 2022; Salehi and Akseer, 2020). Obviously, there has been significant progress in the access to health care for the Afghan population but there are still strong challenges, particularly with regard to informal settlements.

Final Remarks

In this paper we intended to highlight the difficult legacy for establishing a healthy Afghanistan. If we assume for a moment that those currently in power in Afghanistan also have an interest in a healthy population, then this paper intends to show how challenging this task is. The above-mentioned health burdening legacy needs to be addressed openly, topics like mental health,

disabilities, and the fight against poverty should be of highest priority. It is an open question whether the restructuring of the healthcare sector, which began under the NATO alliance, will be continued or whether it will come to a standstill. It will also be necessary to observe the extent to which the Taleban's health and social policies themselves contribute to health burdens, for example for the mental health of women or for members of non-Pashtun minorities. However, it needs to be mentioned that the Taleban could hardly be made responsible for disasters produced continuously in the last four decades. But since they are in charge now it is their duty to produce a healthy Afghanistan. That is - in our view - a yardstick by which the Taleban must be measured.

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Chapter 13

Depression among Female School Students after the Collapse of the Afghan Government in 2021

Shafiqa Farzam

On a global scale, approximately 20% of adolescents encounter various mental disorders during their teenage years, with depression being the most prevalent of these conditions. Depression is a prevalent mental health condition, characterized by persistent feelings of sadness and loss of interest. Associated symptoms include fatigue, poor concentration, and disrupted sleep and appetite.

Introduction

Adolescence is widely regarded as a pivotal period for both personal development and social integration. However, the presence of mental illnesses, particularly depression, during this critical phase of development has been demonstrated to exert a detrimental influence on future decision-making (Ringeisen et al., 2002; quoted in Chekal et al., 2023). On a global scale, approximately 20% of adolescents encounter various mental disorders during their teenage years, with depression being the most prevalent of these conditions (WHO, 2012). According to the World Health Organization's age classification, individuals between the ages of 10 and 19 are designated as adolescents (Barua et al., 2020; quoted from Chekal et al., 2023). Research findings indicate that depressive disorders typically manifest at a younger age, with a prevalence ranging from 1 to 5% among adolescents worldwide (Sandal et al., 2017; quoted from Chekal et al., 2023). Depression manifests differently in both males and females between the ages of 13 and 15 upon entering their teenage years.

Depression is a prevalent mental health condition, characterized by persistent feelings of sadness and loss of interest. Associated symptoms include fatigue, poor concentration, and disrupted sleep and appetite (Hankin et al., 1998; WHO, 2022). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental disorders and depression are among the four most significant global health challenges (Safiri et al., 2013). The WHO further reports that approximately 5% of adults worldwide are affected by depression. This figure has been increasing over the past three decades (Razjouvan et al., 2022). A recent report by the World Health Organization (WHO) found that approximately two million people in Afghanistan suffer from mental disorders, with depression being the most prevalent condition (WHO, 2022; quoted in Neyazi et al., 2023). This increase in depression prevalence over the past three decades is a global phenomenon, affecting 280 million individuals worldwide (WHO, 2023). The consequences of mental disorders can be significant, potentially contributing to violence at family and societal levels. In Afghanistan, violence within families is not limited to interactions between spouses but extends to interactions among other family members. The repercussions of prolonged civil war and conflict in Afghanistan have been profound, with millions of lives lost and millions more compelled to seek refuge in neighboring countries such as Iran and Pakistan. The impact on the mental health of Afghan youth is a salient concern, with the consequences of conflict and war having a significant impact on the overall well-being of the population (Barbury and Hayward, 2013). The World Health Organization (2008) has identified a correlation between exposure to war, displacement, and refugee camps with an increased risk of mental health conditions, including depression, suicide ideation, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and substance abuse.

The Ministry of Public Health has reported that half of the Afghan population aged 15 years or older suffer from at least one of these mental health disorders, respectively: depression, anxiety and posttraumatic stress disorder. In 2019, the Institute of Health Measurement and Evaluation, Global Burden of Disease, reported that 1.44 million people in Afghanistan suffered from depression (Our World in Data, 2019; quoted in Neyazi et al., 2023). A 2021 report highlighted the critical need for mental health support in Afghanistan due to the ongoing political instability and Taliban regime. The report emphasized that, in addition to the prevailing economic, security, and unemployment challenges, women and girls encounter significant barriers in accessing mental healthcare in Afghanistan. For instance, it has been documented that the prohibition of girls

from pursuing education and engaging in gainful employment, coupled with the imposition of restrictions on their freedom of movement, further exacerbates their already vulnerable circumstances (Saleem et al., 2021; quoted in Neyazi et al., 2023). Notably, a cross-sectional study conducted in 2022 revealed that gender exerts a significant influence on the mental health of high school students, with girls demonstrating a higher prevalence of depression and anxiety compared to their male counterparts (Neyazi et al., 2023).

It is evident that women continue to encounter numerous obstacles and challenges in their pursuit of equality. In various regions across the globe, women are deprived of their fundamental rights, including the right to freedom, the right to education, the right to employment, and the right to vote, in addition to subjugation to men within familial settings. This is particularly pronounced in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime, where women's rights are systematically violated and they are subject to inappropriate treatment under the pretext of hijab. Even in societies considered more progressive, women continue to encounter discrimination and inequality in various spheres of life, including the workplace, politics, and their personal lives (Hankin et al., 1998; United Nations, 2010). As highlighted by interviews conducted by the Save the Children Organization, Afghan girls have expressed feelings of disappointment and anger at the loss of their right to education, and have expressed a sense of despair regarding their future prospects due to the loss of the rights and freedoms previously enjoyed. Furthermore, the 2021-2022 World Women's Peace and Security Index (WPSI) has identified Afghanistan as the worst country in the world for women and girls. According to experts in Afghanistan's mental health field, the imposition of restrictions on women's work and education has led to a significant increase in the prevalence of mental illnesses, particularly depression, among women and girls. Furthermore, it has been asserted that this deterioration has resulted in an escalation in the number of suicides among this demographic. A study conducted by Save the Children Organization in 2021 revealed that 26% of girls compared to 16% of boys exhibited symptoms of depression, and 27% of girls compared to 18% of boys displayed symptoms of anxiety (Save the Children, 2022). The study identified restrictions imposed on women, disappointment, poverty, unemployment, forced marriages, and insecurity as the primary factors contributing to the exacerbation of mental illnesses among women.

Another study was conducted at the end of 2022 to investigate mental health and suicide among Afghan university students. The results of this study indicated that 69.7% of students exhibited clinical symptoms of depression following the Taliban takeover in 2021 (Naghavi et al., 2022). A report by the Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan also highlighted that in the post-Taliban era of 2002, the prevalence of depression was reported to be 73% among Afghan women. This study also found that 86% of women had significant anxiety symptoms (CW4WiA, n.d.). Another recent study conducted in 2021 reported that 79.1% of Afghan women were depressed right before the fall of the government to the Taliban (Neyazi et al. 2023). This study was conducted among 664 Afghan women. Of the total participants, 328 (49.4%) were secondary and high school students. Overall, of whom only 83 (25.3%) were classified as "normal", while the remaining 245 (74.69%) were identified as depressed.

To put these numbers in context it is reasonable to compare them with studies from other countries of the Global South. In 2022, a study was conducted among school-aged adolescents in Northwest Ethiopia, encompassing a total of 302

female students. Of these, 91 (29.44%) were diagnosed with depression, while 218 (70.55%) were deemed to be "normal" (Chekol et al., 2023). A study from India was conducted among 838 school-going adolescents in eastern India, with 71.36% of the participants being female. The study found that 34.45% of girls exhibited mild symptoms of depression, 17.39% displayed moderate symptoms, 4.18% showed moderately severe symptoms, and 0.84% presented with severe symptoms. This indicates a total prevalence of 56.86% among girls experiencing depression, while 43.14% did not manifest any symptoms (Bharati et al, 2022).

Even though it is not plausible to compare the studies directly because of different measurements and instruments used for depression diagnosis it is nevertheless significant that the share of persons suffering by depression is extremely high in Afghanistan.

In light of the early onset of mental disorders in adolescents and the significant impact of interventions at this stage, it is imperative to enhance our comprehension of the prevalence of depression among adolescent girls. These findings underscore the necessity for the development of more targeted interventions, thereby facilitating the identification of individuals who are particularly vulnerable.

Objectives

The objective of this study was to ascertain the prevalence of depression among school students in the sixth grade and above in Kabul province.

Research questions

- What is the prevalence of depression?
- How many students have mild, moderate, moderately severe, or severe depression?
- Are they satisfied with the Taliban regime?

Methods

The present study was of an exploratory nature, and data were collected via a combination of in-person and online methods using the PHQ-9 questionnaire (Spitzer et al.). The questionnaire was translated from English into Persian. Nine students from each class were interviewed. Due to the security situation, in coordination with the managers of several educational institutions, the girls were asked to come to a safe place for the interviews.

The questionnaire contained demographic questions and nine main depression questions, as well as two additional questions regarding satisfaction with the Taliban regime and future expectations. Scoring for the PHQ-9 questionnaire is determined by the number of days the patient reports symptoms, with "not at all" equaling a score of 0, "several days" equaling a score of 1, "more than half of the days" equaling a score of 2, and "nearly every day" equaling a score of 3.

Measurements

The data were collected using a pretested, structured questionnaire. The data entry was carried out using Microsoft Excel 2016 and subsequently exported to IBM SPSS V.26 for Microsoft Windows. Logistic regression models were used to examine the association of depression among school students (N = 54).

The following inclusion and exclusion criteria have been established:

- Inclusion criteria:

  - School students above the sixth grade.
  - Only girls are included.
  - Those who want to participate are included.
  - Girls who currently live in Kabul province.

- Exclusion criteria:

  - School students below the sixth grade.
  - Boys are not included.
  - Those who do not want to participate.
  - Girls who live in other provinces except Kabul.
  - Managers, bosses, teachers, and the general population.

Results

This study encompasses female students who have attained the sixth grade and above (see Table 1). Each class is represented by nine students, with the age range of the participants ranging from 13 to 20 years. Among the 54 students, only two have marital status as married, while the remainder are unmarried. A significant proportion, 98.1%, expressed concerns about their future prospects under the Taliban regime. Moreover, 53 students expressed discontent with the Taliban regime, while one student cited her hijab as a factor in her partial satisfaction with the regime.

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of participants

Frequency	Demographic Characteristics	
	N	*%*
Gender: Female	54	100
Age : 13-20	54	100
Marital Status		
Single	52	97.87
Married	2	2.13
Class		
Seven	9	16.66
Eight	9	16.66
Nine	9	16.66
Ten	9	16.66
Eleven	9	16.66
Twelve	9	16.66
Total	54	100

Analysis of prevalence of different types of depression

Table 2 presents the prevalence of different types of depression reported, including the following categories: no depression, mild depression, moderate depression, moderately severe depression, and severe depression. The data indicates that 9 (16.7%) students exhibited no depression, 11 (20.37%) students demonstrated mild depression, 20 (37.03%) students displayed moderate depression, 13 (24.07%) students manifested moderately severe depression, and 1 (1.9%) student manifested severe depression.

Table 2: Distribution of severity of depression among Afghan students

	Prevalence of depression	
Forms of depression	**N**	**%**
Without depression	9	16.63
Mild depression	11	20.37
Moderate depression	20	37.03
Moderately severe depression	13	24.07
Severe depression	1	1.9
Total	54	100

Analysis of the nine major symptoms of depression in the last two weeks

The response to nine primary symptoms of depression was stratified into four categories: "not at all," "several days," "more than half of the day," and "nearly every day." Among the 54 participants in the study, 8 (14.8%) reported no symptoms of sadness or depressed mood (not at all), 28 (51.9%) reported experiencing sadness or depressed mood for several days, 11 (20.4%) reported symptoms for more than half of the days, and 7 (13.0%) reported experiencing depressed or sad mood nearly every day.

Among the 54 students surveyed, 16 (29.6%) reported no loss of interest, 16 (29.6%) indicated a loss of interest in all activities for several days, 9 (16.7%) reported a loss of interest in all activities for more than half of the days, and 13 (24.1%) reported a loss of interest in all activities for nearly every day.

In the previous two weeks, 18 (33.3%) students reported no difficulty sleeping, 23 (42.6%) students experienced difficulty sleeping for several days, 6 (11.1%) students had difficulty sleeping for more than half of the days, and 7 (13.0%) students had difficulty sleeping for nearly every day.

A total of 54 students were surveyed over the course of the past two weeks. Among them, 8 (14.8%) reported no feelings of fatigue or low energy, while 17 (31.5%) reported experiencing fatigue and low energy. For several days, 16 (29.6%) students reported fatigue and low energy, 17 (31.5%) students reported fatigue and low energy for more than half of the days, and 13 (24.1%) students reported fatigue and low energy nearly every day.

Among the 54 students surveyed in the previous two weeks, 9 (16.7%) reported no difficulty concentrating at all, 18 (33.3%) experienced concentration difficulties for several days, 16 (29.6%) encountered concentration challenges for

more than half of the days, and 11 (20.4%) faced concentration difficulties nearly every day.

Among the 54 students surveyed over the past two weeks, 16 (29.6%) reported no sense of worthlessness or failure, 22 (40.7%) indicated that these feelings persisted for several days, 8 (14.8%) noted a continuation of these feelings for more than half of the days, and 8 (14.8%) indicated a daily experience of these emotions.

Furthermore, 25 (46.3%) students reported no alterations in their appetite, 18 (33.3%) students exhibited alterations in appetite for several days, 4 (7.4%) students experienced alterations in appetite for more than half of the days, and 7 (13%) students reported alterations in their appetite nearly every day.

In the sample of 54 students, 25.9% reported being not restless at all, 33.3% exhibited restlessness for several days, 16.7% displayed restlessness for more than half of the days in the past 14 days, and 24.1% manifested restlessness on nearly every day. The highest level was "not at all" (43.5%), and the lowest level was "more than half of the days" (10.9%).

In the sample of 54 students over the past two weeks, 45 (83.3%) reported no suicidal ideation, 2 (3.7%) reported suicidal ideation for several days, 3 (5.6%) reported suicidal ideation for more than half of the days, and 4 (7.4%) reported suicidal ideation nearly every day.

Table 3: Major symptoms of depression

Nine major symptoms of depression	Not at all		Several days		More than half of the days		Nearly every day	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Sadness or depressed mood	8	14.8	28	51.9	11	20.4	7	13.0
Little interest	19	29.6	19	29.6	9	16.7	13	24.1
Sleep disturbance	18	33.3	23	42.6	6	11.1	7	13.0
Fatigue or low of energy	8	14.8	17	31.5	16	29.6	13	24.1
Trouble in concentration	9	16.7	18	33.3	16	29.6	11	20.4
Fleeing worthlessness or failure	16	29.6	22	40.7	8	14.8	8	14.8
Change in appetite	25	46.3	18	33.3	4	7.4	7	13.0
Moving or speaking too slowly or restlessness	14	25.9	18	33.3	9	16.7	13	24.1
Thoughts of death	45	83.3	2	3.7	3	5.6	4	7.4
Total	**54**	**100**	**54**	**100**	**54**	**100**	**54**	**100**

The Relationship between depression and demographic factors

The prevalence of depression was examined in relation to gender, age, and marital status using univariate and multivariate logistic analysis. The results indicated that there was no significant association between depression and gender, age (P = 0.608), or marital status (P = 0.646). (See Table 4).

Table 4: Association analysis of depression and demographic characteristics

	Univariate analysis		Multivariate analysis	
	OR (95%CI)	p-value	OR (95%CI)	p-value
Age				0.608
13-20	1		1	
Marital Status				
Single	1		1	
Married	1.266 (0.619-2.589)	1.000	1.196 (0.556-2.573)	0.646

Discussion

The present study examined the prevalence of depression among a sample of 54 female school students, with results indicating an overall prevalence of 83.32%. The sample was categorized as follows: 9 (16.63%) students were classified as non-depressed, 11 (20.37%) as mildly depressed, 20 (37.03%) as moderately depressed, 13 (24.07%) as moderately severely depressed, and 1 (1.85%) as severely depressed. This finding is considerably higher than the prevalence of depression reported in northwest Ethiopia, India, and research by the Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan in the post-Taliban era (2002) and in Afghanistan. However, the prevalence of depression in this study is almost consistent with the prevalence of depression among Afghan female school students and Afghan women reported in Afghanistan. The study found no statistically significant correlation between depression and age, a finding that contrasts with research conducted in India and northwest Ethiopia. However, it aligns with findings from Kabul. The investigation further revealed no significant association between marital status and depression. The study's findings are consistent with those reported from Afghanistan, India, and northwest Ethiopia. The current study documented an 83.32% prevalence of depression among students, a figure that exceeds the 75% prevalence reported in the Afghanistan study. The higher prevalence in the current study may be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the study was conducted during the Taliban regime, a period characterized by restrictions on women's education and employment, which could have influenced the findings. Secondly, the small sample size may have compromised the study's statistical power, leading to an underestimation of depression prevalence. Thirdly, the security and economic conditions in the region during the study period may have contributed to the observed outcomes. The aforementioned challenges, including the perception of a bleak future and the restriction of education by the Taliban, have the potential to adversely impact students' mental well-being, manifesting in symptoms such as stress, anxiety, and depression.

The following limitations were identified during the data collection process:

- The timing of the data collection period was suboptimal due to the winter season and the prevailing security situation.
- The school calendar was not conducive to the scheduling of interviews with female subjects due to their absence during the period of data collection.
- The Taliban regime posed a significant challenge to the research process.

Recommendations

The ongoing conflict in Afghanistan has led to a significant deterioration in access to mental healthcare services. The withdrawal of financial support from international donors has exacerbated the already fragile health system, which is heavily reliant on external assistance. This has resulted in a critical shortage of essential medicines and medical supplies, as well as a months-long delay in health professional salaries, leading many to abandon their medical duties to support their families. Consequently, the delivery of even fundamental healthcare services is imperiled, with mental healthcare services frequently becoming the first to be compromised.

Despite the prevalence of mental health challenges among the Afghan population, the topic remains heavily stigmatized due to a multitude of cultural, religious, socioeconomic, and environmental factors. The ongoing challenges posed by the de facto Taliban government, including the nation's deteriorating economy and pervasive poverty, have further compounded the situation. Afghanistan is confronted with significant obstacles in addressing mental health concerns. The necessity for additional mental health professionals, including psychiatrists, psychiatric nurses, psychosocial counselors, and social workers, remains paramount to enhance accessibility to services for individuals grappling with mental health challenges. The inadequate financial support for mental health and psychosocial interventions, the escalating rates of alcohol and drug abuse among the youth, the limited monitoring of services, and the suboptimal community mental health awareness collectively impede the capacity to access treatment.

- The Taliban must eliminate restrictions on girls' and women's education and employment.
- All nations should not acknowledge the Taliban regime.
- The Taliban must ensure access to employment and education for all Afghan women and men.
- Women and girls must be granted the same freedom as in the past.
- The Taliban must treat girls and women with respect.

Conclusion

The collapse of the former Afghan government in 2021, precipitated by the Taliban's rise to power, has resulted in the immediate curtailment of girls' and women's fundamental rights. This has manifested in the form of an array of restrictions, including the denial of access to education, employment, justice, essential services, opportunities, and the freedom to move about their own country.

Some years after the collapse of the Afghan government, the nation faced an economic crisis, widespread insecurity, high unemployment, a crippling drought, the closure of schools, and new restrictions on girls and women imposed by the Taliban. These developments have had a devastating impact on the lives of girls, leaving them isolated and malnourished.

Since the Taliban seized power in 2021, the nation has witnessed an alarming decline in human development, affecting both girls and women as well as men. The socio-economic challenges, including poverty, hunger, insecurity, and joblessness, have severely impacted the Afghan populace. Compounding these issues are the restrictions imposed on women's and girls' access to employment and education. The Taliban's rise to power has further exacerbated the situation, leading to an increase in early marriages, joblessness, and poverty. It has been observed that some men have resorted to exchanging their daughters for monetary compensation. The confluence of restrictions on girls' employment and education, compounded by joblessness and poverty, has precipitated a surge in depression. Moreover, the scarcity of employment and economic hardship has escalated anxiety and depression among the populace. Some girls have resorted to suicide due to the constraints imposed by the Taliban regime. In my interviews with female students, a pervasive sense of discontent with the Taliban regime was expressed. Some girls have even expressed suicidal thoughts due to the absence of a future outlook. It is imperative to recognize that, should this situation persist in Afghanistan, the nation will face unprecedented challenges and adversity. The prevalence of depression, anxiety, and suicide among girls is a matter of grave concern, and it is anticipated that these conditions will continue to worsen. It is my earnest hope that the Taliban will adopt a more equitable stance and demonstrate a deeper understanding of humanistic values.

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Chapter 14

Afghan Women's Access to Public Health: Today's Limitations and Tomorrow's Concern

Sima Gul Haidari & Nasrullah Shojaee

This paper examines the significant challenges Afghan women face in accessing healthcare under the Taliban regime. The Taliban's return to power in 2021 prompted a wave of restrictions on women's mobility and access to education, significantly impacting the availability of healthcare services and prompting a mass exodus of female healthcare professionals. In comparison to the Taliban's previous rule (1996-2001), which was marked by public health neglect, the renewed limitations imposed in 2024 paint a disheartening picture of regression. This study employs a mixed-method approach to elucidate the critical shortage of healthcare personnel and the escalating humanitarian crisis fueled by the recent regime change. The immediate consequences of these developments are a curtailment of educational and employment opportunities, as well as a decline in mental well-being. The long-term outlook for Afghan women remains uncertain, dependent on the evolution of Taliban policies, international intervention, and the resilience of local communities. This paper underscores the urgent need for sustained efforts to advance gender equality, ensure healthcare accessibility, and prioritize the overall well-being of Afghan women.

Keywords: Afghan women, Taliban, health system, international organizations, public health.

Introduction

Afghan women have historically encountered obstacles in accessing public health services, a situation that is shaped by a complex array of factors. These include the impact of armed conflict, pervasive poverty, geographic isolation, and deeply entrenched cultural norms. These challenges have been further compounded by the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, which has resulted in the destruction of healthcare infrastructure and the displacement of millions of individuals. Since the Taliban assumed control in August 2021, the circumstances for Afghan women have become increasingly tenuous. The Taliban have imposed a series of limitations on women's autonomy and access to education, which has created significant obstacles for them in reaching health clinics and hospitals (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2022). Furthermore, a considerable number of female healthcare professionals have been compelled to relinquish their positions, thereby exacerbating the dearth of available care. Such parallels prompt a comprehensive examination of Afghan women's access to healthcare during the two periods of Taliban rule and the intervening period. The objective of this paper is to undertake such a study.

This paper presents a concise overview of Afghan women's access to public health during the initial period of Taliban rule (1996-2001), the country's former republic (2001-2021), and the subsequent period of Taliban rule (2021-present). However, the primary focus of this paper is on the current period of Taliban rule, largely due to the urgent challenges and necessary policies that have emerged.

The paper employs a mixed-methods approach to data collection, encompassing qualitative interviews with eleven female participants, semi-structured interviews with health workers and doctors in Kabul and Pakistan, and data derived from news articles and other publications. The objective is to provide readers with a comprehensive understanding of the actual circumstances faced by Afghan female workers in Afghanistan, a country with a robust historical legacy but an uncertain future.

This study demonstrates that the immediate consequences of Taliban policies are profoundly detrimental, impeding women's access to education, employment, and healthcare, thereby exacerbating the psychological burden of violence and fear. It is not merely an urgent necessity, but a moral imperative, for international actors to take immediate action to address the pressing problems and solve the issues at hand.

An historical overview of Afghan women's access to health

This section offers a concise examination of the accessibility of healthcare for Afghan women under three distinct political regimes: the Taliban (1996-2001), the country's former republic (2001-2021), and the ongoing Taliban rule (2021-present).

The first rule of the Taliban (1996-2001)

When the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in 1996, they imposed many restrictions, particularly on women and ethnic groups. The first victims of these extreme measures were women and children, affecting their ability to receive health care and education. During this period, women had limited access to

health care. Notably, even Mullah Omar's mother faced challenges, underscoring the deteriorating conditions for Afghan women.

Once, Dr. Wardak saw a jeep in the parking lot of the military hospital in Kandahar with a rather pathetic-looking burka-clad heap on the back seat. Then his phone rang. It was Mullah Omar. 'That's my mother,' he said. 'You can't look at her, but you need to help her.' Ill as she was, Omar forbade perhaps the one man who could cure her to touch his mother. Dr. Wardak claims he obeyed these orders. He spoke to Mullah Omar's mother and prescribed drugs based on that conversation, after which the jeep left (Dam, 2021).

One of the group's first actions was to impose draconian rules on women and girls, including their access to health care. As documented by Jain et al. (2021), they showed little interest in public health in Afghanistan. In 1996, they banned all female patients from all 22 hospitals in Kabul and transferred them to very poorly equipped facilities that resulted in the world's highest and most shocking maternal mortality rate (1,450 deaths per 100,000) in 2000.

The former republic (2001-2021)

The regime change following the international intervention in 2001 led to consequential changes for women's rights, including the right to access health care. As part of the generous international assistance provided to Afghanistan, foreign aid has been allocated to the country's health system through both on- and off-budget mechanisms. Under both Hamid Karzai and Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, Afghan women's participation in various sectors, particularly health and education, had also gained some visibility. Despite continued insecurity over the past 15 years, Afghanistan has made significant progress in providing health services to its citizens, which can be cited as an example of progress in maternal and child health. The extension of health services to the remotest parts of the country has been the result of an innovative partnership between government and non-government institutions. (World Bank, 2018)

General restrictions on women under the Taliban (2021- present)

At this moment, Afghanistan stands out as one of the most difficult places in the world for women to assert their identity. The Taliban's misogynistic policies have deeply affected the lives of Afghan women. Girls are only allowed to go to school up to the sixth grade, and women can barely work in public offices or are restricted in some way. Women are not allowed to travel alone and, shockingly, in some areas, women are not even allowed to visit their doctors without a male chaperone (known as a Mahram) or they are not allowed to visit male doctors (Rasikh & Sharkey, 2023).

