

Foreign Aid Falling Short: *Promoting Women's Education in Afghanistan*

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Today, women in Afghanistan are not guaranteed the same access to education as men. While it is well documented that female education results in improved health and job prospects for women and their children, the female literacy rate in Afghanistan was estimated in 2015 at 24.2% compared to a male literacy rate of 52% (CIA 2015). Lack of female education and gender inequality in Afghanistan has its roots in Taliban rule, which controlled 90% of Afghanistan from 1996 through 2001. The Taliban prevented women from studying at any educational institution. In spite of the collapse of the Taliban regime, female access to education is still under threat, as foreign aid has fallen short.

Female education is essential, as educated girls can delay marriage and pregnancy, and can avoid death by pregnancy and childbirth. Educated women tend to have healthier children with a much lower mortality rate; the mortality rate of children under five belonging to mothers with a primary school education declines by nearly 50 percent. Educated women can increase their lifetime incomes as well. Girls who had one additional year of education after primary school can earn wages that are 10 to 20% higher than the national average (Abney 2013). Educated girls and women can better resist discrimination, as well as vote, participate in civil society, and reduce violence, thus improving social stability.

Background

After the Taliban collapsed, education became the top priority in Afghanistan, as a strategy for reconstruction, development and peace building. When the Taliban regime was removed in 2001, the interim Afghan government was committed to the reconstruction of the domestic education system using international assistance. In 2002, almost all girls and women were completely excluded from educational opportunities while roughly 900,000 boys attended school. In the same year, the Afghan government, the UN, and international donors cooperated to rebuild the education system under the Back to School Campaign.

Many Western countries, including the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Canada, and especially the United States, helped rebuild Afghanistan. Since 2001, the United States has been involved in interventions to promote security and human rights. Japan has also played an important role in supporting Afghanistan. Since 2001, Japan has provided about \$2.41 billion, and has sent experts and volunteers, as well as contributed to training female teachers and building schools. International organizations like the World Health Organization and the United Nations have provided aid to Afghanistan. Due to support from USAID and other donors, access to education has dramatically increased. The Back to School campaign, carried out by the Afghanistan Ministry of Education and UNICEF, has succeeded in building more than 13,000 schools and has recruited and trained more than 186,000 teachers. Today, more than 8 million students have access to education, including about 2.5 million girls, predominantly in primary education. Enrollment of girls has increased from 5,000 under Taliban rule to 2.4 million.

The international community is particularly concerned about Afghanistan as it has become a hotbed of terrorism under the Taliban and its cohorts. Terrorists have increased their power under the protection of the Taliban, and it is a threat not only to the region, but to the rest of the world.

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In spite of the improvements in access to education, however, there are still many children who lack access. Enrollment in primary school still only measures in at 56% of the total, while access to secondary school is 32%. Today, it is estimated that only about 12,000 Afghan girls graduated from secondary school (Abney 2013).

Girls attend school freely in Kabul and urban areas, but not throughout the rest of the country. Regional leaders frequently permit Taliban restrictions. Even where there is education for girls, schools are often burned, teachers are murdered, or girls may be put under the threat of kidnap and sexual abuse on the way to school. Supportive parents are often afraid of sending their daughters to school (Human Rights Watch 2015). Within the education system, there is frequently a sharp lack of female teachers (Kissane 2012), which particularly affects girls once they reach puberty, as parents often do not allow them to be taught by men. Furthermore, there is a lack of physical school structures and schools with appropriate sanitation facilities, which disproportionately affects girls.

Village-based schools serve the village in which they are based, and frequently suffer from low quality and poorly trained teachers (Burde and Linden 2013). However, village-based education may be the only option for some girls, as girls are often prevented from traveling to

government schools alone, especially when they reach adolescence. Islamic education is another outlet for learning, but this type of education is frequently restricted to males, preventing females from combating the anti-women stance justified by one particular interpretation of the Qu'ran.

Poverty, coupled with gender bias, has reduced girls' access and returns on education. Girls from poor households are often required to stay home to carry out farm work, non-farm work, or household work. School user fees and required purchase of school supplies, transportation, and uniforms also act as a barrier to female school attendance (Oxfam 2011). Early marriage of girls is common, as marriage generates income for the bride's family in the form of a dowry. Returns on education for females are low since girls marry early, are discouraged from work, and experience wage discrimination (Burde and Linden 2013).

