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The Psychological and Socioeconomic Impacts of Education Denial on Afghan Girls

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Abstract

The Taliban's ban on education for girls in Afghanistan has led to significant psychological, economic, and developmental consequences. This study examines the impact of these educational restrictions on Afghan girls, focusing on the decline in mental health, increased financial dependency, and broader societal effects stemming from gender-based exclusion from education. Findings indicate elevated levels of depression, anxiety, and struggles with identity among Afghan girls who are denied schooling, with many forced into early marriages and lifelong financial dependence on male relatives. Furthermore, the lack of female education hinders Afghanistan's economic development, reducing workforce participation and perpetuating cycles of poverty. From the perspectives of feminism and human rights, this systematic exclusion reinforces patriarchal dominance and violates international commitments regarding education and gender equality. In spite of these challenges, Afghan girls continue to seek education through underground schools and online resources, demonstrating remarkable resilience in the face of oppression. The research calls for global action, alternative educational strategies, and psychological support as essential measures to combat the Taliban's restrictions. Ultimately, restoring educational opportunities for Afghan girls is crucial for their personal empowerment and the long-term advancement of Afghanistan.

Keywords: Educational denial, Gender inequality, Patriarchal dominance, Social isolation, psychological impact

Introduction

Access to education, a basic human right that empowers individuals and bolsters societal progress, remains elusive in many parts of the world. This is particularly true for girls in conflict-prone and politically unstable areas. Afghanistan, a nation marked by political upheaval and traditional conservatism, has experienced recurring limitations on female education. The recent re-imposition of these restrictions, especially under Taliban governance, has deprived a generation of Afghan girls of educational opportunities. This exclusion has wide-ranging consequences, impacting not only the girls themselves but also the broader socioeconomic structure of Afghan society.

Education extends beyond mere knowledge acquisition; it is crucial for mental health, personal growth, and financial independence. The systematic exclusion of Afghan girls from education has resulted in severe psychological repercussions, including heightened rates of depression, anxiety, and diminished self-esteem. The ambiguity surrounding their future, combined with a lack of control over their lives, has significantly compromised their mental well-being. Many girls who once aspired to careers in medicine, teaching, or engineering now confront the harsh reality of forced isolation,



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early marriage, and financial reliance on male relatives. The emotional distress caused by this sudden shift in their prospects has led to a concerning rise in despair and psychological suffering.

The UN has consistently stressed the significance of education in its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4, which aims to provide inclusive and fair quality education for all. The ban on education for Afghan girls directly opposes this objective and hinders progress towards achieving gender equality (Goal 5) and reducing inequalities (Goal 10). UN reports indicate that nations with higher levels of female education experience lower infant mortality rates, better maternal health, and increased economic stability. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has cautioned that the education ban on Afghan girls could result in significant setbacks in human development indicators, further isolating Afghanistan from the global community.

For the past forty years, Afghanistan has faced significant challenges in providing educational opportunities, particularly for girls. Factors such as extreme poverty, armed conflict, lack of security, and cultural traditions have hindered girls' access to schooling. The Taliban, however, has been the most significant obstacle, systematically depriving girls of education. When a coalition led by the United States ousted the regime in late 2001, it was estimated that a mere three percent of Afghan girls were receiving some form of elementary education.

The subsequent two decades of quasi-democratic rule saw substantial improvements. UNESCO reported that by 2018, the number of girls enrolled in primary education had risen to 2.5 million. Likewise, female participation in higher education increased from 5,000 in 2001 to 100,000 in 2021, while female literacy rates during this period rose from 17 percent to 30 percent. However, nearly all of this progress was jeopardized when the Taliban reclaimed power in August 2021. Despite promises to the contrary, the regime began shutting down schools and blocking girls' access to education, along with imposing other restrictions on women's rights. According to UNESCO, by early 2023, 80% of school-aged Afghan females – totaling 2.5 million – were not in school. This denial of education to girls has profound social and economic repercussions and casts a shadow over the nation's future prospects.

Storai Tapesh, a women's rights advocate and founder of the Tapesh Foundation, which promotes gender equality in Afghanistan, highlighted that cultural factors were major impediments to female education: "Even before the collapse of Afghanistan, 3.5 million children were out of school, and 85 percent of them were girls. Most families in rural areas of Afghanistan are conservative. They assume women should be homemakers who raise children and do housework.

The Taliban's ideology has consistently opposed Western-style education, and since 2021, they have methodically dismantled educational opportunities for females, reversing the significant progress towards gender equality made in Afghanistan over the previous two decades (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Amnesty International (2023) reports that these prohibitions have affected more than one million Afghan girls, depriving them of their fundamental right to education. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2023) notes that these restrictions significantly impede Afghanistan's educational and economic advancement, potentially leading to generational consequences for the welfare and socio-economic status of Afghan families and communities.

The Taliban's stance that women's education is unnecessary and inappropriate contradicts Islamic teachings. The Quran encourages all Muslims to seek knowledge, as evidenced by the hadith: "Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim" (Sunan Ibn Mājah 224). Tapesh argues that the Taliban's beliefs are at odds with Islamic values, which mandate education for both genders. She notes that many Taliban members lack literacy and accurate Islamic knowledge, suggesting their motivations may extend beyond religious concerns. The Taliban's educational restrictions have



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profoundly impacted Afghan girls and society. Girls denied schooling often experience mental health issues, with Mohammad Hamid Kadwal, a Nangarhar University lecturer, reporting widespread depression among affected girls. Furthermore, out-of-school girls face increased risks of forced child marriage, domestic abuse, and gender-based discrimination.