In addition, there are signs of intersectional discrimination against certain groups of women - as indicated by the new turn in the Taliban's extremist policies. The Taliban have arrested a number of Hazara and Tajik women from areas where these ethnic groups predominate, on the pretext of not observing the hijab imposed by the group. According to several reports, the girls were subjected to violence, including torture and beatings, when they were arrested for violating the Taliban's dress code by wearing white shoes and cowboy pants. (Behnia, 2024).

Restrictions on women's access to public health (2021-present)

However, it would be impossible to imagine the Taliban without restrictions on women, but in many cases they have applied these restrictions by using their guns or torture or detention for some days or longer. But our interviewees we talked to also narrate the dire effects of Taliban's policies. The Taliban have imposed stricter restrictions on women, even to the extent that women's privacy is not left or is severely compromised. Restrictions on the use of pregnancy medication to excuses such as hijab and other cases are clear examples of this unfortunate situation of Afghan women under the Taliban regime.

The interviewee indicates that it has been many times that they have faced the high restrictions of the Taliban when they wanted to visit their female doctors in Kabul and other provinces of Afghanistan. And another interviewee Rokhsana, mother of two children adds that her last try to visit her doctor has been unsuccessful due the masculinity of her doctor. Now she tries to find a female doctor near the area where she can visit her doctor without her husband or in another interpretation "Mahram" while her husband has been away abroad for many years.

Fatimah, a young woman, who does not want to say that she has been checked once by Taliban officers when she got some medication whether she has bought condoms or other preventative medicine (Personal interview).

The Taliban leadership in Afghanistan has reportedly banned young women from taking university entrance exams in several subjects. According to one student, the Islamic extremist group has declared numerous subjects "too difficult for women. Several female students said that they and their peers were denied the opportunity to take exams in fields such as engineering, economics, veterinary medicine, agriculture, geology, and journalism (Mokhtar, 2022). Moreover, in 2024, the Taliban again banned the female doctors from taking the medical exit exam and applied a very high restriction on the rest of the female doctors. Although they announced that the exit exam for female students will take place soon, they have not yet mentioned the specific date for the exams. However, female health experts believe that the Taliban are trying to promise an unclear future for female doctors and medical activists, which is not guaranteed (Etilaatroz, 2023). Even though female students have not given up, they are trying to find some internships in secret, which cannot help them to overcome this restriction. But on the other hand, two female medical students were trying to take the last exam of their degree not for the official grade just so that they could do it, even they have persuaded the professor, but on the day of the exam Taliban armed with guns were already guarding the doors (Carrier, 2023). Rina Amiri, the U.S. special envoy for Afghan women's issues, stated that the crisis in Afghanistan's health care system stems from the radical policies implemented by the Taliban. Amiri stressed that Afghanistan faces a shortage of both nurses and doctors (TOLOnews, 2024).

Under the Taliban regime, child marriage, forced marriage, and child labor increased significantly. In most cases, a teenage girl is given away or forced to marry a man twice her age. In addition, many Afghan girls as young as 10-12 are forced to marry to pay off family debts, a practice that has worsened since the Taliban's return to power. While public ignorance plays a role, this tragedy stems primarily from poverty, a lack of jobs, and a deeply ingrained view of girls and women as commodities.

"Relatives came to their aid, paying off $1,100 of the medical bills. But that money was given as a loan, and now that Raihana's family cannot repay the loan, the relatives have asked for her to be married to her cousin as an alternative form of repayment. The groom's family will discount the debt from the dowry of $6,000 they will pay Raihana's family. Shaima hopes they will find the money to repay the loan in time to cancel the engagement" (Freedom United, 2022).

UNICEF (2021) estimates that 28 per cent of Afghan women aged 15–49 years were married before the age of 18. In addition, widespread poverty has led many Afghan children to endure harsh conditions and turn to work and life on the streets as a means of survival. The prevalence of child labor poses a significant challenge to nations with fragile and unstable economic structures, and Afghanistan is no different. Sadly, this issue has shown no improvement under both past and present governments. Interviews with these children reveal that they are the sole breadwinners for their families.

Upon the Taliban's return to power, they reinstated policies enforcing gender segregation in workplaces, universities, schools, and public places such as restaurants. Through the use of violence, they have increased these restrictions on Afghan girls and women. In addition, the Taliban instituted the practice of segregating services for men and women on separate days and extended these measures to most government offices.

The Taliban's imposition of a rule prohibiting women from traveling without a male relative has created numerous challenges for unmarried women, especially those pursuing education. Women are prohibited from traveling without a sharia Mahram, and failure to comply with this rule can lead to interrogation by the Taliban. The Taliban has recently instructed travel agencies not to offer air tickets to unaccompanied women who require the presence of a Mahram. In addition, Kabul airport officials have been instructed to prevent women from traveling without a Maharram. This directive from the Taliban has been formalized by travel companies on behalf of the general management of the Ariana Afghan Airlines (Rukhshana Media, 2021).

Shafiqa, a female obstetrician said: "Recent restriction of Taliban was the only reason I left Kabul and we have faced many challenges especially when I was looking to find a man who could accept to be my Mahram to get out from Afghanistan in January 2023".

Other factors appear to be exacerbating Afghan women's access to public health are the Taliban government's low budget for public health services and rising poverty rates. The lack of clarity surrounding the national budget for the health sector under the Taliban regime is a major concern. While the amount allocated for health in 2019 was 14.5 billion Afghanis (which included spending on countering COVID-19), the budget for 2023 is unknown. This makes it difficult to plan and deliver essential health services to the Afghan population.

Poverty and unemployment are major obstacles that place Afghan women in a difficult situation of constant hardship. Currently, 49.9% of Afghans live below the national poverty line. In addition, the Afghan economy is expected to remain in a state of minimal growth this year, facing uncertainties after a 25% contraction since August 2021 and adjusting to significantly reduced demand (World Bank, 2023). The revised Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan for 2023 estimates that 28.8 million people in Afghanistan are in need of immediate humanitarian assistance, up from 18.4 million before the Taliban takeover (UNOCHA, 2023).

A World Bank report paints a particularly bleak picture of growing poverty in Afghanistan, revealing a startling change in Afghan households from June 2022 to June 2023. According to the findings, the majority of Afghan households have experienced a decline in the quality of their food. In addition, many families have had to reduce the frequency of their meals and have resorted to borrowing food or money to purchase basic food items. This summary underscores that these factors are contributing to a decline in the number of children in Afghan households. (World Bank, 2023)

The immediate impacts of the Taliban's restrictions

Regrettably, the severe restrictions imposed by the Taliban on Afghan women and girls have had numerous negative consequences that have surprised everyone but the Taliban leaders. Critical issues such as education, employment, health care, public participation, and psychological well-being are currently the most pressing issues facing Afghan women in the country.

Recent reports indicate that referrals of female patients have decreased significantly due to Taliban restrictions, such as gender segregation of medical staff. Under these restrictions, pregnant women and girls face significant challenges in accessing prenatal and maternal care, potentially affecting their health outcomes. In addition, mental health and psychological effects are the most devastating situations facing Afghan women and girls today. The loss of educational and professional opportunities can lead to feelings of hopelessness and diminished self-worth. Although, this situation became more horrible by adding fear, anxiety, depression, social isolation and limited movement which can affect the mental well-being of Afghan women and girls or it has even led to the suicide of some Afghan girls and women under the Taliban regime (Human Rights Watch, 2024; UN Women, 2025). The torture, and even murder of some Afghan girls and women by the Taliban is another direct factor that has made conditions unbearable for this significant segment of Afghan society (UNAMA, 2023).

Many female doctors and health workers have either emigrated or stopped working due to increased restrictions and prevailing patriarchal norms. This has led to a critical shortage of health workers, especially women, and contributed to a worsening humanitarian crisis in the country. In addition, the financial strain of losing their jobs has forced them to seek alternative means of income.

The shackling of Afghan women's labor cripples their economies and communities. Education, health care, and countless industries depend on their vital contributions. These restrictions not only threaten their jobs, but also snowball into widespread unemployment, especially among women. This economic domino effect devastates individual families and triggers broader social and economic turmoil. It's a stark reminder that when women are excluded from the workforce, the well-being of families and societies suffers.

The ban on education for girls and the gender segregation of universities have severely limited women's access to higher education. In addition, female teachers and lecturers are not allowed to teach boys. These current Taliban restrictions have led to widespread job loss among women and girls, affecting various sectors, including private businesses such as beauty salons, and especially the government and public sectors. Restrictions on movement and dress further

complicate matters, making it difficult for women and girls to reach their workplaces or pursue certain professions (International Crisis Group, 2023).

As today's situation is reminiscent of tomorrow's, the situation of Afghan women and girls under the Taliban is very difficult and uncertain. These restrictions have had a devastating impact on the lives of Afghan women and girls. They have limited their access to education, employment and health care. They have also made them more vulnerable to violence and abuse. The long-term outlook for Afghan women and girls is unclear. It will depend on several factors, including the policies of the Taliban and the actions of the international community, and will require the resistance and protest of Afghan men and women against the existing situation. On the other hand, if the current restrictions on Afghan women and girls continue in the long term, it will result in a significant absence in both the professional and social spheres. This scenario is likely to plunge Afghanistan back into a shortage of skilled female labor.

Conclusion

Four decades of war, poverty, and cultural barriers have overshadowed Afghan women's access to health care. The return of the Taliban in 2021 plunged them deeper into darkness. Restrictions on movement, education, and female health workers slammed the doors on health services, while a mass exodus of women in the field created a gaping void. During the Taliban's 1996-2001 rule, public health was disregarded, leading to skyrocketing maternal mortality rates. Now, the ban on female doctors and other restrictions signal a chilling return to that era.

The recent regime change has swept away health workers and left a humanitarian crisis in its wake. The immediate impact is devastatingly limited access to education, jobs, and health care, compounding the psychological toll of violence and fear. Addressing these issues is not only an urgent need, but a moral imperative. As a result, the future of Afghan women hangs in the balance. Taliban policies, international action, and the resilience of Afghan communities will determine their fate. Continued restrictions threaten to erase their progress and create a void in the professional and social spheres. Their future, and the future of Afghanistan, lies in achieving sustainable gender equality, accessible health care, and overall well-being.

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Chapter 15

Prevalence of Anemia among Pregnant Women in Afghanistan

Ahmad Shauib Shekib

Anemia is one of the most common health and nutrition problems in the world today. Anemia in pregnant women is specifically severe as it leads to dangerous complications such as low-birth-weight babies, premature births and miscarriages. This study was conducted in order to determine the level of anemia and identify some factors related to it in pregnant women referred to Mola Ali Hospital in Kabul. This research found that 40.3 percent of women were anemic, and the majority of cases were women who did not have a proper diet of fruits and vegetables. These women did not use anemia tablets during pregnancy. The most common factors related to anemia are the number of pregnancies, husband's occupation, number of children, type of previous delivery, mother's age at the first pregnancy and the family's medical history. The prevalence of anemia in Afghanistan is comparable to that in other countries, and it is an urgent issue that needs to be addressed. It is necessary to pay special attention to prevention programs that recommend iron tablets especially during pregnancy, to reduce the amount of anemia.

Keywords: *level of hemoglobin, anemia, and pregnant women*

Introduction

Anemia, particularly iron deficiency anemia, is a prevalent condition among pregnant women (World Health Organization, 2023). The recognition of anemia and the implementation of measures for early diagnosis and prompt treatment can play a pivotal role in averting anemia complications. While anemia affects all women and girls, its consequences are more severe during pregnancy. Women-centeredness is recognized as a fundamental aspect of ensuring the health of the family (Gregory et al., 2025), contributing to the economic and social cycle of the nation (Wang et al., 2025). Consequently, their health is considered a valuable asset for the maintenance of a healthy society. It is imperative to take necessary measures to address any illness that limits their health. This includes the issue of anemia, which endangers the health of both the mother and the child, significantly restricting their lives.

This section will provide a comprehensive analysis of the issue of anemia, highlighting its implications for maternal and child health and outlining the necessary measures to address it. The consequences of failing to prioritize the health of pregnant women is manifold, including an increased incidence of premature births and a heightened mortality rate among newborns. This study, drawing upon a paucity of research on the subject of anemia in Afghanistan, seeks to raise awareness among women and provide more precise information on the subject.

Anemia represents a significant public health concern, particularly in developing countries (Karami et al., 2022). Women, notably those of reproductive age, constitute a vulnerable demographic for this condition. Approximately one-fourth of the global population is affected by anemia, with nutritional deficiencies being a primary contributing factor(Owais et al., 2021). It is estimated that 350 million women and 50% of children in developing countries are anemic (Gardner & Kaqssebaum, 2020; Gardner et al., 2023). The present study focuses on the prevalence of anemia in the first trimester of pregnancy, with the objective of determining the proportion of pregnant women experiencing anemia. The World Health Organization (2023) defines anemia in the first trimester as a condition in which the amount of hemoglobin in the blood is less than 11 grams per 100 cc of blood. The prevalence of this problem in developed countries is 18 per cent, while in developing countries it ranges from 35 to 75 per cent.

A paucity of studies has been observed with respect to the level of anemia in Afghanistan, as well as the socioeconomic factors and causes associated with this condition. Consequently, an effort has been made to estimate the level of anemia in countries that are either neighboring Afghanistan, such as Iran and India, or countries that share similarities, such as Ethiopia. A study was conducted among 1,369 pregnant women in Pakistan. The study revealed that the overall prevalence of anemia was 90.5%. Among the women with anemia, 75% suffered from mild anemia, 14.8% from moderate anemia, and only 0.7% from severe anemia (Baig-Ansari et al., 2008).

A study of 418 Iranian pregnant women revealed that the prevalence of anemia was in the different locations between 41.1% to 50.6% and a significant relationship was identified between anemia and the participants' educational attainment (Yaghoobi et al., 2015). A study of 6,923 pregnant women across 16 districts of India revealed that 84.9% of the participants were anemic, with 13.1% having severe anemia and 60% having moderate anemia. The study also

demonstrated that anemia is an independent risk factor for abortion and premature birth (Toteja et al., 2006). In Assam, India, the prevalence of anemia among pregnant women was reported at 73.1% (Gogoi et al., 2016). Anemia was classified into three categories: mild, moderate, and severe. Among the women studied, 10% had mild anemia, 43.1% had moderate anemia, and 20% had severe anemia. In comparison, a large nationwide survey conducted under the District Level Household Survey of the Reproductive and Child Health Programme, which included 41,112 pregnant women, reported an even higher overall prevalence. In this analysis, more than half of the pregnant women were mildly anemic, while 42.6% were moderately anemic (Chellan & Paul, 2010). Another study was conducted to investigate the prevalence of anemia in pregnant women referred to a hospital in Southeast Ethiopia (Kefiyalew et al., 2014). The study revealed that mild anemia was present in 55% of the participants, moderate anemia in 32.53%, and severe anemia in 12.5%. The study identified factors that increased the risk of anemia in pregnant women, including a history of heavy menstrual cycle, intestinal parasite infection, residence in rural area. In additional, also other factors such as the use of contraceptive methods, gestational age, the number of children over five, nutritional status during pregnancy, history of chronic disease, and abortion could be considered further potential risk factors for anemia.

Although countries neighboring or comparable to Afghanistan have a high prevalence of anemia among pregnant women, little is known about anemia in pregnant Afghan women. This lack of data is a major shortcoming because without a proper baseline, no adequate intervention or policy can be developed, and progress cannot be tracked.

To provide a first idea of how the prevalence of anemia among pregnant in Afghanistan looks like, this study was conducted. The main research question was: What is the prevalence of anemia during the first trimester of pregnancy, or second trimester of pregnancy or the third trimester of pregnancy and what are factros that influence it?

Hence, four objectives of the study were defined:

- To assess anemia among pregnant women
- To determine the prevalence of anemia in the first trimester, second trimester, or third trimester of pregnancy
- To identify factors linked to anemia
- To provide recommendations to pregnant women to reduce anemia

Methods

The present study was a descriptive cross-sectional study. It was based on a determination of the hemoglobin levels of women referred to Mawla Ali Hospital due to the prevalence of anemia. The necessary information was collected through a questionnaire with four parts. Part one to three contained questions concerning demographics (e.g. age, husband's occupation), individualism, and nutrition were explored. Fourthly, questions about the result of the hemoglobin test were presented.

The inclusion criteria for the study are as follows:

- Pregnant women who present to the hospital for any reason, including those who are participating in the study.
- Pregnant women who undergo a hemoglobin test.

The exclusion criteria for the study are as follows:

- Women who are not pregnant.
- Women who are pregnant but do not present to the hospital.
- Women who present to other hospitals.
- Other patients who are not part of the study.

The study adhered to the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki in conducting ethically sound research. Descriptive statistical analysis was computed e.g. frequencies. Also, chi square was calculated to explore if the findings follow the expected distribution. Data was presented in tables and figures.

Result

The present study was conducted among 72 pregnant women.

The results of the present study indicate a prevalence of anemia (based on a hemoglobin level of <11 g/dL) among 72 pregnant women. The study found that 40.3% (N=29) of the participants were anemic, while 59.7% (N=43) were within normal parameters (see Table 1).

Table 1: Prevalence of hemoglobin level

Hemoglobin Level	Normal		Anemic		P_chi_Square
	N	%	N	%	
7-10	0	0	29	40.3	**0.00**
11-15	43	59.7	0	0	

The findings of this study indicated that anemia was more prevalent in the first trimester of pregnancy (50.0%) compared to the second trimester (46.8%) and the third trimester (33.3%). (see Figure 1)
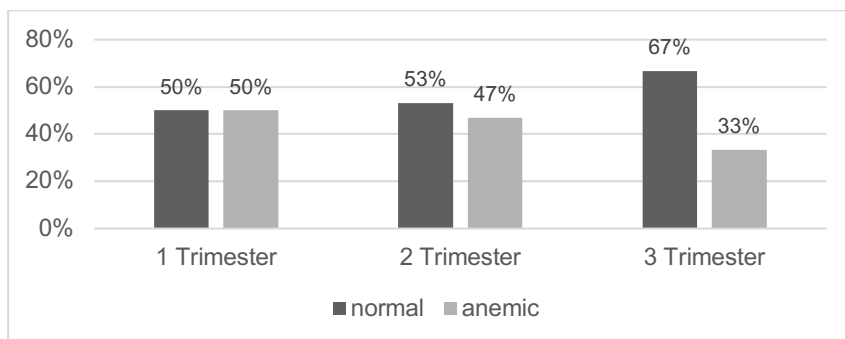

Figure 1: Prevalence of anemia based on trimester of pregnancy

Sociodemographic characteristics and differences in anemic status

The differences in anemia status were explored based on sociodemographic data (see Table 2).

The age of the participants was divided into three categories: The age group of respondents included 15-20, 21-30, and 31-55 years, with the majority falling within the 21-30 age range.

The study's findings revealed that a significant proportion of the population was illiterate, with an anemia prevalence of 26 percent.

Furthermore, it was observed that a significant proportion of pregnant women lacked a stable economic status, and the prevalence of anemia was notably high.

The age of the first pregnancy ranged from 12 to 18 years, from 18 to 22 years, and from 23 to 35 years. However, a significant relationship was observed between anemia and the age of first pregnancy ($p < 0.05$).

The age at which the participants got married was divided into two categories: The age range is from 12 to 20 years and from 21 to 30 years. The majority of the participants were between 12 and 20 years of age at the time of their nuptials. The prevalence of anemia among this group was found to be 37.5%.

The age of the last child was found to be between 1 and 4 years old in 37.5% of cases, and between 5 and 8 years old in the remaining 32%.

The number of fetal cases was categorized into two ranges: The age of the subjects ranged from 1 to 10 years, with the majority falling within the 1-4 age group. The number of children ranged from 1 to 5 and from 6 to 12, with the majority falling within the 1-5 range.

Table 2: Sociodemographic data and status of anemia

Variables	Normal		Anemia		Chi-square
	N	%	N	%	
Age					
15-30	36	50	22	30.55	0.58
31-50	7	9.7	7	9.7	
Education					
Illiterate	18	25	19	26	
School	14	12.5	9	5.6	0.599
University	11	15			
Economic status					
Bad	14	19.4	15	20.8	
Good	27	37.5	13	18.1	
Very good	2	2.8	1	1.49	
Age of first pregnancy					
12-18	19	26.38	17	23.61	
19-22	7	9.72	0	0	
23-35	17	23.61	12	16.66	

Variables	Normal		Anemia		Chi-square
	N	%	N	%	
Age of marriage					
12-20	31	43.05	27	37.5	0.25
21-30	12	16.66	2	2.77	
Age of the last child					
1-4	27	37.5	23	32	0.59
5-8	3	4.16	3	4.16	
Number of pregnancies					
1-5	37	51.38	23	32	0.45
6-10	6	8.33	5	7	
Number of children					
1-5	28	39	24	33.33	
6-12	2	2.77	2	2.77	0.63

The findings of research on the occupations of pregnant women's spouses demonstrated that 44 individuals (61.11%) possessed various types of employment, while 28 individuals (38.89%) were unemployed. The Figure 2 shows the responses of those women who stated that their husbands had an occupation.
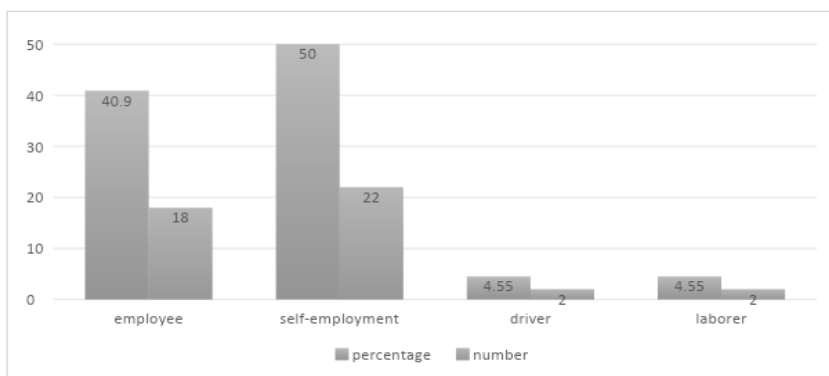

Figure 2: Type of occupation of women's husbands

Factors associated with anemia deficiency

Other factors that are related to anemia deficiency were assessed (see Table 3). The research findings indicated that individuals with menstrual periods of 5-10 days exhibited a 22.22% prevalence of anemia. The prevalence of anemia was 18.08% among individuals with menstrual periods of 2-3 days, and the probability ratio (od=1.243) for these individuals was observed to be one times higher than that of individuals with menstrual periods exceeding 3 days. The menstrual cycle of the subjects under study was divided into ranges of 15-24 and 24-32 days, and those with menstruation in the 24-32 range had a higher prevalence of anemia (5.37%), suggesting a modest relationship between menstrual cycle and anemia (p > 0.09). The prevalence of anemia was 32% among individuals who consumed meat 1 to 3 times per week, while those who consumed meat 3 to 6 times per week exhibited a very low anemia prevalence of

1.39%. Moreover, the anemia prevalence among individuals who consumed fruits one to three times per week was 35%, whereas those who consumed fruits three to six times per week had an anemia prevalence of 12%. The analysis further revealed that the odds of developing anemia were twice as high for women who consumed fruit 1 to 3 times a week compared to those who consumed it more than 3 times a week (odds ratio [OR] = 2.444).

Table 3: Factors associated with anemic status

Variables	Normal		Anemic		Chi-square	OD_R
	N	%	N	%		
Duration of Menstrual						
2-5	17	23.61	13	18.05	0.419	**1.243**
6-10	26	36.11	16	22.22	0.808	
Menstrual Cycle						
15-24	7	9.72	1	1.39	0.093	**0.185**
25-32	35	48.61	27	37.5	0.132	
Use of Meat						
1-3	35	48.61	23	32	0.407	
4-6	0	0	1	1.39	0.407	
Use of Vegetables / Fruits						
1-3	18	25	18	25	0.067	**2.444**
4-6	22	30.55	9	12.5	0.133	

The prevalence of anemia in women who did not adhere to the physician's directives concerning their nutritional regimen was 20.8%, while the prevalence of anemia among those who adhered to the physician's instructions was 6.9%, and the prevalence among those who occasionally adhered to the directives was 12.5%. This is illustrated in Figure 3.
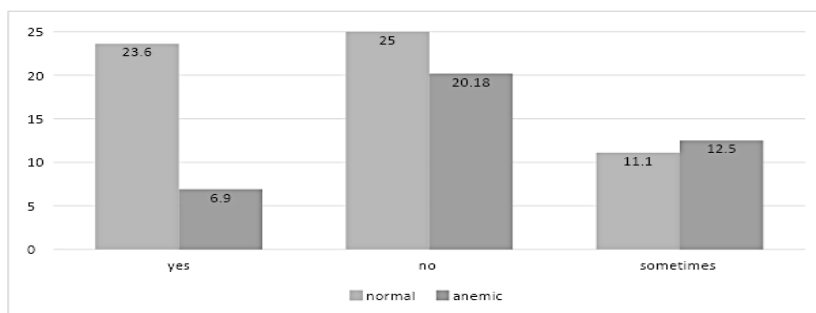

Figure 3: Following the doctor's advice in nutrition

A salient finding of the present study pertains to the correlation between menstrual bleeding and anemia. The investigation revealed a direct relationship between the extent of menstrual bleeding and the occurrence of anemia, with an increase in bleeding intensity concomitantly resulting in an increase in anemia levels. A notable proportion of the study participants, specifically 16.7%, exhibited anemia due to substantial menstrual bleeding (see Figure 4).
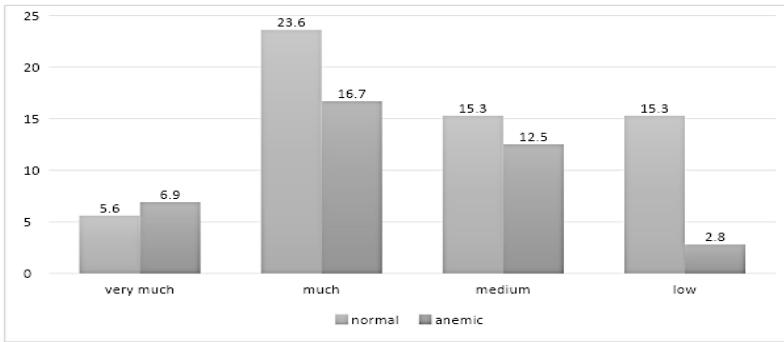
Figure 4: Findings on menstrual blood volume

The study also revealed that none of the pregnant women used anemia tablets during their pregnancies for various reasons, as illustrated in Figure 5.
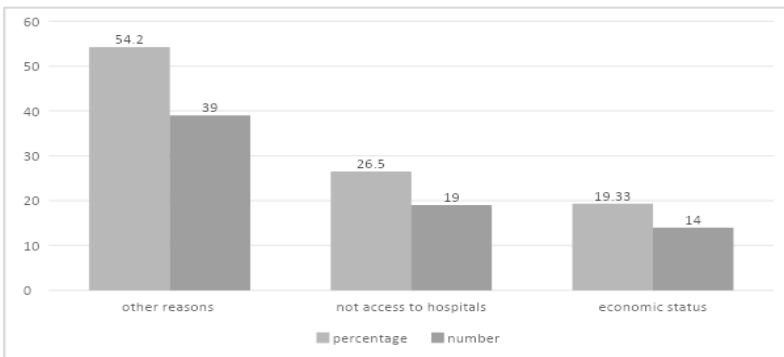

Figure 5: Use of anemia tablets

Discussion

This study examined the prevalence of anemia among a sample of 72 pregnant women, revealing a 40.3% prevalence rate, which is similar to other studies in Afghanistan (Sahak, 2009). This finding stands in contrast to the anemia prevalence rates observed among pregnant women in similar studies conducted in a hospital in southern Ethiopia, Pakistan, and India. However, the observed prevalence in this study is nearly equivalent to the prevalence rates reported in studies conducted in Iran and southern Ethiopia. The study's findings are comparatively lower than those from a comprehensive analysis involving three countries. The potential causes of this discrepancy include the following aspects, which are also limitations of the study.