Lack of security compounds the barriers to female education. The hundreds of new schools that were constructed using foreign aid have frequently been attacked and bombed. In some cases, foreign aid has been used improperly; about 83% of the United States government aid money for Afghanistan has never reached its destination. It is estimated that the money was used for executive salaries in the United States, subcontractors making a profit on second-tier subcontractors, luxury homes being rented in Kabul, etc. (Nasuti 2009). This is because pre-selected American contractors manage the aid money rather than the Afghan ministry.

Foreign aid is dwindling, and security has declined as the US and other countries have withdrawn their troops. Resurgence of Taliban forces has increased territorial gains particularly as a result of the 2015 spring offensive. Afghan security forces are under-equipped to combat the rise of the Taliban and other foreign fighters from the Middle East and Central Asia. ISIL, combined with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and a Taliban splinter group are present, competing for control with the Taliban, while most foreign fighters, including al-Qaeda and the Islamic Jihad Union, support the Taliban (Azami 2015). Declining aid and fragile security conditions have greatly worsened conditions for providing education to females.

Policy Recommendations

One of the biggest issues at this time is maintaining security in Afghanistan. The presence of the Taliban and radical Islamic fighting groups, combined with the reduction of foreign military troops has led to an atmosphere in which social, political, and economic freedom are under threat. Individual safety is the most basic precondition for development, and security must be regained in order to rekindle the gains made in female education.

Furthermore, while the Afghan government's spending on education is comparable to that of other nations, at 4.6% of GDP in 2013 (World Bank 2015), Afghanistan's GDP is much lower than that of its neighbors. Foreign aid continues to play an important role in education and must be increased. However, foreign aid for education must be restructured so that the funds properly reach targets in Afghanistan. Use of foreign aid for profit among foreign subcontractors, or for bribes among local political leaders or firms must be eliminated through careful monitoring and control by foreign and local governments. Fiscal management within the Afghan government must also be improved. Restructuring of funds can be accomplished through cooperation among international institutions, international donors and the Afghan government.

Poverty has created a major barrier to girls' education. In order to combat this, poverty must be reduced through both aid and economic growth, and returns on girls' education must be increased. Both of these goals are difficult to achieve. Once security is restored, economic growth may continue. Economists have recommended that Afghanistan focus on improving its agricultural sector, which has already been accomplished to some extent through financial and technical assistance from the World Bank, Asian Development Bank (ADB), International Fund for Agriculture Development, (IFAD), Department for International Development (DFID), United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), and United Nations Food & Agriculture Organization (UN-FAO). Food processing may also present a viable option for enhancing economic growth. Investment in infrastructure and starting the industrialization process in Afghanistan would also boost the economy.

Economic growth may not alone ensure that poverty reduction occurs, and may be bolstered with additional policies that focus on decentralized community-based development strategies and sustainable agriculture. Afghanistan has used village-level community development councils, which incorporate women in rebuilding bridges and schools. Sustainable agriculture may also present a more inclusive alternative to Afghanistan's predominantly agricultural economy. To some extent, sustainable agriculture programs have been carried out under funding from USAID to provide jobs and training to farmers, including women, but can be continued to maintain higher employment levels. More inclusive economic growth could also encompass a Job Guarantee program.

In order to increase the returns on girls' education, the practice of early marriage must be stopped and females must be allowed to work outside the home. This will allow females to earn income and increase returns on schooling. Quality of girls' education and increases in the number of female teachers in rural areas must be improved in order to boost returns on schooling. Girls must be sent to secondary and high school to achieve this.

Afghanistan is situated in an unfortunate cycle of poverty, insecurity, gender discrimination, and low levels of education. All of these factors are self-reinforcing; as girls grow up in poor households, they are often forbidden to attend school, especially if they must travel far under hostile conditions to participate. These girls marry early and become uneducated mothers in poor households themselves, reinforcing restrictions on their daughters. Security and economic growth increase returns on education and improve the outlook of both males and females, creating a virtuous cycle of growth. The vicious cycle must be broken and the virtuous cycle instilled within Afghanistan's young population.

Female access to education plays a significant role in developing woman's status and gender equality, and in improving the prospects of national growth. Female education is a critical factor in providing long-term stability and growth.

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