- The data were collected during the winter months, which may have affected the results due to seasonal variations.

- The Taliban regime and the ongoing insecurity in Afghanistan may have influenced the findings due to the specific context of the region.

- The sample size was limited to a specific group of women, which may have introduced bias and limited the generalizability of the results.

- There is generally a lack of awareness of anemia in the population.

- Many women have limited access to healthcare services and hospitals.

These factors, collectively or in isolation, may have a deleterious effect on women's health and well-being.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the following measures be taken in light of the findings of this research:

- Firstly, it is essential to educate expectant mothers about the danger of anemia, health nutrition, including the benefits of anemia tablets, to ensure their proper usage.

- Secondly, it is advisable to offer free hemoglobin tests for pregnant women, given that many are reluctant to undergo anemia tests due to financial constraints.

- Thirdly, gynecologists should provide useful recommendations for pregnant women regarding nutrition and the use of anemia tablets.

- Fourthly, anemia tablets should be available across the country, all the time and at an affordable price.

- Finally, it is recommended that similar research projects be conducted in other hospitals to explore the prevalence across the country. As this study was conducted in a single hospital and does not represent the broader experience of other medical centers.

Conclusions

A study was conducted to investigate the prevalence of anemia among pregnant women and the associated factors at Mawla Ali Hospital in Kabul. The study revealed that 40.9% of the participants were anemic, with the age of the first pregnancy exhibiting a highly significant relationship with anemia prevalence. A negligible proportion of the participants were literate, and although none of the participants used anemia tablets for various reasons, the majority were women who did not have proper nutrition from fruits and vegetables.

The consumption of vegetables was minimal, and anemia tablets were not utilized during pregnancy. The findings of this research indicate that the most prevalent factors associated with anemia are the number of pregnancies, the spouse's occupation, the number of children, the type of previous childbirth, the mother's age at first pregnancy, and the history of anemia.

The study's findings indicate that the prevalence of anemia is within acceptable limits, provided that pregnant women adhere to the medical advice

they receive regarding nutrition and do not resort to the use of anemia tablets. However, it is crucial to note that if these guidelines are not followed, the prevalence of anemia is likely to rise. Anemia, being a preventable complication, poses a significant risk to pregnant women. Therefore, the implementation of comprehensive prevention programs, including the promotion of appropriate gestational intervals, adequate nutrition during pregnancy, and the prescription of anemia medication, particularly during pregnancy, is imperative to mitigate the prevalence of anemia. The majority of the subjects in the Kabul province hospital were from various districts and provinces.

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Chapter 16

Economic Opportunities for Women in Rural Afghanistan

Mohammad Yasir Nazari

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Afghanistan is a mountainous and agricultural country, with 71% of its population residing in rural areas and half of them are women. The return of the Taliban and their rules and policies had devastating economic effects on Afghanistan people, especially on women. In 2023, about 85% of Afghanistan's population is living under the poverty line, 95% does not have enough food to eat and 50% of children below 5 suffer from acute hunger. Women lost their occupations and sources of income due to Taliban restrictions including being prohibited from secondary and high education and work opportunities in private and public institutions, enforced dress codes (hijab), and prohibited from social activities. Creating opportunities for rural women in the rural economy including poultry farming, dairy farming, sericulture (silk rearing), saffron cultivation and carpet weaving are the only ways that can provide job opportunities for women who have lost their jobs and are prohibited from education and alleviate the effects of Taliban restrictions. This chapter elaborates on these different options for women to be economically productive. Creating opportunities for women participation in rural economy throughout providing skill training, financial support, equipment and technology, storage facilities, breeds, medicine, vaccine and infrastructure are crucial for alleviating the effects of Taliban restrictions on women, boosting household income, nutrition improvement and reduction of malnutrition and food insecurity, poverty alleviation, economic growth improvement, gender equality, rural women empowerment, and rural women participation in rural economy in Afghanistan.

Keywords: women, rural areas, agriculture, economic development

Introduction

Afghanistan is a landlocked country situated in south-central Asia. Its geographical boundaries are defined as follows: to the east and south by Pakistan, to the west by the Islamic Republic of Iran and by Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to the north, and to the north-east by China. It is a mountainous country and most of its area is covered by high mountains (Parto et al., 2012). Afghanistan is an agricultural country, with 80% of its population (32 million) residing in rural areas, of whom half (16 million) are women. The agriculture sector is the backbone of Afghanistan's economy (Muradi & Boz, 2018; Khaliq & Boz, 2018; Levin, 2009).

Afghanistan's economy has shrunk by 25 percent in the last two years since 2021 when Taliban captured Afghanistan and returned to power. The Taliban administration's restrictive policies regarding the education and employment of women will further lower Afghanistan's economic prospect (World Bank, 2023). The Afghanistan population lives below the poverty line at 85 percent, making it among the poorest countries in the world (United Nations, 2023). 14 million people in Afghanistan (35% of its population) are affected by acute food insecurity and approximately half of Afghan children under the age of 5 suffer from acute malnutrition by the end of 2021. At least 15.6 percent of these children are at risk of dying because of severe acute malnutrition and of urgent treatment (UNICEF, 2021). This situation is particularly worse for women due to severe restrictions imposed on their education and most jobs (UNDP, 2024). Taliban have banned women and girls from secondary and high education and dictated to them what they must wear, how they should travel and what kind of cell phones they should use. Taliban enforce these rules through intimidation and inspections on women (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Afghanistan is a mountainous country with majority rural residents that agriculture is the most income of economic resources. By collapsing of the former government and returning of Taliban in power and implanting extremist rules and restrictions, people, particularly women, are faced with social, economic and human rights challenges.

Current situation of women in Afghanistan

By the return of Taliban in power in 2021 in Afghanistan, women were the first victims of the Taliban's extremist ideology and rules, which removed them from taking part in society. Taliban policies have pushed out women from Afghanistan's social, economic and political life. Women are unable to leave their houses alone without the companioning of a male relative, seek medical attention or meet other people specially men, Taliban have boned women and girls from secondary and high education. A woman in the Taliban viewpoint is seen as an object, rather than a human being (United States Institute of Peace, 2023). The Taliban called for a package of "guidelines" for all people using vehicles to transport only those women that are wearing the hijab, and stop playing music for vehicles passengers. Following a directive ordering television channel not to show films and series starring women and women journalists that work as reporters at television stations should wear headscarves. It has also been reported that Taliban forces girls to marry with their fighters, and women are once again forced to stay at home (Bazhan & Sarwar, 2021). Women under Taliban rules are prohibited from leaving homes without their husbands or male

relatives accompanying them, and they are also compelled to wear a burqa, which is loose clothing that covers the whole body and face (France24, 2021). Over 3,000 small to medium-sized women-owned businesses were closed, including many women's rights organizations and media outlets. Physicians are prohibited from seeing women patients alone, and taxi drivers are forbidden from picking up women passengers who are not accompanied by men or who are dressed outside of Islamic standards (Nehan, 2022).Not only the mentioned restrictions imposed by Taliban on women, but women are also limited from working and receiving the medical attention and the most important and harmful issue that the women are prohibited by Taliban from learning of secondary and high education (Human Rights Watch, 2022). The mentioned restrictions are executed by intimidation and inspections. In some outrageous cases, women have been killed for holding jobs and occupations that are considered un-Islamic or are believed to disregard conventional practices (Sakhi, 2022). Afghanistan is one of the world's poorest countries with a severe gender gap and slight progress made in improvement of human resources (Aroojge & Burridge, 2021). Amnesty International reported that the Taliban have perpetrated gender-based violence against women by implementing various rules and restrictions on women in Afghanistan (Qazi Zada, 2021). Insecurity and violence from Taliban's extremist ideology, rules and general lawlessness, including attacks on educational institutions have been known as obstacles for universal female education in the past several years and now that are caused mainly by Taliban (Blum et al, 2019; Seema et al, 2023). Now women are faced with several barriers for accessing education, work, social activities and economic income.

Afghanistan's rural economy

The rural economy has the potential to create decent and productive jobs, eliminate poverty, ensure food security, and facilitate social justice. There is still a serious deficit of decent work in rural areas, with many rural workers living in poverty and working informally (International Labour Organization, 2022). The Afghan economy has suffered significant damage over the last thirty years as war and political instability destroyed economic infrastructure. In Afghanistan, the agricultural sector accounts for about one-second of GDP, and the sector is sensitive to both weather and neighboring policies (Ward & Jalal, 2011). The agricultural and rural economy in Afghanistan suffer from droughts and climate change, lack of finance, water canals and machinery, and unemployed workers. Ongoing droughts and climatic changes are perceived as one of the greatest threats to Afghanistan's rural economy. On the other hand, climate changes and ongoing droughts have significantly reduced the production and cultivation of cereal grains in some parts of the country (Salman et al., 2017).

Rural Afghans own large agricultural lands and are often engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry, so the majority of them own huge farming lands and are often busy with the cultivation and animal husbandry; thus, for expanding their production and modernizing their farm with the assistance of machinery, basic accessories, pesticides, and insecticides, accessing to finance and agricultural loans is crucial for them (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2023; Kaboski & Townsend, 2012). Availability of energy, advanced machineries, and water canals are very crucial for production of goods at a farm or factory. During the past few years and still, some of the main challenges in far flung rural

areas of Afghanistan are knowingly constant huge demand for energy, water canals, and techbased machineries (Karimi, 2018).

Opportunities for women in rural economy in Afghanistan

The Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey (ALCS) 2013-14 reports that 28.9 percent of the labor force is women. Approximately half of the female population is not engaged in gainful employment (encompassing both unemployed individuals actively seeking work and underemployed individuals who work less than 40 hours per week but are eager to work extra hours). Furthermore, 37 percent of women are unable to secure employment, while approximately 14 percent are classified as underemployed. Approximately 66% of women in the workforce are employed in the agricultural sector, with 21% active in farming or crop cultivation, including jobs related to fisheries and forestry, and 42% engaged in animal production. Furthermore, it is worth noting that 25 percent of economically active women actively participate in craft and related trades. In the realm of agricultural, fishery, and forestry-related industries, women constitute 33 percent of the workforce, whereas they represent over half of the total employment in craft and associated occupations (Central Statistics Organization, 2016).

Despite the fact that 70% of rural women work in agriculture and have direct or indirect contact with agricultural input services (Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL), 2012) alongside a mahram, according to seasonal labor demand and significantly associated with household needs, but few women have land, access to land, or control over its products; most farmlands have some fruit trees and livestock for self-consumption and/or sale in local markets.

Women in some regions work as day workers in the lower end of commercial farming value chains, picking saffron and grapes/raisins in contract farming (drying aftabi, storing kishmish, manual sorting) and hand shelling/sorting almonds, apricots, peanuts, pine nuts, and walnuts in their homes for landowners (World Bank, 2014), they are paid per kilogram. The market linkage for produce is typically through males (MAIL, 2012). Although, in Badakhshan, Daykundi, Baghlan, and Bamyan, women are involved in selling vegetables. Women in Daykundi harvest orchards likewise. There are some female village traders or sales agents in the almond value chain. In Panjshir, women sell cereals and grains, fruits, nuts, and vegetables (MAIL, 2012).

Horticulture (fresh and dried fruits, medicinal herbs, spices, and seeds) has continually made a significant contribution to domestic sales and exports; in 2013-14, its export value was US$224 million, accounting for 43% of overall export value (Rasoly & Chandrashekar, 2018). Women can start businesses in farm-related activities by manufacturing jam, weaving wool, or selling honey, dairy products, eggs, and chicken. The majority of products are sold by women and their families at the weekly local village market. Women also spin wool and use sheep wool to fill cushions and pillows for home or village use. Women and girls work in their houses to weave Namad (felt carpet/rug), Qaleen (pile carpet), and Geleem (rug), as well as needlework and some leatherwork (saddlebags and pads). With a mean of 18 square meters of rug produced annually (Asian Development Bank, 2008),The economic impact of women's income generating is particularly noticeable at the household level. These products accounted for 17

percent of overall export value in 2013-14, with a value of US$86 million (Central Statistics Organization, 2016).

Poultry farming: The Taliban imposed restrictions on women's activities outside their homes, so creating entrepreneurship opportunities for rural women and promoting gender equality and poverty and hunger reduction and improve food security, and women's empowerment through the promotion and development of various poultry farming activities (raising broiler chickens, laying hens, turkeys, ducks, quails, and guinea fowls) as indoor activities in rural and semi-urban areas of Afghanistan is crucial. Producing the poultry products is one of the effective ways to assist women and involve them in rural economic opportunities in rural Afghanistan.

Globally, several studies on rural-based poultry show that rural poultry practices are carried out by rural women. For instance, in Indian backyard poultry (Conroy et al, 2005). Similarly in Pakistan (Shafiq, 2008), as well as in Nigeria (Garba et al., 2013) were already carried out by women. As well as in Afghanistan, where women have responsibility for more than 90 percent of village production of eggs and poultry meat (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2014). Creating small-scale poultry farming, poultry skill training and poultry production equipment and tools are crucial in creating employment opportunities and source of income for rural women in the rural economy. For example, in 2019, a successful project to provide poultry farming training and equipment for 6,000 women in three Afghanistan provinces (Kunduz, Takhar, Baghlan), supported by the World Bank and in collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, serves as a successful example of a poultry farming project (Deutsche Welle, 2014). Women in these three provinces earned enough to cover the costs of their livelihood and their children's education through this job. As well since 2016 to 2020 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) through the implementing various projects over a period of 3 years in 12 provinces in Afghanistan 4990 backyard poultry farms established for women beneficiaries with each farm having the capacity to breed 30 chickens. 149,700 chickens have been distributed to 4,990 women (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020). The mentioned projects are an example of successful projects and further efforts are needed to extend such as projects for all rural women in rural Afghanistan. Providing poultry skill training and career opportunities for women in poultry production is a high priority for empowering women, generating income, producing food, and reducing malnutrition and poverty in Afghanistan. Additionally, establishing small-scale poultry farms offers numerous advantages for rural women, as follows:

1. It needs less capital investment compared to other species and land ownership is not a requirement.

2. Short reproductive cycles ensure quick financial returns.

3. Village women can manage and benefit directly from household poultry.

4. While feed supplementation is a major variable cost, part of the daily nutritional requirements can be obtained from scavenging, kitchen waste and spent/spoiled grains.

5. Provide employment opportunities to the rural small scale and marginal farmers.

6. Provide additional and complementary income to the rural households.

7. Aids in enhancing the soil fertility in the backyard (15 layers produce 1-1.2 kg of manure per day).

8. Products from rural poultry farming fetch high prices compared to those from intensive poultry farming.

Despite the various opportunities that poultry farming offers for women's participation in the Afghanistan rural economy, still opportunity for women participation is not provided sufficiently. Identified barriers that limit women's participation in poultry farming include lack of professional training related to poultry farming, insufficient access to credit and loans, inadequate facilities for poultry products storage, and related knowledge and medicine to controlling disease management.

Creating opportunities for women to participate in the rural economy through their involvement in various poultry farming activities (raising, processing, transportation, and marketing of poultry and their products), is important for job creation for those women that have lost their jobs due to Taliban restrictions and producing food and reducing malnutrition and poverty.

Dairy production

Afghanistan is an agricultural country, that over 80% of its population depends on the agriculture sector for their livelihoods. This sector contributes significantly to economic growth, job creation, poverty alleviation, and food security in the country and accounts for almost one-quarter of the national GDP (World Bank, 2014). It represents the second-biggest sector after services.

Afghanistan is traditionally recognized as a livestock country, with around 45% of its total area designated as pastureland. The animal husbandry sub-sector generates perhaps half of the licit agriculture's contribution to GDP and promotes career opportunities, reducing dependency on imports and exploiting more export opportunities (Akbar, 2015). The livestock leverages significant agricultural processing operations at the small and medium scales, creating around 1.1 million full-time employment opportunities in rural areas (World Bank, 2014; Ganesh, 2017). Over eighty percent of Afghan households in the countryside own livestock (Akbar, 2015).

In the livestock sector, the dairy industry is an important source of household income and nutritious food. Small-scale dairy farming is an important element of Afghanistan's rural economy, engaging more women than males and providing an essential source of income for those living in rural areas (Central Statistics Organization, 2019).

Rural Afghan women play a crucial role in agricultural activities and associated fields like dairy farming, poultry raising, sheep keeping, mushroom production, cultivation of valuable vegetables, and other ornamental crop-growing in mini-greenhouses and kitchen gardens (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2023, Boros & McLeod, 2015; Food and Agriculture Organization, 2011). Afghan women account for 33% of the workforce in agriculture and associated activities, and over half of the total workforce in handicraft and similar activities (Boros & McLeod 2015; Hutchens et al., 2019).

Small-scale dairy farming is the primary career for women in remote Afghanistan. Typically, Afghan women were mostly involved in dairy farming (Mukhtar et al., 2021). Livestock husbandry is considered the most important production task in Afghanistan and is extensively done by the poor in all regions supplying protein-rich food staples in everyone's food. It is done mostly by women, for some of whom it is a crucial source of job opportunity (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2011).

According to a few available time allocation studies, the estimated time spent by a woman on livestock-related activities ranges from four to five hours per day (Ganesh, 2017). Tavva et al conducted research in five villages in northern Afghanistan and observed that women were more familiar than males about livestock management (Tavva et al., 2013). Animal diseases are less common, and generating income is higher from animals reared by women than from animals managed by men. The very important results reveal a good impact on women's engagement in the management of livestock resulting in poverty alleviation (Kaur, 2015). Women are more involved than men in livestock-related tasks, but less so in crop-related activities. According to the reports, any agricultural development program aimed at involving women will be most effective if it includes a significant portion of livestock-related activities (Tavva et al., 2013).

Women in Afghanistan make significant contributions to family income and nutrition and are frequently active in raising livestock, but they have restricted access to agricultural input, including information through extension programs (Hutchens et al., 2017). Small-scale dairy farming can potentially mitigate rural poverty, promote food security, enhance household nutrition, and produce money and jobs for the majority of rural Afghan families (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2011). Milk and other milk-based products are used to meet family nutritional needs, but they also generate income when purchased in the market. Animal husbandry significantly increases the effort of women, who not only have to face the everyday weight of housework but also have to supply meals for those who work in the fields (Boros & McLeod, 2015). Women perform a variety of jobs in the dairy industry, such as feeding, collecting fodder, grazing, cleaning cattle and sheds, preparing dung cakes, collecting faces, milking, processing milk, and even selling milk and dairy products such as butter, butter oil, or ghee (Mukhtar et al., 2021). Reduction of rural poverty will never be achieved unless women attain financial independence. Therefore, the liberation of women represents a crucial step in eliminating poverty (Tavva et al., 2013). Therefore, creating small-scale dairy projects are very important for providing employment opportunities and producing high quality food that will result in poverty alleviation, malnutrition reduction and provide opportunities for rural women in the rural economy. For instance, in 2005, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) implemented the Integrated Dairy Schemes (IDS) project with the financial support of the Afghan government, Germany, Italy, and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). The project aimed to improve food security in Afghanistan by supporting the national dairy sector. Four milk processing factories were established in the provinces of Herat (western region of Afghanistan), Kunduz, Mazar-i-Sharif (northern region of Afghanistan), and Kabul (the capital of Afghanistan). These four IDS projects collectively produce 13,900 liters of milk. Over 5,700 small-scale farmer households, including 1,540 women, benefit from "milk money" on a daily and regular basis. Women livestock farmers from the Balkh Livestock Union (BLDU) mentioned that their cows produce an average of 15 to 20 liters of milk per day.

With a price of 19 Afghanis per liters of milk, the income for each woman from 15 liters of milk amounts to 1,995 Afghanis weekly (35 US dollars) and 7,980 Afghanis monthly (140 US dollars).

This demonstrates the income-generating potential of women who produce milk in the IDS integrated dairy project with dual-purpose cattle and highlights the significance of small-scale dairy processing factories in creating economic opportunities for rural women in Afghanistan. This is an example of a very limited but successful project that has been implemented in only four out of 34 provinces in Afghanistan.

Silk production

Sericulture originates from the word "Su (Si)" which means silk. Sericulture, the art and science of growing silkworms, supplying plants, growing silkworms, and producing silk, is essentially an agro-industry and a financially rewarding venture consisting of a variety of activities, and plays an important role in forming the economic fortunes of rural communities (Dewangan et al., 2012). Sericulture is the keeping of silkworms for the production of cocoons, which are used to produce raw silk. It is separated into two sectors: farm and industry. The agriculture sector is responsible for raising silkworm, providing plants as feed and feeding and rearing silkworms to generate cocoons and eggs. Reeling, twisting, dyeing, printing, finishing, and knitting constitute the industry sector (Datta & Nanvaty, 2005).

In Afghanistan, sericulture has long been practiced in various rural regions, especially in provinces like Kabul, Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif, Badakhshan, Sar-e-Pul, Jowzjan, and Nangarhar (Glinski, 2020; USAID, 2006) More than 90% of silk thread production in Afghanistan is attributed to women. Sericulture, the production of silk worms and, eventually, silk fiber (Ganga, 2019) has become an exciting rural industry, because of its minimum growing period, a small capital investment, maximum employment potential, and quick turnaround for capital (Kasi, 2000). Sericulture, potentially has significant socio-cultural impacts, and it has been demonstrated that sericulture has the ability to provide substantial amounts of income and employment (Hanumappa & Erappa, 1985). Therefore, it offers a promising prospect for Afghanistan.

Considering the restrictions imposed on women's activities outside the home by the Taliban, Sericulture activities are a great option for the livelihoods of women due to the nature of the tasks that take place near their place of home. Women have an important part in sericulture, both in terms of activities and time investment (Geetha, 2014). In 2021, approximately 5,000 women in Afghanistan actively participated in the sericulture industry, producing around 200 tons of silkworm cocoons and transforming them into silk threads. Their earnings from this industry reach up to $900,000 annually (Euronews Farsi, 2020). Presently, some women who lost their jobs have turned to sericulture for a livelihood. For instance, Ms. Shataba Jalal, a resident of Herat province, lost her job after the Taliban regained power, but she has since turned to sericulture and now earns $800 annually, which is essential for her livelihood (VOA, 2022). Due to the lack of silk processing facilities in Afghanistan, a significant portion of silkworm cocoons produced in the country is exported, and up to 40% of these are converted into silk thread within the nation. Some of the silk is turned into scarves and shawls, which are exported to the European market. However, due

to a lack of financial resources, equipment, and marketing for silk products, some rural areas in Afghanistan continue to face challenges in silk production. In 2021, sericulture practitioners in Balkh province reported a downturn in the silk industry in some provinces, with hundreds of years of heritage potentially facing extinction. The number of women involved in silkworm rearing has drastically decreased in several districts of the province. In the past, the sericulture farm in Dawlatabad district, Balkh, employed dozens of workers, distributed hundreds of silkworm eggs annually, but now its warehouses are empty, and only three workers remain to maintain the infrastructure and mulberry trees. In Herat province, sericulture is also in a recession. Women engaged in sericulture state that the industry has faced significant challenges in the past year. They claim that with the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan, silk exports have halted, and the lack of domestic market opportunities has severely affected the work and income of silk practitioners. Out of 300 silk weaving machines in Herat province, only five are currently active. Women who used to earn 1,000 Afghanis (approximately \$12) per day are now earning only 300 Afghanis (approximately \$3.50) per day (Pajhwok Afghan News, 2021).

Women in rural areas play a pivotal role in sericulture activities, providing opportunities for them to achieve social and economic independence. Given the limitations on women's activities imposed by the Taliban, sericulture offers a vital home-based means of employment, income generation, and participation in household decision-making. The sericulture occupation creates excellent employment prospects for rural women and enables them to be active contributors to income generation in their households. Women often face challenges which hinders their effective participation. The primary barriers include poverty, inadequate education, limited job opportunities, low earnings, insufficient assets, and restricted access to financial resources (Riaz et al., 2012).

To improve the silk industry and alleviate the current unfavorable situation in Afghanistan, several key solutions can be beneficial. These solutions include:

1.   Providing skill training in sericulture for rural women to create employment opportunities, enhance their economic status, and promote silk production. This is crucial for empowering women and boosting the silk industry.

2.   Ensuring financial resources and essential tools are made available to women engaged in sericulture to enable them to continue their silk production activities.

3.   Encouraging silk producers to engage in cocoon production by providing them with cost-effective resources, such as silkworm eggs, to lower their expenses.

4.   Developing strategies for establishing silk textile production facilities, including the manufacturing of scarves, shawls, socks, and other products, through foreign investments and non-governmental organizations.

5.   Implementing supportive policies, such as guaranteed purchase agreements, to mitigate market price fluctuations for silk producers.

6.   Empowering women through non-governmental organizations and related institutions to establish mulberry orchards, industrial workshops for cocoon production in Afghanistan, and strengthen other aspects of the value chain in this industry.

Saffron cultivation

Saffron production in Afghanistan, with roots dating back over a century, experienced a resurgence approximately two decades ago. This renaissance was spearheaded by Afghans with prior knowledge of saffron cultivation from neighboring Iran. Initially, this revival began on a modest 60 square meters of land in Ghoryan district, Herat Province, and swiftly expanded to encompass more than 800 hectares in Herat, making Afghanistan a significant player in the saffron market (World Bank, January 19, 2015). In many Afghan villages, women are involved in livestock rearing and income-generating activities like embroidery, which often fall short of meeting their financial needs. However, saffron cultivation has emerged as a novel source of employment for women, both within and outside their homes. Approximately 80% of saffron processing activities are performed by women, signifying a substantial income-boosting opportunity (World Bank, 2015). Women play a vital role in various saffron-related tasks, including assisting in land preparation and planting saffron bulbs, collecting saffron flowers from the fields, separating stigmas from the flowers, drying saffron, and packing saffron.

Working in saffron fields has provided opportunities for Afghan women to breathe in a society that is under economic pressure and serious challenges, especially after the Taliban came to power, filling their dreams with uncertainty. In the critical conditions prevailing in Afghanistan, where most women are confined to their homes and deprived of basic human rights such as education, work, leisure, and free movement, saffron harvesting, alongside addressing economic problems, offers these women a chance to escape their isolation.

In Balkh province of Afghanistan, a private company has provided employment for at least 200 women, many of whom are highly educated. According to the company's spokesperson, each woman is paid a monthly salary of 12,000 Afghanis. Some of the women in Balkh who work in saffron farms express their satisfaction with the work opportunities provided (Qasem, 2022).

Sima Ghoriani is head of the Women Saffron Cultivators' Union in Herat. She says "A woman can earn 500 USD annually. Saffron is cultivated in remote areas of the province and there too they (women) get good benefits. She says in Herat province there are six active saffron production and process unions that employ nearly 1,300 women and men, and their saffron is exported to France, Spain, Italy and the United Arab Emirates. These women have often pursued higher education, but the Taliban's restrictions have forced them to spend their days working on farms. They say that after months of unemployment at home, they have faced psychological and emotional challenges. Now they have decided to work in these farms while waiting for brighter days (The Killid Group, 2015).

In recent years, due to favorable conditions for saffron cultivation, the production of this valuable plant has significantly increased. Afghanistan is currently the second-largest saffron producer in the world after Iran and is also known as the third-largest saffron exporter in the world. Nevertheless, Afghan saffron still enjoys a strong position among regional countries. In 2022, there are nearly 90 large companies and 52 saffron grower associations engaged in cultivation, processing, and production of this plant at the national level (Azimy et al., 2020). These companies have created job opportunities for hundreds of women. The deputy of the National Saffron Union of Afghanistan stated that the total saffron production in the country was 18 tons in 2017 (Omid, 2018). The

involvement of women in saffron cultivation has several notable economic impacts, including, providing independent income sources for women, offering employment opportunities, promoting self-dependability among women, contributing to the overall household livelihood, particularly for women, and enhancing self-reliance and self-confidence among women. Women involved in saffron cultivation encounter various challenges, such as, limited access to saffron markets, scarcity of female specialists in saffron production and processing, insufficient knowledge among women regarding saffron production and processing, inadequate equipment for saffron processing and packaging, and insufficient coordination among women saffron growers. Providing skill training, equipment, tools, and financial support for saffron cultivation and processing is crucial to foster active participation among rural women in these activities.

Handicrafts production

Handicrafts are mainly understood as artisanal work and sometimes also called artisan work. It is a type of work through which various beautiful things are made by hand, using simple tools only (UNESCO & ITC, 1997). Handicrafts provide a variety of socioeconomic characteristics, in addition to cultural ones. Socioeconomic factors characterize the handicrafts sector as a home-based industry that requires minimal resources and infrastructure to begin and can offer jobs opportunities. It utilizes available skills and materials that are raw, and product is less expensive than invested energy and raw resources. Handicrafts also create income in villages, either through home or community-based production, which is primarily a crucial source in agricultural communities in challenging economic times (Richard, 2007).

Women have performed an essential role in the handicraft sector throughout history, and their participation in this industry has long cultural and social importance. Handicrafts have been a manner for women to present their creativity and maintain cultural heritage, and they have also offered women financial advantages and a means of supporting their own and families. Traditionally, women have been the main producers and sellers of handicrafts, with several typical handicrafts being passed down from mothers to daughters. Women's participation in the handicraft operations has helped to conserve ancient techniques and cultural customs, assuring that they are passed down through generations. Furthermore, women have made substantial contributions to the development and expansion of the handicraft industry. They have contributed significantly to creating a variety of unique and high-quality items that are recognized for both their artistic and functional attributes. Handicraft industries have a significant role in employment opportunities with a large number of residents involved. Afghan carpet weavers weave rugs by hand, and this visual art, which has been passed down from one generation to the next for many years, is still kept in its most traditional form in Afghanistan (Mater, 2015).

Women in Afghanistan are the keepers of the traditions of carpet weaving and wool spinning. There is no need for a commute because production is typically done at home, allowing women to balance work and family jobs. The hours are adaptable, and the job can be performed by several women who are members of a family, a group, or community (UN Women, 2024). Women have a key role in the carpets sector, comprising 90% of workers in the sector, largely

in weaving. Weaving is ideally adapted to the limits of Afghan female employment, especially in rural areas, where women have restricted engagement and mobility outdoors of their villages. Weaving is a mostly home-based occupation in families with long histories of weaving; thus the hours are flexible, and the job may be shared among female family members, fitting their competing family duties (World Bank Group, 2019). The rug weaving industry has had a great market in Afghanistan for decades, and even currently, due to the rise in poverty, the enforcing of limitations on women's education and workforce, a huge number of them have moved to the production and weaving of carpets (Salam Watandar media, 2023). Saleha, an 18-year-old weaver who works alongside Bibi Niaz, was a Grade 8 student with plans of becoming a nurse when her dreams were thwarted two years ago by the Taliban authorities' restriction on girls studying secondary and higher education. "There is no other way to earn money now," she said. "The suspension of schools education means I was at home, and I like to keep myself occupied through this hobby (UNHCR, 2023). As well as in Kabul province, about 200 women of various ages are engaged producing carpets in a factory called "Afghan Rag Carpet Weaving". Many of them spin wool, many of them spin yarn, and other of them, by weaving, provide designs and beauty to the carpets under their fingers. Mohammad Naeem Valizada, the owner of the carpet weaving course, claims that the goal of establishing this workshop was to create jobs for women, and currently, about 3,500 women are working through this workshop (Salam Watandar media, 2023). In Nangarhar province, a company called Dara-e-Noor Brothers Carpet Weaving Company offered employment opportunities for about 1,500 women as carpet weavers, allowing them to earn 12,000 Afghanis per month. Many of the employees at this factory are women and girls who, sadly, have been denied higher education in recent years. However, their participation in carpet weaving is changing their life by allowing them to finance schooling for other family members. Gul Mina, one of the factory workers, stated her excitement about the idea of contributing to her family's financial well-being through her job (Amu TV, 2023). After the imposition of restrictions on higher education, many girls and women in Balkh province began weaving carpets. A private company provided employment opportunities for 600 females who were prevented from education. Saleha Ghulami, the company's owner, stated that over 600 girls worked in her businesses, with 80% of them being school students (Sirat, 2023).

Financial support, providing carpet weaving tools and equipment, and skill training is crucial for improving the carpet weaving industry and economic progress in rural areas. On the financial, production tools and skill training demands of the carpet sector, national and international NGOs should adopt an adequate lending policy to give access to financial services for carpet manufacturers and other businesses. A small investment in boosting expertise may provide long-term benefits in terms of profitability as well as productivity. Building a strong carpet brand in Afghanistan necessitates the establishment of cutting, washing, and finishing facilities that satisfy modern, internationally recognized standards. As a result, stakeholders should upgrade the existing cut and wash companies in terms of capacity and quality. The customs procedures need to be completely digitalized, which could help to eliminate the existing gaps in trade management (Nasrat & Karimi, 2016).

Conclusion

Taliban rules and policies have faced Afghanistan's economy into serious challenges that has resulted in poverty intensification, malnutrition challenges, migration and humanitarian crises and psychological and nutritional health problems for Afghanistan residents, that has more affected women than men. Women in Afghanistan, under Taliban rule since 2021, have faced severe restrictions, including being prohibited from secondary and higher education, as well as work opportunities in both private and public institutions, enforced dress codes (such as the hijab), and participation in social activities. The Taliban's policies have pushed women out of public life that have caused several challenges including human rights violations, gender inequality persistence and poverty spreading, malnutrition, and economic challenges. By providing participation opportunities for rural women in rural economy in Afghanistan throughout providing skill training in various agricultural and handicraft activities including poultry farming, dairy farming, silkworm farming, saffron cultivation and processing, carpet weaving, and financial support, providing equipment and technology, storage facilities, breeds, animal medicine and vaccine and infrastructure, can alleviate the effects of Taliban restrictions on women, and boost household income, improve nutrition, alleviate poverty, improve economic growth, improve gender equality, empower the rural women, create financial independence for rural women in rural Afghanistan.

Recommendations

To empower women in rural areas in Afghanistan and support their economic development, the following recommendations are proposed:

1.   Providing of Training Programs: Provide and implement skill training and capacity building programs for women in rural areas to enhance their skills in sericulture, poultry farming, dairy farming techniques, animal husbandry, and milk processing, saffron production and processing, including land preparation, planting, harvesting, drying, and packaging, carpet weaving skills including carpet design, and business management to improve product quality and market competitiveness.

2.   Providing Finance Access: Facilitate access to credit and financial services and micro-loans for women in rural area who involved in the poultry rearing, dairy production, silk worm rearing, saffron cultivation and handicraft industry to foster economic progress and sustainability and modernize farms, purchase machinery, and invest in productivity-enhancing measures.

3.   Providing Technology and Innovation skills: Introduce and promote appropriate technologies and innovative skills in poultry farming, dairy farming, silkworm farming, saffron cultivation and processing, handicraft industry that can enhance productivity, efficiency, and sustainability, making it more accessible and profitable for rural women.

4.   Providing Health and Safety Measures and equipment: Implement and provide health and safety measures and equipment in poultry farming, dairy farming, silkworm farming, saffron cultivation and processing, handicraft industry to protect the well-being of rural women, including proper sanitation, hygiene, and personal protective equipment.

5.   Improvement of Storage Facilities: Invest in the development of adequate storage facilities for poultry, dairy, saffron and silk worm products to ensure the quality and preservation of goods, thus enabling women to effectively manage their produce and market it efficiently.

6.   Upgrading Production Facilities: Upgrade existing production facilities for poultry farming, dairy farming, silkworm farming, saffron cultivation and processing, handicraft (carpet cutting, washing, and finishing) to meet modern, internationally recognized standards, thus improving product quality and appeal.

7.   Facilitating of Market Access: Facilitate access to markets for rural agricultural products by improving transportation infrastructure, establishing market linkages, and supporting value-added processing and marketing initiatives.

8.   Building Infrastructure: Poultry keeping and poultry products processing infrastructure, dairy infrastructure, such as milk collection centers and processing facilities, to support small-scale dairy farming, establishing silk textile production facilities within Afghanistan.

9.   Expansion of Veterinary Services and Disease Management: Provide access to veterinary services, vaccinations, and disease management resources to support women in maintaining healthy poultry flocks and reducing production risks.

10.   Diversification of Income Sources: Encourage diversification of rural livelihoods beyond agriculture, such as promoting rural entrepreneurship and small-scale industries to reduce dependence on agriculture and enhance resilience to economic shocks.

11.   Providing Extension Services Programs: Strengthen extension services to provide essential information, guidance, technical assistance and support in livestock management, disease prevention, and market access for rural women.

These recommendations aim to support and empower rural women in Afghanistan through the opportunities presented by the poultry farming, dairy farming, silk worm rearing, saffron cultivation and handicraft industry. And it will contribute to the poverty alleviation, food security, and economic development, gender equality in rural Afghanistan.

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Part 4: Women in Society

Chapter 17

Unveiling Employment Opportunities and Training Needs in Afghanistan's Labor Market under the Taliban Rule

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This paper aims to analyze the current situation of the Afghan labor market. This aim is not a purpose in itself. However, it is connected to the more comprehensive goal of the Hope-project which is to develop skills and competencies for Afghan women whose access to the Afghan labor market has been brutally restricted. Primarily, we want to address academic Afghan women and offer online certificates that could improve their access to the Afghan labor market or international labor markets in 2023. This report addresses the following questions: What is the current state of the labor market in Afghanistan under the control of the Taliban, particularly about employment opportunities for Afghan women? Which sectors or industries demonstrate potential for employment opportunities for Afghans, especially women, in the current context? How can (online) training programs be customized to meet the needs of Afghans, particularly women, and enhance their employability in the labor market under Taliban control? We deliver a secondary analysis of published reports as well as a qualitative study based on expert-interviews and a quantitative study based on an analysis of job offers published in ACBAR.org.

Keywords: employment, labor market, Taliban, women, opportunities

Introduction

August 2021 marked a significant change in many Afghan women's lives when the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan and enacted a series of rules that ordered social and professional life, restricting the rights and freedoms of women in Afghanistan. These restrictions were particularly evident in the education sector. At first only women were dismissed from studying and working at the university. Subsequently this was followed by school bans for female pupils from the seventh grade. Also, in other areas of society, women were increasingly forbidden to pursue their former jobs and had to confine themselves to activities in the home. At the same time, former leaders were deposed, and many people - especially highly educated people - fled Afghanistan. Furthermore, many international organizations withdrew (partially or entirely) from Afghanistan. All this affected the labor market in many complex ways. Women and girls in Afghanistan, in particular, who since 2001 have enjoyed increasing education and the associated job opportunities, have lost many of their new gains. At the same time, the situation in 2023 is different from that at the end of the 20th century because the Internet has created new opportunities for staying in touch with other people, new educational opportunities, and opportunities to work from home. However, there is hardly any empirical information on the job opportunities currently available to men and women in Afghanistan, on the prerequisites they need to meet, for example, in terms of skills, and on how they can be prepared for them in the best possible way.

This paper aims to analyze the current situation of the Afghan labor market. This aim is not a purpose in itself. However, it is connected to the more comprehensive goal of the Hope-project[1,] which is to develop skills and competencies for Afghan women whose access to the Afghan labor market has been brutally restricted. Primarily, we want to address academic Afghan women and offer online certificates that could improve their access to the Afghan labor market or international labor markets in 2023. In order to develop tailored measures and courses designed for the labor market's needs and demands rather than based only on the imaginations of Western politicians, NGOs, or researchers, an analysis of the current Afghan labor market is mandatory. Furthermore, we need to conduct this analysis as empirically as possible (we will return to this in the paragraph "Methods and methodological remarks").

According to this frame of the report, our analysis of the Afghan labor market will address the following research questions:

- What is the current state of the labor market in Afghanistan under the control of the Taliban, particularly about employment opportunities for Afghan women?

- Which sectors or industries demonstrate potential for employment opportunities for Afghans, especially women, in the current context?

- How can (online) training programs be customized to meet the needs of Afghans, particularly women, and enhance their employability in the labor market under Taliban control?

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[1] The Hope-project was funded by the German Academic Exchange Office (DAAD). It started in 2021, before the Taliban took over the power in Afghanistan in July 2021 and ended December 2023.

We are cognizant that an analysis of the Afghan labor market in 2023 is confronted with many challenges. First, the availability of valid data for Afghanistan is very poor, and much data is extrapolated (cf. Bittlingmayer et al., 2020). This is true for almost every sector, for instance, economy, health, or education. The existing economic reports are often biased, mainly when they are products from the Ministry for Economy, because they should document positive developments during the government supported by the international community and NATO. Furthermore, most of the studies ignore the specific conditions of rural areas. Even though around three-quarters of Afghans live in rural areas or are nomads, they primarily focus on urban settlements. "Based on the estimated population Graphs the urban population is 8.0 million while the rural population is 23.4 million and the remain 1.5 million is Kochi (Nomadic)." (NSIA, 2021, p. 3) However, there has been a broad consensus that there was progress and positive development in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021. Notably, in education and health, many indicators demonstrate this positive development: rates of school enrolment, absolute numbers of students and universities, child mortality rate, or life expectancy rate (cf. the contributions in Bittlingmayer et al., 2019).

On the other hand, there is also a broad consensus in social science that the NATO-led allies have not been mainly concerned with building a sustainable Afghan economy. Most jobs created after 2001 were directly linked to services for foreign soldiers and NGOs. After 2014, when the withdrawal of the foreign military started, mass unemployment immediately returned to Afghanistan. There is the argument that the Western coalition pumped so much money into the Afghan economy that corruption was the logical consequence of this (lack of) strategy. "The US government flooded Afghanistan with far more money than the country could absorb." (Whitlock, 2021, p. 211) The OECD- and World Bank-driven policy in Afghanistan (and worldwide) to invest in education to build economic development and growth has failed, as has the idea of creating sustainable educational markets. These policies did not reflect the particularity of Afghanistan's history, culture, and economic structure. Afghanistan's economy has been described earlier as a simultaneous mixture of feudalism, pre-feudalism, archaic, and capitalistic (Samimy, 2017, p. 21). In short, economic development in Afghanistan over the past two decades has been nothing short of a disaster. In 2021, the Taliban took over a largely dysfunctional economy. In the last two years, they worsened the situation by pushing women out of large parts of the labor market. According to a recently published report from the World Bank the economic performance is still very poor but the picture is ambivalent. The food prices have fallen, the self-reported welfare improved and the export increased. Nevertheless, poverty still hits (at least) half of the Afghan population (World Bank, 2023a). We cannot change the economic and political structures in Afghanistan's currently confusing economic situation. However, our project wants to identify niches and areas where Afghan women can meaningfully contribute to increasing household income. This market analysis should help us to develop tailored certificates.

Methodology and methods

In order to come close to a realistic picture of the current Afghan labor market and economy, different sorts of data are used and analyzed in this report. In the following chapters, we analyze macro-data published by international

organizations like the World Bank, UNESCO, the International Labour Organisation, and others. Subsequently, we analyze the documents and reports published by the Taliban regime resp—the Afghan Ministry of Economy. In the analysis, our primary focus will be on the three research questions mentioned above. We particularly look for labor market segments that are still promising and – at least partly – open for women.

Complementary to the secondary macro-data analysis, we conducted qualitative expert interviews with economic and educational experts still living in Afghanistan. In contrast to the published reports, these interviews serve as first-hand sources.

We conducted interviews with five individuals. They were selected for interviews purposefully, all of whom are experts with relevant work experience in the education and empowerment of women in Afghanistan. Among these five interviewees, three are men and two are women. Interviews were conducted online in August 2023 using WhatsApp. The duration of the interviews ranged between 40 and 75 minutes. Participants were allowed to answer the questions listed in the interview guide without a time limit during the interview. To ensure the privacy and security of the interviewees, their names are omitted from this research text, and they are assigned numbers for citation purposes. The background and professional experience of each interviewee are detailed in the following table (Table 1):

Table 1: Background and professional experience of interviewees

Interview ID	The background and professional experience
I1	He is an economist and a university professor.
I2	He has years of experience in non-governmental organizations focused on technical and vocational training in Afghanistan.
I3	She is a human rights activist and leads a non-governmental organization in Afghanistan.
I4	Before the Taliban came to power, she was involved in women empowerment programs of the Afghanistan government.
I5	He has worked as an education specialist and researcher for many years in Afghanistan.

We used the same self-developed interview guide for all expert interviews to make the interviews easy to compare. The interview guide contains thirteen questions and is documented in *Annex 1*. We wanted to know from the experts how they estimate the chances for (academic) women to be employed and in which sectors they can identify opportunities. Examples of the questions from the interview guide are:

-   "Could you please provide an overview of the current state of the labor market in Afghanistan under the control of the Taliban, particularly in relation to employment opportunities for educated Afghan women?"

- "What job opportunities are currently available for educated Afghan women?" or

- "In your opinion, which sectors or industries demonstrate potential for employment opportunities for Afghans, especially women, in the current context?"

We used a slightly open form of qualitative interview analysis for the analysis. Because the categories of interest are already fixed for this analysis, we could use a qualitative content analysis without establishing a coding procedure.

Last but not least, we collected and analyzed quantitative data. In order to conduct a quantitative analysis of the Afghan job market, we have collected data on the job offerings from ACBAR website[2], the largest job advertisement portal in Afghanistan[3]. In order to evaluate the importance of the ACBAR-portal for the Afghan labor market we will give a short overview about it.

ACBAR is the abbreviation for Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief and Development. Bringing together 193 domestic and foreign NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) operating in Afghanistan, ACBAR is an autonomous organization. Through the website, ACBAR is able to coordinate and streamline relief and development efforts and offer resources, information, and assistance to its member groups. It has sections on publishing, job opportunities, coordination, capacity building, advocacy, and more. The website also includes papers, studies, events, and announcements about development and relief activities in Afghanistan. ACBAR was established in August 1988, in Peshawar, Pakistan, in response to the need for more effective coordination of aid and service delivery from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that deal with Afghan refugees in Pakistan and across the border in Afghanistan. Since 2002, the secretariat, or main office, of ACBAR has been located in Kabul. Five provincial managers are also employed by ACBAR and are situated at member offices in Jalalabad, Mazar-e-Sherif, Herat, Kunduz, and Kandahar. The highest decision-making body of ACBAR is the General Assembly, which is a democratic assembly with representation from all members. Every two years, the General Assembly convenes. The 15 NGOs that make up the ACBAR Steering Committee are led by the Chair and assisted by the Vice-Chair and Treasurer. Information exchange, coordination, and advocacy with NGO members, the government, the UN, donors, and the larger civil society are the main foci of the activities. It also helps its members develop their capacity. The secretariat's several departments oversee these operations.

Jobs relating to Afghanistan's relief and development sector are advertised on the ACBAR website. These employment openings may be in a variety of sectors, including capacity building, development initiatives, advocacy, coordination, and humanitarian assistance. The website functions as a career hub where businesses can advertise openings and job seekers can locate openings in the industry. It serves as a platform for NGOs and other organizations to get in touch with applicants who might be interested in working in the development and humanitarian sectors in Afghanistan.

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[2] ACBAR: List Job; https://www.acbar.org/jobs; last check 2024/1/20.
[3] It is to mention that data on all relevant variables are not available on the website. For instance, data on whether an applicant gets hired is not available. It also barely covers government positions.

In order to analyze the ACBAR data we have employed a Web Scraper, which is a Google Chrome extension, to harvest data. Web harvesting automates the extraction of data from websites. This allows the configuration of the extension via a graphical user interface. First, the relevant variables and data elements are identified. After that, the extension interacts with websites implementing the scraping guidelines and retrieves the necessary information. After processing and formatting the data, one can export it in a number of formats, including Excel and CSV. A great advantage of this web harvesting method is its simplicity and efficiency.

Employing this web harvesting method, we have collected data on job offerings on eight different dates from June to September 2023. The harvesting time was chosen in a way to cover at least one quarter (June – September) and the exact date was chosen randomly conditioning a minimum of one week break in between. Table 2 depicts a summary of the data acquisition from the ACBAR website.

Table 2: Summary of data acquisition from ACBAR website

Round	Download Date	Number of variables	Number of Job Ads/New ads	Total Number of Job Ads*
1	June 19, 2023	8	398 / 0	398
2	July 1, 2023	8	262 / 208	606
3	July 8, 2023	8	303 / 252	858
4	July 17, 2023	8	314 / 280	1138
5	July 23, 2023	8	296 / 253	1391
6	Aug 1, 2023	8	316 / 275	1666
7	Aug 11, 2023	8	309 / 262	1928
8	Sep 16, 2023	8	291 / 271	2199 (= total number of cases)

the total number is calculated after removing the duplicates

The variables on which data are being collected include Location, Nationality, Job Category, Employment type, Gender, Experience, and Minimum Education. We have also collected the concrete name of the occupational positions as well as the key skills required for the jobs. Figure 1 depicts a screenshot of a typical job advertisement on the website.

Figure 1: A screenshot of a job advertisement on the ACBAR website

Additionally, the advertisement includes details on the hiring organization, job description, submission guidelines, and some employers mentioned directly required key skills in their job offers.

Since the advertised jobs cover almost all 34 provinces of Afghanistan, in order to avoid the curse of dimensionality problem, we have categorized them into different regional zones. Table 3 details the categorization of the zones.

Table 3: Categorization of the location

Zone	Provinces
Kabul Zone	Maidan Wardak, Logar, Kapisa, Parwan
Kabul City	Kabul
North Zone	Samangan, Baghlan, Balkh, Jawzjan, Faryab, Sar-e-Pol
West Zone	Badghis, Herat, Nimruz, Farah, Ghur
Central Highlands	Bamian, Daikondi, Ghazni
North-East Zone	Kunduz, Takhar, Badakhshan, Panjshir
South Zone	Helmand, Kandahar, Zabul, Oruzgan
East Zone	Laghman, Nangarhar, Paktia, Paktika, Khost, Nuristan, Kunar

Creating categories for the zone results in some further duplications in the dataset, since some job offers were published in different zones parallelly. This resulted in the total number of observations to be reduced to 2064. In the subsequent analysis we use the last version of the dataset.

From a methodological perspective, we used a mixed methods approach, following a deductive logic of concretization. We start with published macro-data, try to validate it based on expert interviews and analyze job offers at the micro-level. Finally, in the discussion part, we look for mutual contradictions and confirmations when we compare the results of the different analyzes we conducted.

Current state of the labor market in Afghanistan under Taliban control

Afghanistan is currently facing numerous challenges stemming from dictatorship and political isolation, leading to a devastating crisis that has profoundly affected the lives and livelihoods of its citizens, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized, such as women, children, minority communities, and people from rural areas. The repercussions of these circumstances extend to the labor market, with key sectors of the economy, such as agriculture, public administration, social services, and construction, experiencing severe hardship, resulting in substantial job losses and reductions in labor income (World Bank, 2023a, 2003b). Restrictions have particularly impacted women in their movement and employment opportunities. The labor market situation for women, including young women, remains critical and challenging, and it has been further exacerbated by a recent edict prohibiting women from working in both national and international non-governmental organizations (International Labour Organisation, 2023).

In Afghanistan, labor force participation among people of working age (15.9 million) has historically been limited. According to a survey conducted in 2017, only 53.9 percent of individuals (8.5 million people) in this age group are either employed or actively seeking work. This is primarily because of the very low levels of female activity in the labor market. As a result, Afghanistan's labor force shows a highly uneven gender composition, with 6.4 million men constituting 75.4 percent and 2.1 million women comprising 24.6 percent of the workforce (Central Statistics Organization, 2018) (See Figure 2).

The country's labor force is characterized by an exceptionally young age structure, with a substantial proportion of individuals below the age of 30. Approximately half of the economically active population (50.2 percent) falls within the age range of 14[4] to 29 years. Combined with the next 10-year age group, 6.0 million individuals in the labor force (71.3 percent) are below 40 years old.

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[4] The Central Statistics Organization of Afghanistan defines the working age as 14 years old, a definition that is also adopted in this research (Central Statistics Organization, 2016).

Age	In thousands			In percentages		
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total
Total	6,392.7	2,085.8	8,478.4	100.0	100.0	100.0
14-19	1,129.8	464.4	1,594.2	17.7	22.3	18.8
20-29	1,989.8	672.0	2,661.8	31.1	32.2	31.4
30-39	1,378.8	411.6	1,790.4	21.6	19.7	21.1
40-49	953.6	313.5	1,267.1	14.9	15.0	14.9
50-59	575.8	164.2	740.0	9.0	7.9	8.7
60-69	284.2	48.1	332.3	4.4	2.3	3.9
70-79	65.6	10.3	76.0	1.0	0.5	0.9
80+	14.9	1.7	16.6	0.2	0.1	0.2

Figure 2: Labor force by ten-year age group and by sex
(Source: Central Statistics Organization, 2018)

Regarding geographical distribution, labor force participation is higher in rural areas, with rates of 54.9 percent. This is a common trend in less developed economies, where educational opportunities are scarce, and most people are engaged in labor-intensive, low-productivity agricultural activities. The labor force participation rate in urban areas is lower, at 48.0 percent for both sexes combined. This is due to the presence of alternative opportunities, such as school attendance, getting sufficient financial resources from parental businesses, and having income sources beyond employment. While the differences in economic participation across residence types follow a similar pattern for men and women, the disparities are much more pronounced for women. Although the rural female labor force participation rate (27.6 percent) is close to the national average of 26.8 percent, nomadic Kuchi women have a participation rate almost twice as high (50.5 percent). In contrast, the rate for urban women is significantly lower (20.5 percent) (see Figure 3 below).
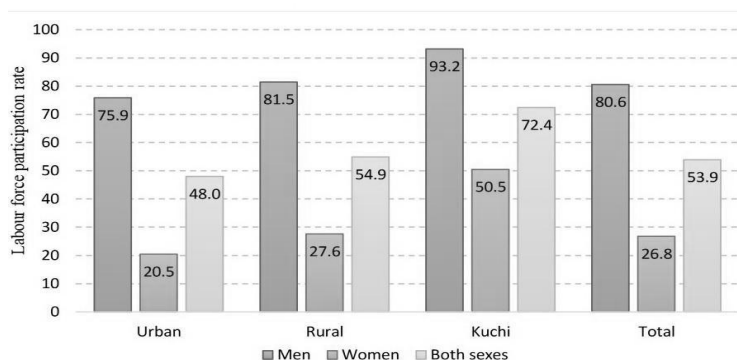

Figure 3: Participation rate in the workforce, categorized by location and gender
(Source: Central Statistics Organization, 2018)

The main reason for the variation in participation rates by residence is the economic activity of individuals under the age of 20. In this age group, the largest differences in participation rates are observed, and since it constitutes a significant portion of the total working-age population (24.0 percent), it has a significant impact on the overall picture. Limited access to education for children and young adults, particularly among rural populations compared to urban residents, can explain these differences in labor participation at younger ages (Central Statistics Organization, 2018). Another factor is the greater demand for

child labor (Hall, 2011), as demonstrated by the analysis of child labor based on ALCS 2013-14 data; the survey indicated that among urban, rural, and Kuchi children in the working age of 14-17, 24.0, 54.7, and 77.3 percent, respectively, were involved in child labor or were otherwise working (Central Statistics Organization, 2016).

Overall, the labor force participation rates align with relatively high participation among middle-aged adults and low to very low participation among young and older individuals. However, there are substantial gender differences; men's participation rates peak at nearly 100 percent for a broad age range from 30 to 44 years and remain above 95 percent between 25 and 49 years old. In contrast, women's participation rates barely exceed 30 percent and are concentrated in the middle adult age range of 31 to 49 years. Additionally, women's participation shows little variation across age groups until the age of 60-64, when a significant drop occurs (Central Statistics Organization, 2018).

Employment

In households, only a few members are engaged in work. This is mainly due to a noteworthy number of children, as 88 percent of households have children. On average, a household consists of 6.6 individuals, comprising 3.21 adults (aged 18-59), 0.26 elderly (aged 60+), and 3.13 children (below 18). Out of these, only 1.6 members work outside the home, with 1.19 being men, 0.15 women, 0.23 boys, and 0.03 girls. Interestingly, households tend to rely more on children (predominantly boys) for work compared to adult women. The proportion of working men in a household remains relatively constant at about three-quarters as the household size increases (see Figure 4). At the same time, the percentage of children decreases from one in six to nearly zero (2 percent) with larger household sizes. The share of working women increases significantly as the household size increases, reaching almost 25 percent (Tzannatos & Violetta, 2023).
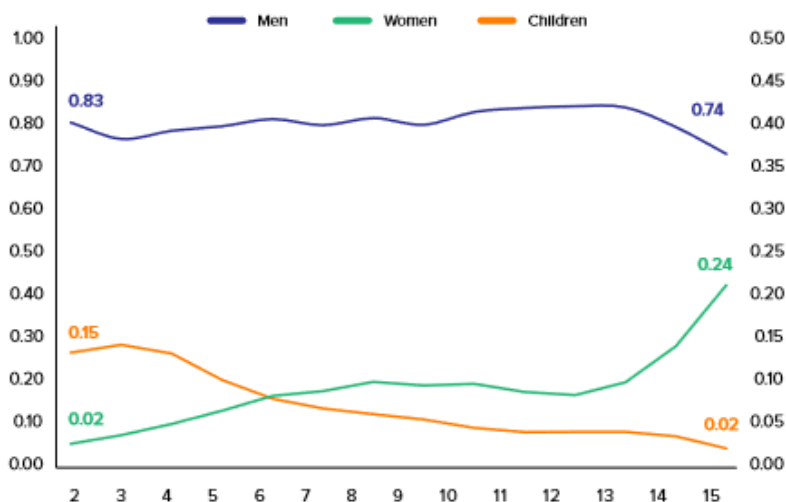

Figure 4: Distribution of workers within the household by gender and age
(Men on the left axis, women and children on the right axis)
(Source: UNDP, 2023b; derived from the Whole of Afghanistan Assessment)

Notably, both female-headed and male-headed households have similar proportions of working men among their employed members. However, in female-headed households, the share of working women is ten times higher than in male-headed households (over 40 percent compared to 4 percent). As expected, the number of workers does increase with the size of the household, although not substantially (Humanitarian Data Exchange, 2022). For instance, only one member works in households with two members, but this number rises to just 2.8 in households with 15 members. While households may face challenges related to environmental and seasonal factors, the current dire employment situation is primarily a result of recent political and economic changes. Additionally, the limited participation of women in the labor market significantly impacts households' ability to generate income, alongside the impact of having many children (Tzannatos & Violetta, 2023).

The agricultural sector heavily dominates the employment distribution in Afghanistan (in Figure 5). Approximately 45 percent of the employed population, accounting for 2.8 million individuals, work in farming or livestock-related activities. This economic sector is divided equally between farming (23.2 percent of total employment) and livestock production (21.2 percent). The service sector comes second regarding job numbers, employing 19.7 percent of the workforce. Additionally, four other economic sectors stand out in the employment distribution, each covering approximately 6 to 11 percent of the workforce: wholesale and retail trade and restaurants and hotels (mainly retail trade; 10.4 percent of total employment), construction (mostly construction of buildings; 9.2 percent), manufacturing (mainly manufacturing of clothes and textiles; 6.5 percent), and transport, storage, communication, and information (mainly land transport; 5.7 percent). The remaining main economic sectors have minimal visibility in the employment statistics (Central Statistics Organization, 2018). It is essential to acknowledge that a portion of Afghanistan's informal economy, which includes activities related to the drug trade, is typically excluded from official statistical calculations.
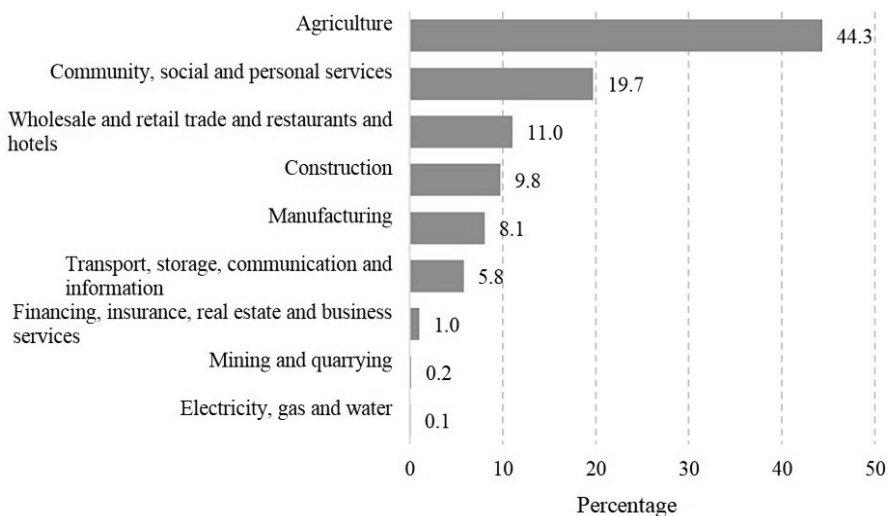

Figure 5: Distribution of the working population based on the sector of employment (Central Statistics Organization, 2018)

Clearly, the distribution of employment across economic sectors varies significantly based on residence. Agriculture employs more than half (52.6 percent) of the rural population and, due to their nomadic lifestyle, 80.1 percent of the Kuchi population. In contrast, urban employment is more diversified, with only 5.5 percent of the working population engaged in agriculture, 12.9 percent in manufacturing, 23.5 percent in trade and restaurant businesses, and 36.5 percent in various services (Central Statistics Organization, 2018).

Gender differences in the employment distribution by economic sector are evident (see Figure 6). While overall employment concentrates in a few sectors, it is notable that women's employment is primarily restricted to three main sectors: agriculture, manufacturing, and services. In agriculture, one-third (32.8 percent) of workers are female. However, a notable disparity exists between farming activities and livestock production in the agriculture sector. Only 9.5 percent of workers in farming activities are women, while women make up as much as 58.6 percent of the workforce in livestock production. This indicates a significant differentiation of gender roles in agricultural production in Afghanistan. In 2016 and 2017, in the service sector, women were relatively well represented in medical and education services, accounting for 16.1 and 24.0 percent, respectively. Manufacturing was the only central economic sector with a female majority (64.4 percent). This is particularly evident in manufacturing of clothes and textiles, where women constituted a significant 78.7 percent of the workforce. In the lower sub-sector of textile manufacturing (mainly carpet weaving), women occupied an overwhelming 90.8 percent of the jobs (Central Statistics Organization, 2018).
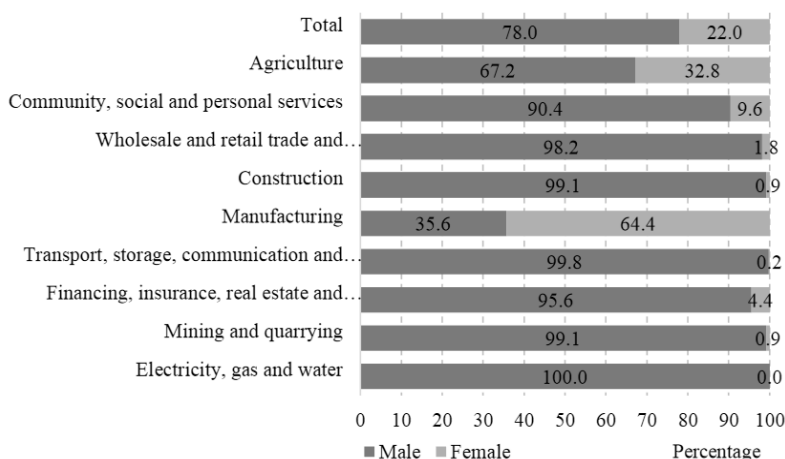

Figure 6: Distribution of economic activity by gender
(Central Statistics Organization, 2018)

Amidst Taliban-imposed constraints on women's employment and education, the proportion of women engaged in the labor market, particularly in education and other public services, has significantly declined. During the preceding Afghan government, approximately 40% of educators were women, and women's representation in the civil service sector peaked at around 27% (Kumar & Noori, 2022). With women's opportunities considerably curtailed in these sectors, this trend indicates a substantial reduction in women's contribution to Afghanistan's service sector and the overall labor market.

Unemployment

Before the Taliban assumed control of the nation in 2021, 2.0 million individuals were classified as unemployed. This encompassed those who were actively seeking employment or those who worked less than eight hours per week. Due to the absence of updated statistics regarding unemployment in Afghanistan, it is plausible that the actual number of unemployed individuals could surpass the figures reported by official institutions. This statistic accounted for 23.9 percent of the total labor force, showcasing the Afghan economy's challenging predicament in fully harnessing its available workforce, leaving almost a quarter of it untapped. Notably, the urban labor force had a slightly higher unemployment rate at 26.5 percent than their rural counterparts. A striking observation is that despite women constituting only one-third of the labor force as compared to men (2.1 and 6.4 million, respectively), the number of unemployed women was nearly equivalent to that of men: 0.9 and 1.2 million, respectively. Consequently, the female unemployment rate soared to more than double that of men, reaching 41.0 percent in contrast to 18.3 percent. One prominent factor contributing to the elevated female unemployment rate was the higher proportion of working women who labored for less than eight hours, thereby qualifying as unemployed (18.4 percent compared to 2.4 percent for men). Even when considering only those who were entirely without work, the unemployment rate for women remained substantially higher than that for men: 28.6 percent versus 16.4 percent, respectively (Central Statistics Organization, 2018).

After the Taliban's assumption of power in August 2021, employment rate in Afghanistan reached its lowest point during the final quarter of that same year (International Labour Organisation, 2023). This phase witnessed a notable reduction, with an estimated deficit of 540,000 individuals employed when compared to the second quarter of 2021. Additionally, there was a decline of around 690,000 men and women participating in the workforce, as contrasted with a hypothetical scenario where the government remained unchanged (International Labour Organisation, 2023). According to findings from the private sector survey conducted by the World Bank, a significant three-quarters of female workers have experienced job layoffs within the surveyed firms since the commencement of August 2021 (World Bank Group, 2022a).

During the initial half of 2022, a minor amelioration was discernible in the labor market, though it was modest (see Figure 7). Nevertheless, this revival predominantly favored adult males who managed to secure employment, often through self-employment opportunities. As late as 2022, the state of employment remained stagnant, culminating in a shortfall of approximately 450,000 workers in the fourth quarter compared to the pre-crisis period. When juxtaposed with the employment figures anticipated without a change in administration, the disparity amounted to a substantial 900,000. The working-age populace bore significant losses due to emigration, contributing to employment stagnation towards the conclusion of 2022. This led to a marked decline in the employment-to-population ratio (EPR), plummeting from 37 percent in the second quarter of 2021 to 33.6 percent in the fourth quarter of the same year. Despite a minor resurgence, the EPR still lingered above 34 percent, indicating a considerable disparity from the levels seen before the administrative transition (International Labour Organisation, 2023).
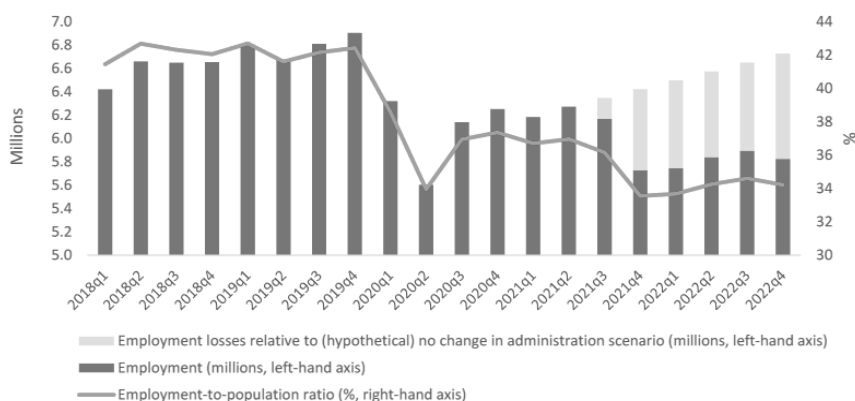
Figure 7: Total employment (millions) and employment-to-population ratio (percent)
(Source: ILO estimates based on Afghanistan Labor Force Survey 2020 and ILOSTAT database)

The recent political change and economic crisis in Afghanistan have significantly impacted labor incomes. The combination of declining wage and salaried employment alongside the increase in self-employment has caused labor income to become more unstable, leading to reduced earnings for many individuals. Based on the findings of the Afghanistan Welfare Monitoring Survey carried out by the World Bank (World Bank Group, 2022b), a considerable 46 percent of all household heads reported a decrease in their earnings.

The crisis in Afghanistan has had a severe and disproportionate impact on young people, particularly those aged 15-24 years. Employment opportunities for the youth have been significantly affected, with a 25 percent decrease in youth employment during the fourth quarter of 2022 compared to the second quarter of 2021. While total employment showed some modest signs of recovery in the first half of 2022, the employment situation for young men and women continued to decline throughout the year. The economic and political situation, along with the humanitarian crisis, has long-term implications for the country's youthful economy and society. More than 40 percent of the total population in 2022 was under the age of 15 years, and over 20 percent were aged 15-24 years (International Labour Organization, 2023).

The secondary school enrolment and changes in youth labor force participation have put immense pressure on the labor market to absorb young job seekers and retain young workers. A comprehensive study conducted by the World Bank (World Bank Group, 2022c) indicates that the labor force participation rate for young men aged 14-24 years increased from 48 per cent in June–August 2020 to 59 percent during the same period in 2022.

Constraining access to education, especially for adolescent girls and young women, yields immediate and enduring repercussions on their educational and labor prospects within Afghanistan (UN WOMEN, 2022). In the fourth quarter of 2022, female employment plummeted by an estimated 25 percent compared to the second quarter of 2021, pre-crisis. Conversely, men experienced a relatively minor dip of only 7 percent during the same timeframe (see Figure 8).
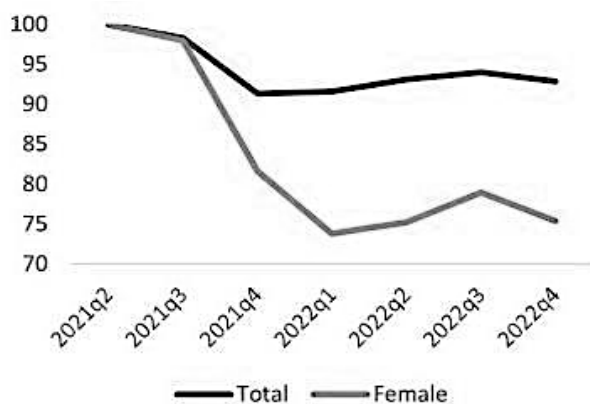
Figure 8: Total and female employment (index, 2021Q2 = 100)
(Source: ILO estimates based on Afghanistan Labor Force Survey 2020 and ILOSTAT database)

The recent prohibition on young women's higher education, implemented at the close of 2022, undoes the advancements achieved over the last two decades. The closure of secondary schools for girls resulted in a reduction in enrolment rates among young women aged 14-18. Furthermore, child labor surged, with one out of every four children indicating their involvement in family support through work (World Bank Group, 2022c).

The constrained labor force participation of women, including the youth, can be attributed to sociocultural norms, limited educational and training access, and the burdens of unpaid household and caregiving responsibilities. The mobility and employment restrictions imposed on women subsequent to the change in government may have also prompted some to withdraw from the labor force (International Labour Organization, 2022).

In response to the challenging circumstances, some women turned to self-employed activities such as farming, piece work, or clothes repair to contribute to household income and mitigate further declines in female employment. These activities are often home-based due to the systematic exclusion of women from public life. However, despite these efforts, the employment situation for women remains critical and has been worsened by a recent decree prohibiting women from working in national and international non-governmental organizations (International Labour Organization, 2023).

Research on the Afghan labor market following the Taliban's assumption of power has brought to light a striking reality: a surge in unemployment. While unemployment is a pervasive challenge affecting the entire working-age population of Afghanistan, the plight of women stands out with an unprecedented increase over the past two decades. This crisis finds its roots in a series of events within Afghanistan. The prevailing harsh economic conditions have triggered a loss of employment opportunities, leading to a sharp uptick in the unemployment rate. Notably, within the private sector, approximately seventy-five percent of female employees across various enterprises have found themselves without jobs.

The stringent constraints imposed by the Taliban on women's participation in the workforce, coupled with their limited access to education beyond the home,

have left a significant portion of Afghan women jobless. The ban on women's education in universities and schools has compounded this issue, further contributing to the growing ranks of unemployed women of working age. Regrettably, the repercussions of denying women access to education extend beyond mere unemployment, exacerbating the overall poverty rate within the nation. A survey undertaken by the Central Statistics Organization underscores the relation between illiteracy and poverty. Those most affected by poverty are frequently characterized by their lack of education.
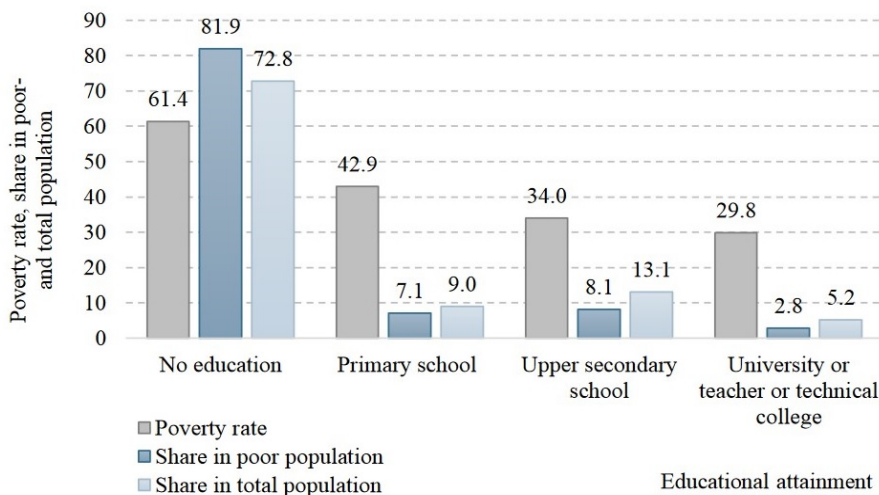

Figure 9: Percentage figures indicating the poverty rate, proportion within the impoverished populace, and portion within the overall population, categorized by the educational achievement of the household head (Central Statistics Organization, 2018)

As depicted in Figure 9, roughly 73 percent of the populace resides in households led by individuals without any formal education. These households constitute a significant majority, comprising 82 percent of the impoverished sector, with an average poverty rate of 61 percent. It's noteworthy that poverty rates tend to decline as the educational attainment of the household head rises; nevertheless, households whose heads possess education beyond the secondary level make up a mere 5 percent of the total population. It's important to note that even when the household head is educated, the potential for poverty still persists.

The labor market in Afghanistan under Taliban control faces severe challenges due to political instability and economic crisis. Women have been particularly affected by restrictions on education and employment, leading to a dramatic reduction in their labor market participation. Unemployment rates have increased, especially among women, who face barriers to employment due to restrictions imposed by the Taliban. The urban labor force has higher unemployment compared to rural areas, exacerbating the challenges faced by households, particularly those headed by women. The ongoing restrictions and lack of educational opportunities further worsen the economic hardships, leading to increased poverty rates across the nation.

In the next chapter, we will refer to our qualitative research and present some insights from expert interviews.

Women's employment landscape in Afghanistan and the role of distance education

The following chapter summarizes key findings related to working opportunities and education for female university students in Afghanistan based on the qualitative findings of five interviews. The key informants stated that following the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan in August 2021, women faced substantial limitations on their employment opportunities due to imposed restrictions. Many job options within the Afghan labor market are practically forbidden to them. Currently, educated women are permitted to work only in sectors such as health, education, media, agriculture, small businesses, and handicrafts (I1, I2, I3, I4, I5).

The authorization to work in these sectors signifies that the Taliban have allowed some women to engage in employment out of their homes. It is important to note that despite these constraints, some women continue to work from home in various capacities, including administrative roles. In these cases, the Taliban lack control over their work and are unable to impede them from carrying out their professional activities remotely.

In rural areas, restrictions on the employment of rural women are not severe; women actively participate in the agricultural sector, particularly in saffron cultivation, honey production, and handicrafts. Urban areas also have some employment opportunities for women in small businesses, tailoring, and handicrafts. The Afghan Diaspora across the US, Europe, Canada, and Australia, provides a global market for locally-produced clothing and handicrafts by women within Afghanistan, and this market is continuously expanding. Recently, the Afghan Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industry has been established in different parts of Afghanistan, initiated with the support of the United Nations Development Program and granted permission by the Taliban government. The establishment of Afghan Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industry signifies that women can participate in the business sector. According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP, 2023a), this organization currently supports 34,000 businesswomen in Afghanistan and aims to increase this number to 50,000. Recently, several businesswomen, backed by this organization, took part in an exhibition in Dubai, showcasing a diverse range of products, including jewelry, carpets, dried fruits, handicrafts, shoes, and saffron. Moreover, as the Internet continues to expand, new opportunities have emerged for online work, offering Afghan women the chance to access the local, regional, and international labor markets. Interviewees in this research highlighted diverse opportunities in the online job market for women. Some women collaborate with international research institutions, engaging in research data collection and conducting telephone interviews (I5). Others are involved in online marketing for various companies. One interviewee named persons who work online as translators for international companies. In the city where she resides, she noted that some students are involved in data entry for an American company (I3).

Despite women's contributions in the fields of health, education, media, and commerce, there are limitations on women's employment in these sectors. Notably, women are currently prohibited from enrolling in universities to study in the mentioned fields. Even those who have graduated from medical programs encounter restrictions under the Taliban government; only women who obtained licenses before the Taliban's rule can continue to practice as physicians. In the

education sector, women are restricted to working in elementary schools, and in the media sector, their employment is confined primarily to Kabul. In the provinces, the constraints imposed by the Taliban make women's work in the media nearly impossible. Additionally, the presence of women in small businesses is notably limited and subdued (I5).

The challenges faced by women in employment extend beyond the official restrictions declared by the Taliban. In numerous instances, individuals associated with the Taliban adopt an even more aggressive stance than the group's officially declared policies, imposing personal preferences that hinder women's employment. The work environment for women in Taliban-approved sectors like health and education has become markedly difficult due to the stringent policies of the Taliban's ethical police concerning women's travel between their homes and workplaces. In numerous cases, the Taliban restrict women from traveling to the city unless accompanied by a male relative. Additionally, economic problems have led to the closure of many businesses, exacerbating the issue of women's unemployment (I1, I3, I5).

The viewpoints of our interviewees shed light on two crucial aspects concerning women's employment opportunities in the labor market. Firstly, women's employment in Afghanistan faces numerous challenges, but viable opportunities exist for their active involvement in the labor market and economic activities. Secondly, despite these opportunities, Afghan women still require empowerment to fully engage in the workforce. Over the past two decades, the international community's support for women's empowerment programs has played a pivotal role in their achievements across various sectors, including education and the economy. To sustain the progress made in enhancing women's participation in Afghanistan, it is imperative to address the challenges posed by the Taliban's restrictions on women. This can be achieved through the implementation of distance learning and online training programs aimed at overcoming barriers and by bolstering women's skills to increase their impactful presence in the labor market.

Research on the impact of E-Learning on female students at Samangan University in Afghanistan (Hakimi et al., 2023) concluded that E-Learning significantly enhances academic achievements, overcoming barriers and enriching learning experiences. Positive feedback from students highlights the motivational and engaging aspects of E-Learning. The study underscores the importance of leveraging technology to provide equitable educational opportunities and enhance academic performance. It suggests the need for increased investments in E-Learning infrastructure, particularly in remote areas with limited traditional educational resources. According to this study, comprehensive teacher training is deemed crucial for the effective use of digital tools and collaboration with diverse stakeholders is encouraged to ensure the sustainable implementation of E-Learning initiatives.

The interviewees suggested that online training courses should target both the Afghan labor market and online job opportunities in the regional and global job markets. Given the limited job opportunities for women in Afghanistan, it is advisable to design and implement online training courses covering various fields such as education, health, journalism, research methods, writing skills development, management skills, accounting, entrepreneurship, small business start-ups, website design, and marketing for agricultural products and handicrafts. Moreover, specific educational courses for Afghan women can be

developed to focus on skills required for online jobs in the regional and international labor markets. This includes subjects like computer programming, application development, and applied software, which can enhance women's prospects of securing online jobs (I1, I2, I3, I4, I5).

Ensuring successful implementation of online courses for women in Afghanistan depends on essential prerequisites such as reliable Internet connectivity and access to electricity. Moreover, participants enrolled in courses covering web design, computer programming, application development, and software training for various professions must possess a personal computer. Without this crucial tool, engaging in the practical projects integral to these courses becomes impractical. To meet these conditions, a flexible approach to course delivery is necessary, enabling participants to engage during periods of stable electricity and accommodating potential disruptions affecting one to three individuals per teaching session. Addressing these challenges can involve recording and sharing instructional videos, as well as providing learning resources to students. In the long term, establishing an online educational platform in the form of a dedicated website is essential. Such a platform would enable participants to access educational materials seamlessly, ensuring uninterrupted availability throughout the course (I3). Moreover, over 90% of the Afghan population currently suffers from poverty (Tzannatos & Violetta, 2023). Consequently, a significant number of women face financial constraints that hinder their ability to afford proper internet access for online training courses. To ensure equal opportunities for all women deprived of education to participate in online training, it is essential to cover their monthly internet fees during the training period. The estimated monthly internet fee stands at approximately 30 euros (I1). A number of women, particularly those residing in rural areas without internet access, face significant challenges participating in online training courses. To address this, recorded educational videos and relevant materials can be distributed to them via flash memory and computer storage, enabling self-paced learning. Alternatively, an option is to cover the cost of their internet and stay in cities with internet access, amounting to approximately 100 euros per month (I5). Given that many villagers have connections in urban areas, they can rent suitable accommodations during the training course. This approach mirrors the practice employed by rural students over the past two decades when preparing for Afghanistan's higher education entrance exam, Kankur. During the three-month winter break, students traditionally migrated to cities, enhancing their educational skills through specialized courses, with a particular focus on mathematics and science. One of the alternative options to make training courses accessible to a large number of participants in Afghanistan is to use satellite technology as an educational medium. Distance education through satellite television emerges as a viable alternative to educate women without internet access. Television holds widespread usage in Afghanistan, reaching 68% of the population, including rural areas, as indicated by a survey conducted in 2021, see Figure 10 (BBC Media Action, 2021).
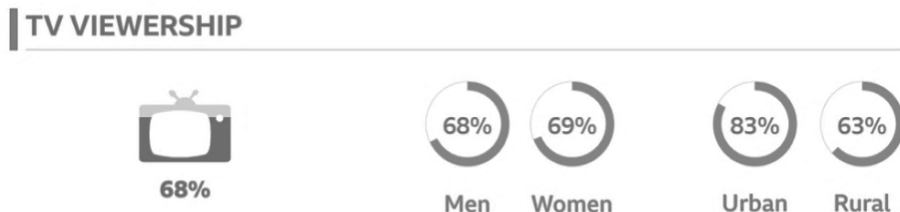
Figure 10: Television viewership rate in Afghanistan.
(Source: BBC Media Action)

The process for distance education via television involves recording teaching sessions, preparing them for broadcast in both television and multimedia formats. To disseminate educational content across Afghanistan, making it accessible to all participants, satellite technology is employed for television broadcasting and sending training materials in various formats (text, audio, and video) to students. This technology enables the delivery of digital educational content using a standard home TV satellite set-top box, eliminating the requirement for extra hardware. The educational content will be integrated into a typical TV video stream as .ts files and transmitted through a satellite TV channel (Moon, 2016). Students can record the video stream with their regular satellite TV receiver, transfer it to their smartphone or computer, and utilize an application to decode the video stream into text, audio, or video files for viewing. The Yahsat Satellite Communications Company currently provides this service in the region. Establishing a suitable studio and broadcast center is essential for television production and distributing educational content to students via satellite. This approach ensures widespread access to educational materials throughout the region, enhancing educational opportunities for Afghan women.

Various distance education options aimed at enhancing women's skills and fostering their employment opportunities in Afghanistan provide a viable means to overcome the constraints imposed by the Taliban. These initiatives empower Afghan women to pursue entrepreneurship by acquiring marketable skills or securing employment aligned with their capabilities. Conducting training courses through the mentioned methods demands human and financial resources. Fortunately, over the last two decades, the expansion of education in Afghanistan has led to a significant number of capable Afghan instructors both within and outside the country, qualified to teach in the field of distance education. Therefore, most educational programs can be conducted in Persian and Pashto languages. Moreover, there is a notable number of Afghan women proficient in English who can actively engage in training courses delivered in that language. For these female students, non-Afghan instructors can also contribute by instructing in English.

Training courses can be done according to academic standards regarding subjects and credit requirements. Individuals who successfully complete the training will receive a certificate from a university. Implementing this approach in educational programs can significantly ease the integration of Afghan women into the workforce. Furthermore, the credits they successfully pass may be transferable to bachelor's degree programs at various universities in the future. Therefore, universities are the best qualified institutes to organize these training courses for Afghan women (I1).

Using the management and communication capacity of local educational institutions in Afghanistan for conducting educational courses can enhance their effectiveness and streamline the implementation process. Informing applicants about participation and encouraging their registration, along with distributing the cost of internet, necessitates local cooperation. While private universities are not able to independently conduct online training courses for girls, they can collaborate with international organizations and universities outside Afghanistan. Additionally, they can play a crucial role in providing human resources by introducing qualified instructors to teach in these educational courses (I1).

The key point regarding online training courses is that it should not be viewed as a long-term solution for the education of women facing deprivation in Afghanistan. Rather, it serves as a temporary measure to address the constraints imposed by the Taliban on Afghan women. Some experts interviewed in this research expressed concern about the acceptance of online education by international institutions as an alternative to formal education. They perceive it as a potential step towards normalizing the restrictions imposed by the Taliban on Afghan women. These interviewees believe that such online training should be regarded as a short-term emergency response rather than a long-term solution. Therefore, they call for increased pressure on the Taliban government to respect women's rights and remove the ban on women's education (I3, I5).

Sectors with potential employment opportunities for Afghans, particularly women

This chapter uses quantitative evidence to explore the Afghanistan job market and check women's employment opportunities. We use published job offers as a proxy for job opportunities. We do not claim that we can give a full and exact overview about the (legal parts of the) Afghan labor market. But the analysis of job offers of the biggest and most popular digital job portal, Acbar, allows us to estimate whether there are any job opportunities for women. In order to produce more than a single snapshot of the labor market, we observed the job portal for several months (cf. Chapter 3 for details). We mainly try to shed light on the following questions:

1. Are there any job offers for women and if so in what sector?

2. Does the proportion in the previous question change over the time of data collection?

3. What are the rules of education and work experience in relation to gender?

4. What key skills were mentioned as required for a successful hiring?

Descriptives

The following Table 4 presents the description and some key summary statistics of the above observed variables.

Table 4: Description of the variables and some key summary statistics

Variable	Description	Summary statistics
Location	Location of the job	Maximum-Kabul City: 860 (41%) Minimum- Panjshir: 4 *Women: Kabul City - 81*
Nationality	International National (Afghan) Any	6 2006 (97%) 52 *Women: National - 307*
Job Category	Agriculture, Business, Education, Engineering, Health, IT, Law, Security	Mostly-Business: 1003 (49%) Least-Legal: 16 (0.7%) *Women: Business - 103*
Employment Type	Full time Part time	2018 (98%) 46 (2%) *Women: Full time - 300*
Gender	Female Male Any	310 (15%) 518 (25%) 1236 (60%)
Experience-in years	Minimum / maximum work experience required	min = 0, avg = 3.4, max = 15, SD = 1.9 *Women: avg = 2.6 (SD = 1.4)*
Minimum educational degree required	Secondary school High school Vocational degree Bachelor's degree Master's degree Medical degree None	21 (1%) 162 (8%) 21 (1%) 1547 (75%) 144 (7%) 133 (6%) 36 (1.7%)

Table 4 suggests that most of the jobs offered are located in Kabul. Majority of the openings are for Afghan candidates and nearly all positions are full-time. A significant result of the observed frequencies is that only 25% of positions are looking for only male candidates, 15% opened only for female applicants, the rest are open for both genders. With Taliban's restrictions on women's employment, this result is surprising.

In order to check the variation across time, we checked the variability of different variables across different rounds of data harvesting.

With the main focus on women's share in the job market, we checked the percentage of job ads exclusively for women across time. Figure 11 depicts the distribution with x-axes representing eight different rounds of data collection. Figure 11 illustrates that the proportion of jobs open only for females is fairly stable around 15% ranging from 10% to 18% during several months of observation.

Our data shows that the significance of the health sector for women in terms of labor market opportunities is outstanding. The next Figure 11 shows that the proportion of jobs in this sector is also fairly stable at around 23%. Compared to other sectors, the health sector is the one where the proportion of female exclusive jobs is predominant. During several months there is some dynamic in the health-related job offers. Figure 11 suggests a relatively high variation of the proportion across eight different rounds.
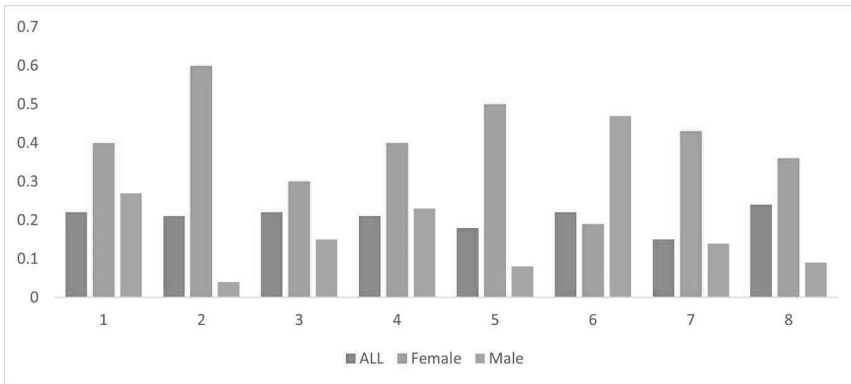

Figure 11: Proportion of jobs in the health sector based on gender

According to our data, part-time job offers are very rare in Afghanistan. Based on statistics on the types of jobs (Full/Part time), the percentage of full time offers remains above more than 90% throughout our data collection period.

Analysis

In this subsection, we will have a deeper look at the data on different variables.

When it comes to successful hiring, relevant job experience is one of the main factors. Looking at the distribution of the working experience required (Figure 12), it is evident that about 90% of the jobs require 5 years or less working experience and 50% require at least 3 years of working experience.
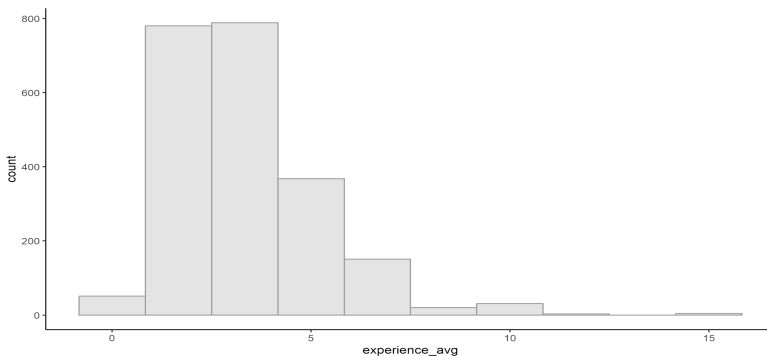

Figure 12: Minimum working experience required (in years)

A leading concern, in the face of the current reality in Afghanistan, is the exploration of the association of different variables with gender. This will allow one to better understand the job opportunities for women and how possible interventions could improve their chances. To that end we have explored the

association of Gender with Job Category, Education and Experience requirements.

Understanding which job categories are exclusively for female candidates, which ones are open only to male candidates, and which ones are for both genders gives a clear idea of which measures can support women's employment. To that end we construct a joint frequency table to study the association of Gender and Job Category. Table 5 depicts the joint distribution of Gender and the Job Category.

Table 5: Joint distribution of gender and job category

	Agriculture	Business	Education	Engineering	Health	IT	Law	Security	Others
Female	3 (7.5%)	103 (10.3%)	15 (15.15%)	4 (4.6%)	155 (36.4%)	1 (2.3%)	1 (6.2%)	1 (2.3%)	27 (8.8%)
Male	9 (22.5%)	227 (22.6%)	42 (42.4%)	37 (42.5%)	88 (20.6%)	12 (27.3%)	4 (25%)	22 (51.2%)	77 (25.2%)
Any	28 (70%)	673 (67.1%)	42 (42.4%)	46 (52.9%)	183 (43%)	31 (70.4%)	11 (68.7%)	20 (46.5%)	202 (66%)
Total	40	1003	99	87	426	44	16	43	306

Table 5 suggests that there is a high demand exclusively for female candidates in the health sector. Furthermore, the business-sector is also of very importance for women. In sum, the health sector and the business-sector represent more than 80% of the job offers that are exclusively offered for women. Figure 13 illustrates the proportions of female-exclusive jobs in the different labor-market sectors.
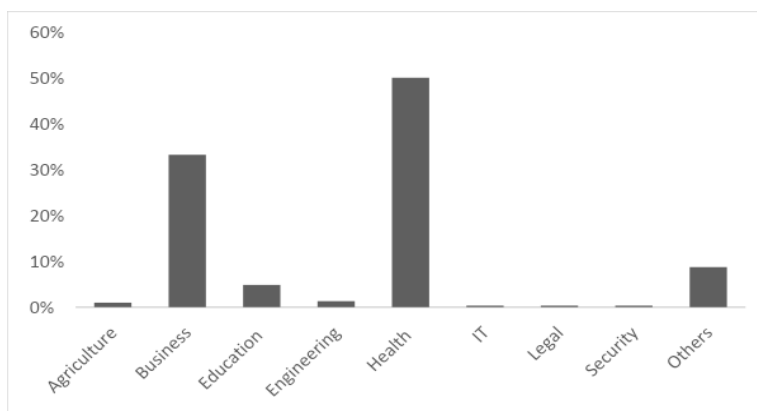

Figure 13: Proportion of females' exclusive jobs across sectors

In sectors like Agriculture, Engineering, and Security demands for male candidates dominate. There are surprisingly little job offers exclusively for women in the education sector. Only around five percent of all job offers that are exclusively for women are located in the educational sector.

If the focus were on supporting female employment, we need to look at the competition area, where either gender can assume the position.

Next, we explore the association of gender and minimum education requirements. Understanding this association is especially important because of the Taliban's restrictions on women's education---it is becoming increasingly harder for them to fulfill the education requirement. Figure 14 shows the association of gender and minimum education requirement.
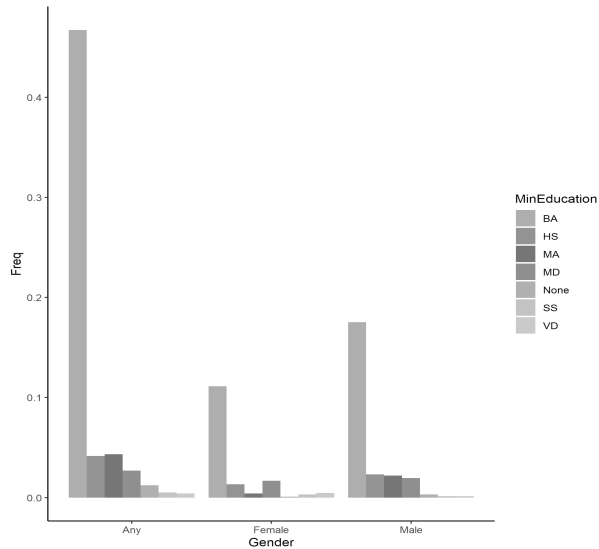

Figure 14: Association of Gender and Minimum Education

Figure 14 suggests that a bachelor degree is widely asked also for the female candidates (which is the same also for males) followed by a medical degree, which, referring to the significance of the health sector, is obvious.

If gender is not expressed in the job offers, a Bachelor's degree is clearly the dominant minimum education requirement. This is of course a direct effect of the selected data source Acbar. The next important dimension is the required working experience. Working experience is something that cannot be acquired via training. Hence it is relatively harder to facilitate this requirement through a third-party intervention---for instance. To understand the association of gender and minimum work experience required, we employed an F-test and compared the mean standard deviation of the work experience across different Gender categories. The following table presents the summary of our analysis.

Table 6: Required working experiences in years by gender category

	Min	Mean	Median	Standard	95th Percentile
Female	0	2.6	2	1.4	5
Male	0	3.3	3	1.9	6.6
Any	0	3.6	3	2	7

Table 6 suggests that on average the positions for female candidates require significantly less work experience and based on the standard deviations, this requirement does not vary much across these positions. The 95th percentile confirms a much lower work experience requirement for jobs exclusive to female candidates. Here too, one has to pay a particular attention to the "Any" area. The average work experience required in this area is significantly higher than that of the "Female" group. This can be a bigger obstacle towards female employment in the long run.

Another factor that can be key for designing supportive measures is the understanding of the key skills required for the advertised positions. To come up with a list of frequently asked key skills, we have analyzed the collected data—which are in the form of text – on key skills. Due to the fact that the data is in the form of text, we have employed text mining to transform it into a structured form. From the total 2199 observations (job ads), 595 (98 female, 84 male, 413 both) of them contain the key skills data. Applying text mining analysis on information on key skills, we have discovered the most frequently asked skills. Figure 15 depicts the top 15 most frequently asked key skills.
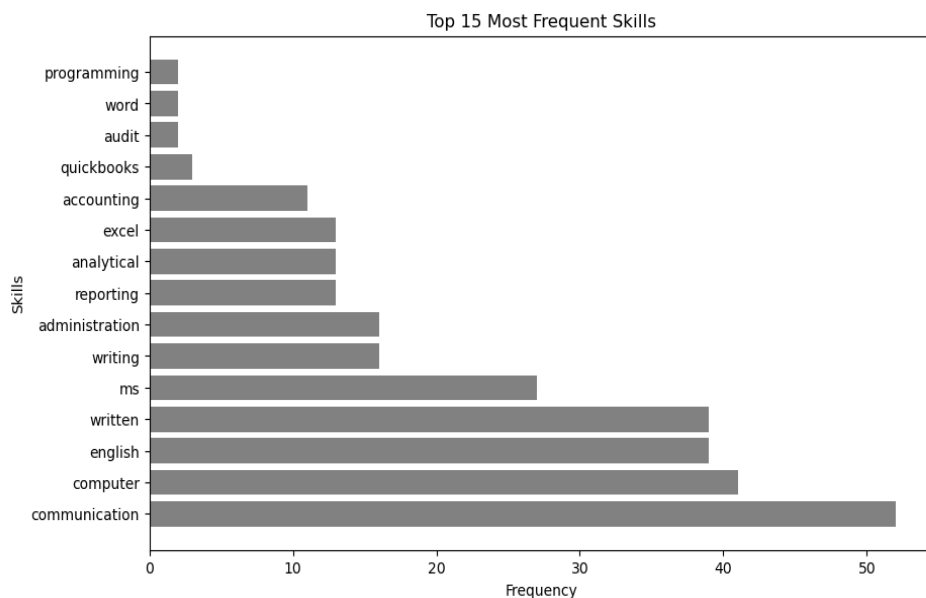

Figure 15: Frequently asked Key Skills

Figure 15 suggests that communication skill is the most widely asked skill. Writing skills (also coded as *Written*), computer skills--especially office programs, accounting, including QuickBooks and auditing skills are also favorite skills. To understand the key skills required for the jobs exclusively for females/males, we have looked at them separately. Figure 16 presents the key skills asked for jobs exclusively for females.
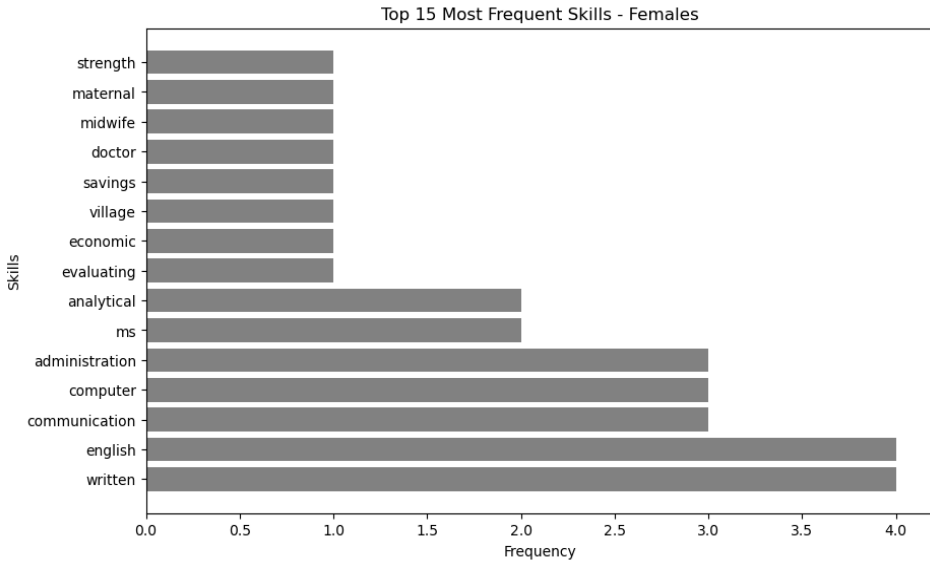
Figure 16: Frequently asked Key Skills: Females

Based on Figure 16, English language skills, communication, and computer skills are among the widely required skills for females' exclusive jobs. Furthermore, analytical skills, ability to work in rural areas, possessing a medical and nursing degree are also among the key requirements.

For the men on the other hand the set of required skills is different. Communication skills are the most widely asked skills. English language skills, accounting, reporting, and analytical skills are also frequently asked. Moreover, driver positions typically are meant for male candidates. Figure 17 presents the most asked skills for the positions exclusive to males.
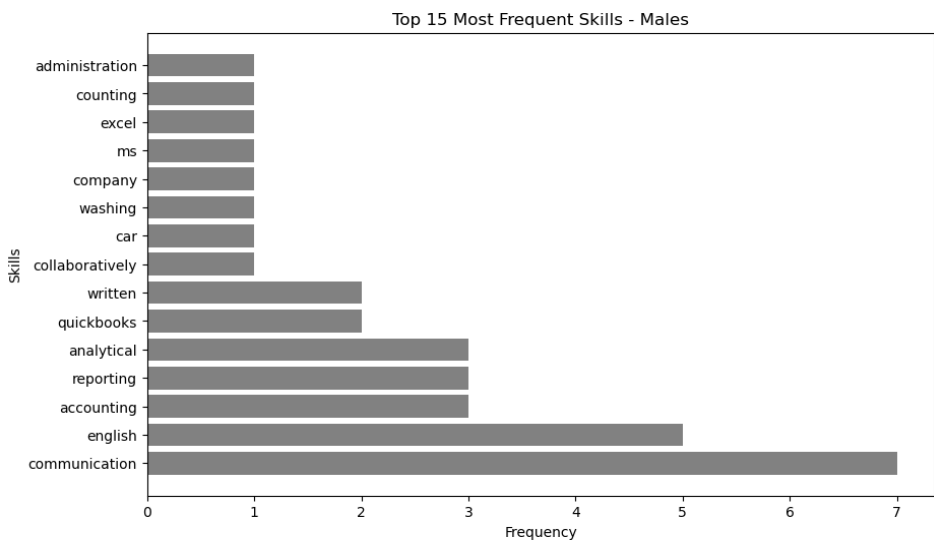

Figure 17: Frequently asked key skills: Males

After giving an overview about gender-related job offers in Afghanistan on the basis of the job portal ACBAR, we will present a brief discussion part.

Discussion

The findings of this research indicate that the Taliban have imposed extensive gender discrimination against Afghan women. The education of girls above the sixth grade is prohibited, and women are denied access to higher education. Most employment opportunities are limited for them. Despite these restrictions, there are still opportunities for women's employment in the labor market of Afghanistan and the region. Since the existence of these employment opportunities appears contradictory to the portrayal in the public media regarding the removal of Afghan women from the public arena, it is necessary to clarify that the existing opportunities for women's employment are highly fragile. The prohibition of women's education gradually leads to their transformation into unskilled human resources. In other words, if women are not empowered through alternative educational options, they cannot enter the labor market and benefit from the available employment opportunities. Furthermore, the expansion of Internet access has increased the possibility of working from home for Afghan women. By utilizing these facilities, women actively resist the Taliban and attempt to cross their restrictions at the lowest cost. However, the constraints imposed on women's education and work by the Taliban cannot be considered completely resolved. Afghan women have abnormal lives under the rule of the Taliban.

The aim of this research is to identify employment opportunities for women in Afghanistan. Through interviews with Afghan experts, we found out that the online job market, both regionally and internationally, offers significant potential for the employment of Afghan women. However, a comprehensive understanding of remote employment capacities for Afghan women in the regional and international labor market requires further research. This research reveals that Afghan women can overcome the restrictions imposed by the Taliban and enhance their employment prospects by acquiring the necessary skills for remote and online jobs. Therefore, it is advisable to organize training courses to empower Afghan women through education. The skills gained from such courses would be valuable in both the traditional job market of Afghanistan and the online job market, not only within the country but also regionally and internationally.

The findings of this research depict the current state of Afghan women in the country's labor market. The Taliban's conduct towards women is unpredictable; restrictions on women may either expand or decrease. Recently, the Taliban have become stricter regarding women's clothing, even arresting some who, in their view, did not adhere to proper Islamic dress code(AP, 2024). Such actions indicate that the Taliban's discriminatory policy against women may be enforced more severely. Whether the existing restrictions on women persist or reduce, empowering women through training programs will significantly contribute to enhancing their employment prospects.

If the Taliban persists in gender discrimination against women in Afghanistan, their exclusion from the job market would be considered an extraordinary challenge from both a humanitarian and human rights perspective. Addressing this exceptional problem requires unique and

exceptional solutions including providing educational and empowerment services. In the long run, limited educational courses are insufficient as a solution for the Afghan women. An effective strategy to promote women's higher education necessitates offering conventional academic programs at the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels, enabling them to obtain valid educational diplomas upon graduation. By leveraging available communication technology capacities, such as the internet and satellite TVs, it is possible to provide educational services for a large number of women deprived of education in Afghanistan. The Taliban's ban on women's education in Afghanistan is an unprecedented event. Overcoming this challenge and facilitating women's access to education demand flexible methods and approaches—options that may not be ideal but are currently the only viable ones.

Conclusion

The limited participation of women in the Afghan labor market has been a significant challenge over the past half-century. From 2002 until the collapse of the republican system, during which the international community, particularly the United States, the European Union, and other supporting countries, provided substantial financial aid to Afghanistan, women constituted approximately 25% of the country's workforce. In addition to insufficient employment opportunities and traditional values constraining women's presence in the labor market, the low professional capacity of women in terms of the skills required in the Afghan labor market has been one of the major obstacles to their engagement. One indicator of this is the high participation of rural women in the labor force compared to their urban counterparts. This difference arises because working in rural areas typically demands simpler skills, whereas the urban labor market necessitates skills often acquired through a more modern education. Despite the relatively good effectiveness of women's empowerment programs implemented with the support of the international community, they have not succeeded in reducing the gender gap in employment to an acceptable level.

Since the Taliban returned to power in August 2021, there has been an unprecedented increase in unemployment. The rate of unemployment among women has disproportionately increased compared to men, exemplified by the loss of employment for three-quarters of women in private enterprises. Women's unemployment has been primarily driven by two factors: the Taliban's extreme gender discrimination against them and the economic crisis that emerged following the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan. By prohibiting the education of girls above the sixth grade and banning female students from universities, the Taliban effectively dismissed women employed in the education sector. Furthermore, the ban on Afghan women working in foreign non-governmental organizations operating in Afghanistan further contributed to female unemployment. Additionally, restrictions such as the mandate for women to be accompanied by a male family member while traveling and enforcing stringent Hijab regulations have also played a role in increasing the unemployment rate among women. Alongside the Taliban's gender discrimination, the economic crisis that unfolded in Afghanistan post-August 2021 led to the closure of numerous businesses operating in both the manufacturing and service sectors, resulting in the unemployment of many women primarily employed in these areas.

Despite the restrictions imposed by the Taliban on women's work, the findings of this research indicate that there are still employment opportunities for women in Afghanistan's labor market. There is demand for women to work in agriculture, business, education, engineering, health, information technology, clerical work, legal services, research, accounting, marketing, and project management. According to the findings of this research, 15% of these employment opportunities are only for women. Therefore, the level of competition for these special employment opportunities is relatively low due to their allocation to women, and women only compete with each other to secure them. A significant portion of job opportunities is not gender-specific. To succeed in obtaining them, women must compete with male applicants who have had more opportunities to improve their capacity in traditional Afghan society than women, giving them a higher chance of employment. The restrictions imposed by the Taliban on women's education have had a negative impact on their ability to compete with men in obtaining employment opportunities, making success in this sector very challenging for women. Despite the progress made in the last twenty years, Afghanistan's educational system does not align well with the demands of the Afghan labor market in terms of skill development. As a result, many Afghan university graduates, particularly female graduates, must seek additional skills to enhance their employability and chances of success in the workforce.

Many women who have lost their jobs due to the Taliban's oppressive policies, particularly those who were employed in the education sector and are now unemployed because of the closure of girls' schools and the prohibition of women's education in universities, must acquire skills that align with the job opportunities present in the labor market. This necessitates an improvement in their capacity through training, enabling them to secure employment in Afghanistan's labor market and region.

Online training courses for Afghan women should be seen as a temporary solution to the restrictions imposed by the Taliban, not a permanent strategy. There is a concern that the international community might consider online education as an alternative to traditional education, which could normalize the Taliban's restrictions on Afghan women.

Recommendations for educational offers for Aghan females under challenging circumstances

After the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan has been widely regarded as one of the most challenging countries for women. Beyond the restrictive measures imposed by the Taliban, their unprecedented limitations on women's work and economic activities stand out as particularly challenging. With Afghanistan witnessing the highest levels of gender discrimination, Afghan women now need support in various forms more urgently than ever before. This research highlights specific recommendations for supporting women's employment through professional training. Hence, we propose a set of recommendations focusing on the implementation of professional training for Afghan women, addressing aspects such as management, access, and the content of training programs.

Management

Developing targeted e-learning courses

Planning and implementing comprehensive online training programs tailored for sectors where women are permitted to work, or to build capacity for hybrid jobs in the region and internationally. This includes health, education, media, agriculture, small businesses, computer programming, and online marketing.

Funding for online professional trainings

There are sufficient Afghan and non-Afghan instructors available to conduct professional training courses both within and outside Afghanistan, and their expertise can be utilized in online education. The primary limitation in this scenario is the insufficient financial resources to cover internet fees and laptop price for low-income participants and instructors' compensation. It is recommended to allocate adequate funds to support the implementation of the aforementioned training courses.

Certification offer

Participants completing courses should receive recognized credentials for employment purposes or further education.

Learning Management System (LMS)

Delivering training courses to a large number of diverse populations in various subjects requires a suitable Learning Management System (LMS) to effectively manage and track online training. It is crucial to ensure that the training platform is user-friendly, with a straightforward navigation structure and an intuitive interface for both trainers and participants. Additionally, optimizing the training platform for popular devices, including laptops, tablets, and smartphones, is essential.

Access

Bridging the rural-urban divide

Access to online educational infrastructure, including internet and electricity, is comparatively limited in rural areas compared to urban areas. To ensure equitable access to educational courses, it is essential to provide rural participants with a small solar panel, rechargeable battery, and a laptop, in addition to covering the internet fees.

Expanding access via Satellite TV

Some rural areas in Afghanistan lack Internet access. With adequate financial resources, a more effective approach would be to record training sessions and subsequently broadcast them through satellite TV. This would extend the reach of training programs to a broader audience.

Content

Generally, it is advisable to align training courses with the job opportunities present in the Afghan labor market, as well as remote and online work options within the regional and international employment landscapes. This approach

aims to enhance women's employment prospects. Here some courses are recommended to empower women in employment:

Course title	Justification
Computer programming	... is a highly sought-after skill in the Afghan, regional, and international labor markets. Afghan women can participate in global coding projects, offer freelance programming services, and collaborate with international clients, leveraging their programming skills for remote work.
Application development	... is a skill in demand in the local job market and globally. Afghan women can take advantage of online platforms to offer their services as freelance app developers, participating in international projects and collaborating with clients from around the world.
Website designing	... skills allow Afghan women to support local businesses in creating and maintaining their websites. With the rise of remote work, website designers are in demand globally. Afghan women can offer their services on online platforms, working with clients from different countries.
Entrepreneurship Fundamentals	Afghan women equipped with entrepreneurship skills can establish their businesses, contributing to job creation and economic growth within their communities.
Digital marketing for small businesses	... skills enable Afghan women to support local businesses in promoting their products or services online, contributing to the growth of the local economy. Afghan women can offer their digital marketing services online, working with clients from different regions.
Small business management	... skills empower Afghan women to establish and run successful small businesses, contributing to local economic development and job creation.
Teaching method	Proficiency in teaching methods is crucial for female educators engaged in homeschooling, especially when instructing girls who have been barred from formal education, hidden from the scrutiny of the Taliban. Afghan women with expertise in teaching methods can enhance online education platforms by crafting instructional content, designing courses, and offering training to Afghan girls.
Research method	A significant number of women, who previously served as university professors, have had their academic activities prohibited by the Taliban. Nonetheless, they can engage in active research and establish collaborations with research institutions outside of Afghanistan, particularly in the field of social science research. Teaching research methods, while enhancing their research skills, also boosts their employment prospects.
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences is valuable in research, social sciences, and academia, increasing employability in roles that involve statistical analysis and data interpretation.

Project management fundamentals	... skills are essential for coordinating tasks and projects in various sectors, increasing employability in project-oriented roles.
Office administration & management	Proficiency in office administration is crucial for roles in various organizations, including NGOs, and private businesses, enhancing employability in administrative positions.
Digital journalism & multimedia storytelling	Afghan women skilled in digital journalism can offer multimedia storytelling services online, contributing to digital media outlets, podcasts, and online video platforms, broadening their employment prospects in the online media sector.
Investigative journalism	... skills are essential for uncovering and reporting on critical issues, increasing employability in roles requiring in-depth research and reporting.
AutoCAD (Computer-Aided Design)	Proficiency in AutoCAD is indispensable in various industries such as architecture, engineering, and construction, enhancing employability in roles requiring design and drafting skills. Afghan women skilled in AutoCAD can offer remote drafting and design services globally, expanding their employment prospects in the online design and drafting sector.
QuickBooks	Proficiency in widely used accounting software like QuickBooks is valuable for businesses in Afghanistan, increasing employability in roles that require hands-on experience with this tool.
Health education & promotion	Expertise in health education and promotion is essential for roles focused on community health improvement, increasing employability in healthcare settings and community-based organizations.
English Language	... proficiency is a key requirement for many job opportunities in Afghanistan, especially in international organizations, businesses, and educational institutions, enhancing employability in various sectors. It increases eligibility for scholarship programs, facilitating opportunities for Afghan women to study abroad.

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Chapter 18

Education in Afghanistan:
The Fight Against Gender Apartheid[1]

Sima Samar

The banning of women from education and work constitutes gender apartheid and prevents sustainable peace and development in Afghanistan. This discrimination, particularly the government's systematic exclusion of women from public life, fuels societal conflict. The denial of education to women contributes to higher rates of child and maternal mortality, increased child marriage, and a rise in domestic violence, all of which obstruct national progress. An educated population is essential for upholding the rule of law and preventing radicalization, as uneducated individuals are more easily swayed by extremist ideologies. Afghans, especially those in exile, should prioritize education as a powerful form of resistance against the Taliban, support their relatives' access to education, and promote accountability and justice in Afghanistan.

Keywords: *gender apartheid, education, women, personal experience*

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[1] This article is the revised version of the keynote I gave at the conference 'Polycrisis in Afghanistan' in Freiburg, Germany, in July 2024.

I think we all know that access to education is a basic human right and a vital tool to change societies. Unfortunately, we are in Afghanistan, which means we are in the only country on this planet where the government has officially banned girls' education beyond the sixth grade. And why is that? What is the rationale behind? I would like to provide some answers to this complex question.

My own experiences with education and the history of education in Afghanistan

When I look at myself, I realize that education has played a crucial role in my life (cf. Samar 2024). I keep telling people that the difference between me and my cousins is that I had the opportunity to receive an education, whereas that they did not. So, it's not that my mind was bigger than theirs or that I was very special. We were born in the same area, in Ghazni province, and later I grew up in Helmand; both are in Afghanistan, in a difficult and problematic environment, because of the many conflicts that continue till today. I keep telling people that I have seen twelve different King leaders in Afghanistan in my lifetime. Imagine, if it is a "normal" area, if it is a region where normal democratic elections take place, then you could easily see twelve different leaders. But the leaders I saw were not democratically elected leaders, they did not rely on the participation of the people who chose their leaders voluntarily. Unfortunately, most of them took power by force and violence.

Sixty years ago, I went to school in Helmand, a very conservative part of the country. I attended a school that followed the previous Afghan curriculum. I would say the curriculum was not very good. However, it was not as politicized as it was even during the Republic of Afghanistan. For example, we studied religion until the 12th grade in school, but no one imposed Sharia law and it was accepted by the people as part of our education. If you really want to be a good Muslim and want to practice as much and intensively as you wish, that is your decision. There is no need to impose strong Islamic rules, to make people better Muslims. But then it started during the Mujahedeen government when they made Islamic Studies compulsory even at the university level. This applied to engineering, medicine, and all other faculties, and the Taliban enforced it further. Now, under the second reign of the Taliban, it is even worse. Now they want to replace all the subjects with Islamic studies. During the Russian period in Afghanistan, when the coup d'état happened and the Russian army invaded the country, they started to change the education system of Afghanistan to make it compatible with that of the USSR. The original curriculum was not very bad; it was actually much better than the current one and more impartial. However, of course, they focused on the subjects from their own perspective. For example, geography predominantly covered the communist countries, focusing only on Eastern Europe, Russia and the other countries. But then came the Mujahideen in the 1990s. Initially, they were not interested in educational issues at all, when they started establishing schools. During this time, they only focused on Islamic countries, geography was then only about Islamic countries. Mathematics was about how many soldiers were killed; how many tanks were captured, and so on. Every educational subject became extremely politicized. The Mujahideen connected every single subject to their interpretation of Islam, turning the education system into a tool for promoting their ideologies.

Consequences of war

The problem with war is that it not only causes physical destruction, but it also destroys people's behavior and relationships. Discrimination existed in Afghanistan earlier, 60 years ago, but not to this extent. I am now in the United States of America. And when I watch movies produced in the 1960s, then I can see how strong the racial segregation was between the White and the Black in different public places like buses and restaurants. Our Afghan society was much better at that time. I was a young child back then, but I never witnessed that level of discrimination against minorities, for example, against the Hazaras, to which I belong.

We know how distracting war can be. But in Afghanistan we had war for 46 years now! Most of the people living in Afghanistan are young and have never experienced a peaceful society in their entire lives. They have never seen the emancipated and free Afghanistan that I remember from the past.

Another issue that I would like to raise concerns the consequences of flawed educational policies. If you really want to destroy a nation or a society, you do not need to have all these "mother bombs" or "father bombs", or the highly sophisticated missiles. It is enough, and even more effective and sustainable, to simply destroy the education system. The educational system we had in Afghanistan has almost been forgotten due to the long history of conflict. Nobody has ever tried to focus consistently on improving this education system, not even during the twenty years of the so-called Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

So, one of the most brutal destructions you can do to a nation would be the destruction of the education system. By destroying the education system, you really destroy the nation and impede, or at least slow down, democracy, societal progress, and sustainable peace.

Gender adpartheid

Afghanistan is unique. The first Taliban regime actually implemented *gender apartheid*. The term 'gender apartheid' is strong and appropriate here, because the imposition of the discrimination against girls and women is strategic, systematic, and organized and is carried out by the so-called government. I remember that, under the Karzai administration, we held the first workshop when I was nominated as the chairperson of the Human Rights Commission. We worked with people who were responsible to look at the curriculum of the schools at the Ministry of Education. First of all, there were all conservative fundamentalists belonging to the different political parties. And as soon as they could, they began to impose their values on the educational field. They said: "We do not want educational reforms. We want our children to grow up to be good Muslim. We don't want these ideas of human rights and so on".

After we had discussed it intensively for three days. I still did not want to be aggressive. So, instead of direct confrontation, I mentioned my position but in a smoother way. Regarding human rights, I raised questions such as: Do people need to have shelter? The answer, of course, was: Yes. Is this against Islam? The answer was: No. Do people need good access to quality education? Yes. Is this un-Islamic? No. Do people need to have access to clean water? Yes. Is this un-

Islamic? No. So, topics like these are not Islamic, yet they express universal human rights. So, why, then, do you say that everyone who talks about human rights is un-Islamic and not worth listening to? By the end of the third day, they were a little softer.

In the last years of the Afghanistan Republic, I think it was in 2019, we held another workshop with the people about the curriculum, because the one they made was not really good in terms of human rights education and gender equality; it was rather very patriarchal. And it was the same style of patriarchy that sought to put women in inferior positions. During the workshop, a participant told a joke that perfectly exemplified the extremely conservative mentality. I think it was during the discussions for the sixth-grade curriculum. The joke went like this: Ahmed saw his friend Mahmood crying. Ahmed asked Mahmood "Why are you crying?" "My grandmother died," Mahmoud said. But then Ahmed told him that his chicken had died too, even though it was laying eggs. Ahmed said, "See, even my chicken died, and I don't cry. But your grandmother was not even laying eggs, and you are crying!" Imagine reducing a woman's dignity to that of a chicken. Why compare the dignity of a grandmother to that of a chicken?

In addition to the destruction of a society through the destruction of its education system, I believe there is another key factor in the continuation of conflict within a country or the destruction of a nation. This is devaluing the female family member. When you devalue the mothers, your sisters, grandmothers, and all other female family members, you create conflict within families. Because discrimination is a cause of conflict. Thus, you actually cause large-scale societal destruction. Children grow up with this mentality and take it outside the family home, to the classroom, the streets, and ultimately, to society as a whole. If women cannot get an education, if women cannot walk on the street, if women cannot go to the park, and if women cannot work, their voices should not be heard by unrelated men. In my view, this gender apartheid policy is crazy because how can a boy or a man can be better than a girl or a woman when both genders are born by their mothers? And how can you be a better person than your own mother? It's against human dignity.

There is an additional, linked issue that is really destructive to society, causes conflict and prevents sustainable peace in a country: not respecting and believing in equality and human rights values. This leads to the belief that one ethnic group or this religion is superior to another. I believe that human dignity is equal and everyone should be treated fairly. This is also a cause of the conflict and the continuation of conflict. This is what we currently have in Afghanistan. What we currently have in Afghanistan is more than the, albeit bad and brutal, sexual gender-based violence. It's more than that, it's beyond "ordinary gender-based violence". In Afghanistan, the government removes women from public life. Women don't have the right to show their faces. So, what I am trying to say is that we must insist on equality in order to promote a real, prosperous Afghanistan.

Failing to invest in education leads to increased poverty within families. Without education, it is difficult to create a prosperous society, a developed society or a democratic society. This is particularly true, if half of the population is banned from education and participation in public life. Therefore, it is really important to consider education for Afghan women. If you really intend honestly

to build a prosperous country, reduce poverty and reduce hunger, improve society, it can only be done through education. Nothing else can do it.

What happened in Afghanistan was just the opposite. The Taliban actually erased half of the population from public life and access to education. They banned contraception and even access to health and reproductive healthcare. We already have a problem with the growing Afghan population. They are not skilled or educated, so they cannot find jobs. The young followers of the Taliban are frustrated because they cannot start families and get married. As a result, they go and join gangs and participate in the production of opium and the smuggling of weapons. Because of all the direct and indirect consequences, it is crucial that men and women have access to education, reproductive health and rights, including access to contraceptives.

With half of the population out of the school, the child and mother mortality rates in Afghanistan increased. Before the Taliban came to power again, we worked hard to reduce the extremely high mortality rates, which were among the highest in the world, second only to Sierra Leone. The country had the highest rates for maternal and child mortality due to the lack of education. Education or access to education delays the age of marriage. When women do not have access to education one of the easiest strategies for families is to marry off their daughters. If you don't have to go to school, there is no reason to delay your marriage, so you might as well get married. The consequence is that these young women have children by the age of fourteen. So, from the age of fourteen to forty-eight, they have children. If they marry at the age of twenty-eight or thirty, their reproductive years will be much shorter - only ten years. Otherwise, they will have thirty years of childbearing. That's why very many families have ten or twelve children. So, in this case, we increase the child marriage of the girls, and we increase the infant and maternal mortality rates. Furthermore, we increase the violence against women, particularly the domestic violence within the families.

Unfortunately, the mechanisms established to protect women from violence against women during the twenty years of the Afghan Republic were abolished by the Taliban. There is no longer any mechanism in place for protection, such as the Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, and other institutions.

Education and empowerment

The rulers in Afghanistan know that education is key to empowering individuals and building their capacity. These restrictions pose a severe threat to those who believe in strict forms of patriarchy. The rulers don't want to lose their power in Afghanistan's established patriarchal system, which is why they try to implement control over half of the population. This is the reason why they don't want girls and women to be educated. So why is education important again? I think it is important because it's key to empowerment and to becoming a better, more committed citizen, who can protect their rights and respect others' rights.

It's easy to convince an uneducated mother, but you can only convince an educated mother with arguments. Think about health. An educated mother will try to prevent her family members from getting sick by not giving them contaminated water. Consequently, she supports the family economy because

she won't spend the money of the family on medical doctors and medicine. Educated mothers don't waste time taking their children to the doctor for treatment. So, education really helps to reduce poverty, empowers families, improves future decision-making, and trains children to become good citizens and responsible citizens.

Educated mothers will actually fight for their daughters' education and for their sons' education. This is also really helpful for facilitating the rule of law. One reason to break the law is because they don't understand it. It is true that we write in our Constitution that not understanding the law is not an excuse for violating it. However, if a woman or man cannot read, how can they understand the Constitution and the laws? So, we write something nice, put it on the shelf, and we are happy. The same goes for our presidents who are always shouting that they have the best laws in the world and the region. But how do we apply the law? It's important to apply the law and it is essential to note that education plays a crucial role in implementing the law and the rule of law in our country. The rule of law itself makes the society more organized, promotes accountability and ensures access to justice. Now once again, I will say that one reason the conflict is so aggressive and so long is the lack of education in Afghanistan. Because how can you convince educated people to become suicide bombers with the promise that they will go directly to paradise. An educated person would say, "I have not seen that in the Quran." They would not do that, but uneducated people would. This is why the Taliban are so afraid of women and men receiving a quality education. An educated population would be a game changer for Afghanistan.

Some recommendations for Afghans in exile

Finally, I would like to offer a few suggestions to young Afghans in exile. I think you have the opportunity to take responsibility, and the best thing you can do is make the most of it here in Germany. Focus on getting a proper education and being a good citizen of this country and for our people in Afghanistan. A good education is key because it makes you personally strong and gives you self-confidence. With an education, you won't become afraid that you cannot do a certain profession. Have confidence and say "Yes! Here I am, with this qualification and I can do whatever I want." Getting an education is the strongest tool to fight radicalism. It does not require fighting with weapons or killing. It is a slow, effective resistance against the Taliban, and you should take advantage of the opportunities you have here.

Furthermore, once you have an education, you must use it. Start changing yourself and your behavior, both personally and within your home. However, if you have a PhD and still think that your sister is inferior to you, then you have not understood the importance of education. Please try to start and change your own behavior and your own personality. When you receive an education and establish your life here, don't forget that you have your roots back in Afghanistan and that you have a responsibility to that country. If you can't do much, at least support your own relatives, your cousins, your sisters, your nieces, and others to get an education. I'm not saying that we can change millions of lives, but if you can change the lives of ten or hundred people, that's something that you have done. I think that what we can do, we should do.

I think we all have a responsibility to raise awareness about what is happening in Afghanistan because it is a collective failure. The Afghans, the current Taliban and the Afghan people are the results of wrong policies, and we must learn from the situation in Afghanistan. This is really key because whatever problem we have in Afghanistan, it will not stay in Afghanistan. Today (July 2024), the BBC reported that the radicalization or the terrorist groups are embedded in Afghanistan according to the UN. Finally, we have a responsibility to promote accountability and justice. Revenge is not justice. Do not encourage revenge among children. Otherwise, there is no difference between you and the person who committed a human rights violation, you are just continuing the same behavior. Revenge only makes the wounds deeper. And I think you all have a responsibility to call for accountability and justice. We don't want to hang or kill all the Taliban, but they must be brought to justice and held accountable for their actions. Let's stand together and defend human dignity.

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The way forward

Chapter 19

Foundations of Taliban Stability and Change:
A Concluding Comment

Mohammad Javad Salehi

In 1994, religious seminary teachers in Kandahar, Helmand, Zabul, and Oruzgan provinces started an armed rebellion against the government of Burhanuddin Rabbani. The rebellion was soon supported by the clergy and Pashtun nationalists. Although this rebellion was stopped by US-Taliban war due to the groups' support for Osama bin Laden, in 2021 they seized power in Kabul and overthrew the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The social status of clergy, Pashtun nationalism and conservative ideology, with the cooperation of Pakistan, gave them military superiority and they returned to power. But the escalation of disputes within their government, the deprivation of citizens, especially women and non-Pashtuns, of human rights, confrontation with the international community, hostility towards Pakistan, and support for terrorist groups. This has weakened the Taliban and made the Taliban susceptible to change.

Keywords: stability, change, social states, legitimacy, superiority of power, bureaucracy of Taliban.

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Introduction

In August 2021, after two decades of war, the Taliban entered Kabul and seized the Presidential Palace. They announced a general amnesty and called upon former government employees to return to their posts. Schools and universities were reopened, and the Taliban emphasized their commitment to ending corruption and foreign occupation. They assured neighboring countries that Afghanistan would no longer pose a threat and declared their intention to foster friendly relations with all nations, including the United States.

However, the public remained skeptical of the Taliban's promises due to their historical record. In Kabul and other major cities, there were no signs of celebration. Instead, widespread shock and anxiety prevailed. Many believed that the Taliban would soon begin implementing their religious agenda, imposing severe restrictions—particularly on women, minorities, and former government employees, especially military personnel. A deep wall of mistrust, especially among non-Pashtun ethnic groups, became evident. In Kabul, few were willing to purchase the Taliban flag being sold on the streets. The desire to flee the country reached unprecedented levels, property values fell by more than half, unemployment soared, and forced marriages of young girls became increasingly common.

Over time, public predictions proved accurate. The Taliban began enforcing restrictive policies, particularly targeting women. Their previously close relationship with Pakistan deteriorated into hostility, and internal divisions within the Taliban grew. No country formally recognized their government, and retaliatory actions against former officials—especially military personnel—intensified. With Donald Trump's election in the United States, American aid was halted. Armed resistance continued, and senior Taliban figures were assassinated by ISIS-Khorasan.

This raises a fundamental question: What does the future hold for Afghanistan? Will the Taliban maintain their military dominance? Can their conservative ideology provide them with legitimacy among the Afghan people? Will foreign governments recognize the Taliban and initiate economic and political cooperation? Can the Taliban preserve the cohesion of their social base—namely the clergy and Pashtun communities?

These questions form the core focus of this concluding chapter, which seeks to answer two key inquiries:

1. What are the foundations of the Taliban's power?
2. What are the potential drivers of transformation.

The foundations of Taliban power

The formation and survival of any government—regardless of its nature—depend on four essential elements. No regime can be established or can endure without them. These pillars include a social base of support, military dominance, legitimacy and the capacity to deliver public services through an effective bureaucracy

These elements ensure a government's durability and distinguish it from rival groups. However, the degree and quality of these elements vary across political

systems, shaping the nature of each regime. The character of a government is determined by the combination of these factors. By analyzing this composition, one can discern the regime's political nature and stability, and even forecast its future.

Governments reliant on military force differ fundamentally from those grounded in popular legitimacy. Similarly, regimes with limited social support face different outcomes than those with broad societal backing. Moreover, governments capable of providing essential public goods tend to enjoy greater stability.

Thus, these four elements serve as valuable conceptual tools for assessing the stability or transformation of governments and for making relative predictions about their future (Bashiriyeh, 2002). This is also true for the Taliban. The Taliban's power is deeply tied to the extent and quality of its access to the four key pillars of governance. Their future can be assessed through these four factors.

Military power of the Taliban

The first and most important factor in Taliban's power is military force. Their insurgency was initially armed, and their victory has been achieved largely through Repression and violence and today, the continuation of the Taliban regime depends on force and repression.

The acquisition of power through military force and violence has long been embedded in Afghanistan's political culture. Since 1978, it has been a defining principle for all Mujahideen parties and factions. Military dominance has consistently been the primary objective, with each group striving to defeat rivals through force rather than negotiation. Dialogue has never been prioritized; instead, the drumbeat of war and violence has persisted. This approach has perpetuated conflict, preventing any group from achieving national reconciliation or ending the cycle of violence.

The Taliban emerged in 1994 as a military organization and have prioritized armed conquest as their path to power ever since. Their military identity remains intact, with the majority of cabinet members, provincial governors, district chiefs, department heads, and senior officials drawn from military ranks. The militarized nature of the Taliban is their most prominent feature, and they continue to rely on suppression and violence to consolidate their authority. Civilian aspects of governance are largely overshadowed, and military force has been the group's defining characteristic from its inception.

Negotiation with opponents has never been part of the Taliban's strategy for gaining power. They have consistently demanded unconditional surrender or resorted to armed conflict. Their most serious negotiations have been with foreign powers—particularly the United States—with the primary goal of securing the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan, thereby stripping the Afghan government of its main support. Although the Doha Agreement included provisions for talks with the Afghan government and the formation of a joint administration, the Taliban never took this seriously and instead planned for a military takeover.

Even today, despite declaring a general amnesty, the Taliban maintain that no individual or group from the opposition should be part of the government. In

practice, their approach to dissent has been marked by widespread suppression and violence. Their alliance with some of the world's most extreme terrorist organizations, such as al-Qaeda, and their involvement in atrocities including the massacres of Hazaras in Mazar-i-Sharif (1997) and Yakawlang (1998), the brutal crackdown in northern Kabul, and the orchestration of hundreds of suicide bombings are part of their record in pursuit of power. Over the past two decades, the Taliban have trained and deployed suicide squads as a central element of their campaign against the Republic and international forces. Today, they continue to emphasize the strengthening of these units within the Ministries of Interior and Defense, offering special support to these fighters and their families.

Approximately 80% of the Taliban's senior and mid-level officials have military backgrounds. The Taliban government is effectively controlled by those who fought alongside them in the past. As the Afghan Minister of Higher Education has stated, Taliban fighters earned their credentials on the battlefield, and one's rank within the government is determined by the number of bombs they have detonated (Ahmad, 2025).

Thus, the Taliban perceive their security as inseparable from military strength. Their regime is heavily reliant on armed force, and suppression of opposition plays a central role in their survival and continuity. This militarized nature defines their governance. Any weakening or erosion of their military power would likely trigger widespread protests and uprisings.

The social base of the Taliban

The social power of the mullahs is the second pillar of Taliban power, because the clergy (ʿulama) represent one of the most influential social forces in Afghanistan's traditional society. They have long held sway over many aspects of daily life, enjoying substantial social authority. Religious education, judicial functions, the conduct of religious ceremonies, and close ties with the public—especially through the nationwide network of mosques—have granted them extensive power.

Although political, economic, social, and cultural modernization over the past century has somewhat diminished their influence, particularly in urban centers, their authority remains largely intact in rural areas and in the eastern and southern regions of the country, where the state has had limited reach. In these regions, government-led educational and institutional reforms have had minimal impact, and traditional customs remain deeply rooted. The rural clergy, aligned with local traditions, are highly conservative and tend to follow the cultural norms of their communities. As such, they form the most traditional and conservative segment of the religious establishment.

Historically, this social power has coexisted peacefully with state authority. The implementation of Sharia law and the preservation of clerical privileges have been their primary demands from the government. Cooperation between the clergy and the state has been a cornerstone of traditional governance in Afghanistan. Rulers have often relied on religious decrees (fatwas) to legitimize actions against opponents. A notable example is the fatwa issued by clerics during the mass killings of Hazaras under Abdur Rahman Khan between 1881 and 1883 (Hakimi, 2024).

Clerical uprisings have typically occurred when their privileges were threatened or their social power curtailed. Their revolts against King Amanullah in 1901 and against government in 1978 were reactions to government reforms that limited their authority over education, judiciary, religious endowments, and other domains.

However, the jihad period (1978–1992), followed by the factional wars among Mujahideen groups (1992–2000), sparked a shift in the clergy's ambitions—from social influence to political control. This transition began with relatively moderate urban clerics, educated in Arab countries, who did not oppose the public's right to choose their government. Yet the ensuing civil wars created an opening for the traditional clergy to seize local and national power, establishing a conservative regime devoid of political innovation and aimed at reviving rural life across the country.

It was in this context that Mullah Mohammad Omar, along with a group of village clerics from Kandahar, Helmand, and Zabul, mostly educated in local religious schools or in Pakistan, launched their campaign against the Tajik-led government of Burhanuddin Rabbani. They adopted the name "Taliban," meaning students of religious schools, and rallied under the slogan "God's rule on God's land." In 1996, they captured Kabul and formed a government primarily composed of clerics from Kandahar, Helmand, Nimroz, and Uruzgan.

Following the collapse of their regime in 2001, they established the Quetta Shura. Upon regaining power in 2021, they reconstituted their government with a structure similar to their previous rule. In this regime, the "Amir ul-Mu'minin" (Taliban leader) stands at the top, advised by a consultative council. The Prime Minister leads the cabinet, supported by three deputies for political, economic, and administrative affairs. All these officials, along with the Chief Justice, are appointed by the Taliban leader. The majority are graduates of Darul Uloom Haqqan. The structure of the Taliban regime clearly illustrates that it remains under the control of its original leadership from four provinces of Afghanistan. Religious scholars from these regions, particularly instructors at local madrasas, hold the central reins of power.

Strengthening and expanding religious schools have become a strategic priority for Taliban leaders, aimed at ensuring the long-term dominance of the clergy. Over the past four years, considerable efforts have been made to reinforce and proliferate these institutions. Many Taliban leaders have established their own private madrasas, which serve not only as centers of religious education but also as key propaganda platforms. These schools play a vital role in building bridges between the government and the public.

Moreover, each madrasa functions as a hub for consolidating the social base of its founders and instructors. As such, the number of these institutions is expected to grow steadily, with increasingly sophisticated mechanisms for recruitment and outreach. In parallel, formal government structures have also been reshaped to enhance clerical influence. Notable developments include the establishment of the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of evil, which enforces religious norms and moral conduct, and the creation of provincial religious councils, which extend clerical authority across local governance structures. These initiatives reflect a broader strategy to institutionalize religious authority within both the social and political fabric of the Taliban regime.

Traditional conservative ideology of the Taliban

Conservative ideology is the third pillar of the Taliban's power, because the majority in rural and illiterate areas do not have a proper understanding of modern values and are hostile to them and the mullahs and elders support it.The social base of any political group fundamentally shapes its ideology. The nature and content of a group's ideology often reflect its alignment with a specific social constituency.

The Taliban's social base consists of the traditional clergy from the four provinces of Kandahar, Helmand, Nimroz, and Zabul, as well as Pashtun nationalist elements. As Islamists, the Taliban derive their ideology from traditional jurisprudence (fiqh), which they consider a religious obligation to implement. According to this jurisprudence, governance is the exclusive right of the clergy, who bear the religious duty to enforce their interpretation of Islamic law. The people have no right to choose their rulers; authority belongs solely to the religious jurists (fuqaha) for the purpose of implementing Sharia. According to this ideological framework, governance is the exclusive domain of religious jurists; the public has no right to elect their leaders, the jurists appoint a single leader (Amir), whose obedience becomes obligatory for all, Amir ul-Mu'minin 's command is equated with the command of the Prophet and, by extension, of God; opposition to him is considered disbelief, and rebellion against the government is deemed insurrection, punishable by death. The official legal code is Hanafi jurisprudence; the public and its representatives have no legislative authority. Religious scholars are the executors of the law; the judiciary and other state institutions must be directly or indirectly under clerical control. The primary function of the government is to implement Islamic law; thus, all administrative bodies must be under clerical supervision, and The Amir's orders are binding on all scholars; no one has the right to oppose him. Hanafi jurisprudence is the only recognized legal framework; other religions and sects are not officially acknowledged (Haqqani, 2022).

Pashtun nationalism

Although the social base of the Taliban government is formed by the Pashtun clergy, but Pashtun nationalism also supports them. Therefore, the fourth pillar of Taliban power are the Pashtun support for this group.

Pashtun nationalists aim to restore the dominance lost during the jihad era and revive the golden age of Pashtun exclusivity. Their ideology prioritizes Pashtun centrality in politics, culture, and the economy, viewing other ethnic groups in Afghanistan as minorities whose roles should be minimized and controlled. Clear signs of Pashtun nationalism include the gradual removal of Persian from university signage and official documents, the Pashtunization of government institutions, an excessively conservative interpretation of Sharia and support for Pakistani Taliban factions

Attracting Pashtun support for the Taliban is very important, and many ultra-conservative interpretations of Islamic law is largely driven by concerns over potential dissent in deeply traditional Pashtun regions. Unlike other Islamist and Mujahideen groups, the Taliban do not recognize individual rights in personal or public life. Yet this strict version of Sharia resonates strongly among rural clerics and tribal leaders in the southern and eastern provinces, who form the

Taliban's core social base. Consequently, the Taliban prioritize the satisfaction of these groups. Many of the recent edicts issued by Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada—especially those concerning women—are aimed at appeasing the clergy and tribal elites of these regions. The Taliban believe that by securing the loyalty of these religious and ethnic constituencies, they can impose their rule over the rest of Afghanistan through force.

Dimensions of Taliban change

The social power of the clergy, the mobilization of Pashtun nationalism, traditional conservative ideology and military dominance are the main pillars of Taliban power that helped them achieve power and have maintained their power so far. The continuation of their rule also depends on maintaining these factors, but internal disputes, the creation of severe restrictions on citizen specially women, the pashtunization of the government, and support for the Pakistan Taliban have shaken these pillars and created change in them that, if they continue and deepen, will push the Taliban towards change. These issues will be discussed below.

Internal divisions within the Taliban

The first challenge of Taliban Power is internal conflicts that have begun since the death of Mullah Omar. Mullah Mohammad Omar, the founder and first leader of the Taliban, played a pivotal role in maintaining the unity and cohesion of the group. Until his death in Pakistan, he effectively prevented internal divisions. The Taliban even attempted to conceal his death for two years to avoid triggering factional disputes. However, in 2015, the Afghan government publicly confirmed his death, prompting a power struggle over his succession.

During the years of war, a shared enemy—the Afghan government and its international allies—helped suppress internal rifts. But the Taliban's return to power exposed these divisions, as various factions began competing for control over state resources and institutions. The division of the Presidential Palace in Kabul into separate zones, each controlled by different Taliban factions, is a clear manifestation of this fragmentation.

According to reports, the palace operates across adjacent buildings, each under distinct security protocols. Movement between sections requires strict body searches and clearance. Mullah Hasan Akhund controls one wing of the palace, while Mullah Baradar and Mullah Yaqoob jointly oversee another. Deputy Prime Minister Mawlawi Kabir commands a third section, and the remaining part is under the authority of Sirajuddin Haqqani from the Haqqani Network (Ahmad, 2025). These divisions stem from a mix of organizational, ideological, and personal rivalries, which can be categorized as follows:

Organizational divisions

During the Republic era, Taliban leaders fled to Pakistan and formed the Quetta Shura, headquartered in Quetta. This council was composed primarily of senior Taliban figures from Kandahar, Helmand, Zabul, and Nimroz—all Pashtun. They remain the primary decision-makers today. The Haqqani Network was also part of this council, though it played a limited role in decision-making. Despite operating independently and in separate zones of influence, all factions were engaged in combat against a common enemy.

However, competition for spoils began even before their victory. The Presidential Palace had ties to the Haqqani Network through Hamdullah Mohib, while the Quetta Shura was connected to U.S. envoy Zalmay Khalilzad. As a result, the Haqqani forces entered Kabul earlier, while the Kandahari faction arrived later in the afternoon after President Ghani fled (Abbas, 2023). Different strategic locations—including Bagram Airbase and Kabul International Airport—were seized by various factions. On the streets, the contrast between Haqqani and Kandahari fighters was evident: Haqqani forces were uniformed and well-trained, while Kandahari fighters wore civilian clothing.

Competition for influence and resources continues to intensify. Sirajuddin Haqqani reportedly avoided public appearances and refrained from attending the Ministry of Interior for over a month. Experts offer differing predictions about the future of these divisions, but all agree that resolving them will not be easy.

Ideological divisions

Ideological differences between Islamists and nationalists represent another major fault line within the Taliban. At least two distinct voices are emerging in the group's policymaking. Hardline Islamist faction led by Taliban leader Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada, Chief Justice Abdul Hakim Haqqani, Minister of Religious Affairs Noor Mohammad Saqib, and Minister for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice Mohammad Khalid Hanafi. This faction opposes girls' education beyond grade six, rejects engagement with former political parties, and refuses to recognize Shi'a Islam. Moderate nationalist faction led by Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani, Defense Minister Mullah Yaqoob, and Deputy Prime Minister Mullah Baradar. This group is more flexible and does not view women's education or employment as inherently contradictory to Islamic values.

Personal rivalries within the Taliban

The Taliban is a broad coalition of commanders, many of whom previously fought under different—and at times opposing—parties and fronts. Their shared opposition to the Republic created a bridge toward unity, but competition for power and wealth remains a natural consequence of their alliance. The Taliban's personalized style of governance has further enabled these rivalries, where personal connections to key figures—especially Mullah Hibatullah—are seen as the main path to influence and success (Ali, 2023). Former jihadist commanders and current Taliban leaders each strive to strengthen their ties with top officials, hoping to improve their chances of succession. The division will ultimately reduce the Taliban's military power and weaken its dominance.

Emergence of alternative ideological interpretations

Mullah Hibatullah's rural and tribal interpretation of Islam has become another source of division within the Taliban and it has provided the grounds for the emergence of new interpretations of Islam, especially regarding women and it has reduced the Taliban's ideological legitimacy and weakened another of the Taliban's power bases. Because the interpretation of Hibatullah severely undermines civil and political rights, reducing citizens to passive subjects akin to sheep needing a shepherd. Its harshest expression is in its treatment of women—denying them education, employment, and personal freedom, and relegating them to roles of sexual servitude and domestic labor.

The consequences of this ideology have been profound. Many Taliban members have expressed dissatisfaction, both publicly and privately. Repeated criticisms by Abbas Stanikzai are just one example of the growing dissent within Taliban ranks. Families across Afghanistan experience the daily hardships caused by these policies, and the international community—including the Organization of Islamic Cooperation—has repeatedly condemned them as contrary to Islamic teachings.

Yet Mullah Hibatullah remains concerned about resistance from deeply conservative communities in his native region including Kandahar, Helmand, and Uruzgan—where many Taliban fighters are recruited. On September 11, 2022, the former Minister of Education said "If you go out of the Uruzgan market and ask the elders… you will understand. Ask at the mosque what percentage of men with white beards and what percentage of people are willing to send their 16-year-old daughters to school, and you won't need to ask me anymore." (Rubin, 2022)

Pakistan–Taliban relations

The 1978 coup in Afghanistan led Islamic groups to flee to Pakistan and Iran, where they established their own factions. Pakistan became the conduit for distributing financial and military aid to these groups. Notably, 40% of this support went to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e-Islami, which received special backing from General Zia-ul-Haq. Pakistan's military, intelligence services, and government maintained close ties with these factions, viewing them as alternatives to the Kabul regime.

However, the rise of the Northern Alliance—comprising Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Hazaras—and the fall of Najibullah prevented Hezb-e-Islami from unilaterally capturing Kabul. Instead, the city came under Northern Alliance control, a coalition over which Pakistan had little influence and viewed with suspicion. With the emergence of the Taliban in 1994 from Spin Boldak near the Pakistan–Afghanistan border, Pakistan offered full support and played a key role in their rise to power. After the Taliban's collapse in 2001, Pakistan once again sheltered their leaders and fighters, using the opportunity to deepen its influence and control over the group.

Throughout the 20-year war, the Afghan government and international community repeatedly urged Pakistan to cease its support for the Taliban. Yet Pakistan never paused its assistance. The Quetta Shura in Balochistan and the Peshawar Shura in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa coordinated the war effort, while Pakistan consistently denied their presence. In 2021, when the Taliban returned to Kabul, internal tensions over power-sharing emerged. The head of Pakistan's ISI intervened to mediate and broker an agreement among the factions. Pakistan viewed the Taliban as a replacement for the Northern Alliance and a close strategic ally.

However, the Taliban's return to power—and their acquisition of vast American weaponry—emboldened Pakistani Taliban factions and other allied groups to attempt establishing their own Taliban-style regime in Pakistan. This led to an unprecedented rise in insecurity within Pakistan. In response, the Pakistani government demanded that the Afghan Taliban cease supporting Pakistani Taliban fighters and expel them from Afghanistan. The Taliban denied their presence and refused to comply. These disputes have strained bilateral relations. For the first time, in 2025, Pakistan initiated mass deportations of

Afghan refugees from cities across the country. Border skirmishes and the Taliban's outreach to India have further soured relations. Thus, what began as a close alliance has, over the past four years, and lead into hostility and it will lead into strengthening of opposition and weaken the Taliban.

Resistance and the emergence of armed fronts

The idea of resistance against the Taliban began during the Doha peace negotiations. Until the United States initiated talks with the Taliban without the participation of the Afghan government, few believed the Taliban could return to power. At that time, they lacked any permanent foothold in Afghanistan. However, once negotiations began, concerns arose among various groups, and leaders of the Jamiat-e Islami openly proposed a second wave of resistance.

Following the sudden collapse of the government, these leaders relocated to Panjshir and launched armed resistance in Panjshir and Andarab. Although the Taliban conducted military operations and temporarily seized these areas, they failed to eliminate the resistance entirely. Over the past four years, resistance fighters have continued to organize military operations in various regions, including Kabul.

In addition to the Resistance Front, the Freedom Front has emerged, conducting operations in Kabul, Parwan, Kapisa, and Kunar. The deadliest attacks, however, have come from ISIS-Khorasan, whose suicide bombings have inflicted significant casualties on both Taliban forces and civilians. Notable incidents include the assassination of the Taliban governor in Mazar and the Minister of Refugees in Kabul, as well as coordinated suicide attacks targeting Hazaras in Kabul and Mazar.

Outside Afghanistan, former Mujahideen leaders and officials from the Republic era have formed the Supreme Council of National Resistance in Turkey, aiming to unify opposition forces. Members include General Abdul Rashid Dostum, Abdul Rab Rasul Sayyaf, Haji Mohammad Mohaqiq, Amir Ismail Khan, Ahmad Massoud, and many others.

Afghan civil society—especially women—have also mobilized since the Taliban's return, organizing widespread protests in Kabul and advocating for their rights and freedoms. This movement includes journalists, students, university professors, international organization staff, and human rights activists, both inside and outside the country, who continue to expose Taliban restrictions on civil liberties.

Conclusion

The intensification of internal disputes. The emergence of alternative interpretations of Taliban ideology within the group, the presence of armed insurgencies in the country, and hostility towards Pakistan are all areas that are weakening the four pillars of Taliban's government. Although the Taliban made great efforts to prevent the spread of these factors, but they have not yet succeeded. Because the absence of Mullah Mohammad Omar has intensified personal, regional, political, and ideological rivalries within the group. The ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam by the Taliban's current leadership—especially the exclusion of women from public life—has deepened internal divisions and provoked backlash from nationalist factions. The sweeping decrees

against women have not only alienated the Afghan public but also prevented international recognition, except Russia, of the regime.

Support for Pakistani Taliban factions has transformed once-friendly relations with Pakistan into hostility, weakening Islamabad's willingness to support the group. U.S. aid was cut following Donald Trump's rise to power, and the exclusion of ethnic minorities—especially Hazaras—from governance has further eroded trust in the Taliban's promises of general amnesty, which are increasingly undermined by reports of human rights violations and extrajudicial killings.

The Taliban's administrative structure is highly personalized, with power and loyalty dependent on individual patronage. Ministries and government agencies are divided among competing factions, and internal competition for control continues. Mullah Hibatullah maintains a circle of loyalists and works to strengthen their influence and this reinforced division.

In sum, the Taliban regime faces a multitude of crises. Their rigid conservative ideology continues to widen the gap between the group and both the Afghan people and the international community. Internal divisions between Islamists and nationalists are deepening. Their ties to foreign Islamist groups—especially Pakistani Taliban factions—raise concerns among neighboring countries and global actors. Ethnic divisions are intensifying due to Pashtun-centric policies, and Afghanistan's isolation from the West is making access to science and technology increasingly difficult, prolonging the country's path to development. Ultimately, the Taliban appear to be retracing the path of their predecessors, reinforcing the conditions for future transformation rather than stability.

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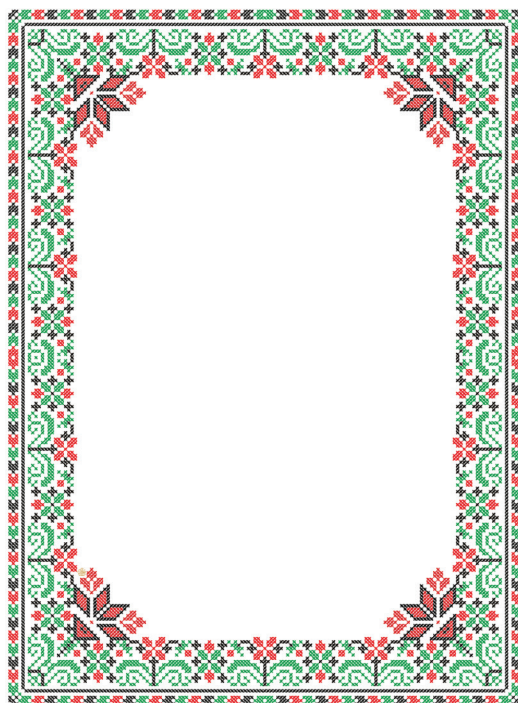
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