The ban on girls' education also harms Afghanistan's overall development. Aqa Mohammad Qureshi, a writer and policy analyst, points out that this exclusion deprives the country of half its human capital, hindering progress in both public and private sectors. He emphasizes that a thriving society requires educated women. Sahira Sharif concurs, stating that women's contributions to the economy, culture, politics, and governance are equally important as men's. However, under Taliban rule, women are largely excluded from government, private employment, and education.

Literature Review

The Taliban's ban on education for Afghan girls has led to profound psychological, social, and economic repercussions. This intentional exclusion has been thoroughly examined in scholarly articles, international reports, and human rights initiatives. Numerous investigations underscore the correlation between education and empowerment, economic security, and mental health. The prohibition of education transcends mere policy; it serves as a mechanism of oppression that exacerbates gender inequality and hinders national progress (Amnesty International, 2023; UNESCO, 2023).

Education is crucial for mental health, fostering self-esteem, critical thinking, and aspirations for the future (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Studies indicate that the absence of educational opportunities has resulted in increased levels of anxiety, depression, and identity crises among Afghan girls (Medica Mondiale, 2023). Many young women, who once aspired to careers as doctors, teachers, or engineers, now endure forced isolation and dependency on others, leading to persistent psychological distress (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Research conducted by the United States Institute of Peace (2023) indicates that Afghan girls who are denied education exhibit signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), such as social withdrawal and suicidal ideation. The lack of structured learning environments has stunted their intellectual development, resulting in cognitive stagnation and reduced problem-solving skills (Piaget, 1950). The impact of educational deprivation on self-worth is significant, reinforcing societal oppression and diminishing resilience among young Afghan women (UN Women, 2023).

Education is fundamental in promoting economic development and reducing poverty (Sen, 1999). Studies show that nations with higher rates of female literacy tend to have lower infant mortality rates, improved maternal health, and greater economic stability (World Bank, 2018). According to the World Bank (2022), the restriction of educational access for Afghan girls hampers their future earning potential, increases their economic dependency, and perpetuates poverty cycles.

Moreover, the exclusion of women from educational opportunities has negatively impacted Afghanistan's GDP, with an estimated 15% decline linked to the absence of female workforce participation (United Nations Development Programme, 2023). The International Labour Organization (2023) indicates that female employment rates in Afghanistan have fallen below 10%, exacerbating financial disparities. Women without education are at a heightened risk of forced marriages, domestic violence, and exploitation, which reinforces systemic oppression (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Feminist Theory and Human Rights Issues

From a feminist theoretical perspective, the Taliban's policies regarding women's education reinforce patriarchal systems aimed at sustaining male dominance (hooks, 2000). By limiting women's access to education, these policies ensure their ongoing



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economic and social dependence, representing a form of systemic oppression that perpetuates gender inequality (Nussbaum, 2001). Furthermore, the denial of education to women contravenes international human rights treaties, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979).

UNESCO (2023) warns that the exclusion of girls from education will have enduring consequences, affecting not only individual lives but also the socio-economic progress of Afghanistan. The World Economic Forum (2023) notes that gender-based wage gaps are widening due to educational limitations, which further obstructs women's empowerment and financial autonomy. In spite of these restrictions, Afghan girls are discovering creative methods to pursue their education through clandestine schools, digital learning platforms, and community-led initiatives. The rise of secret educational networks, reminiscent of those formed during the Taliban's earlier regime from 1996 to 2001, illustrates their resilience and resistance to oppressive measures (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Organizations such as Sahar Education have emphasized the importance of online learning and psychological support for Afghan girls (Sahar Education, 2023).

Additionally, international organizations like UNESCO and UNICEF have advocated for conditional humanitarian aid, linking financial assistance to the reinstatement of girls' education (United Nations Development Programme, 2023). Another proposed solution to tackle the educational crisis is the enhancement of scholarship opportunities for Afghan girls to study abroad.

Methodology

This study employs a systematic review and qualitative research approach to investigate the mental and socioeconomic effects of restricting education for Afghan girls. A thematic analysis will be conducted to identify recurring themes and significant issues. Primary data sources used in the compilation of articles include comprehensive examination of scholarly articles, reports from the United Nations, publications from non-governmental organizations, and psychological research related to the impact of educational restrictions on Afghan girls. Analyzing personal narratives documented by human rights organizations, focusing on mental health, economic implications, and enforced dependency. Moreover, gathering qualitative data from interviews conducted by NGOs, advocates, and international organizations. Secondary data choices include utilizing statistical reports from UNESCO, WHO, the World Bank, and UNICEF that illustrate the correlation between the denial of education and economic decline, gender inequality, and health deterioration.

Ethical consideration in compiling the obtained data ensures that all data sourced from reports and interviews upholds anonymity and confidentiality. Utilizing only verified and credible sources to prevent misinformation. Acknowledging the sensitivity of the topic by maintaining a neutral and scholarly tone.

However, the absence of direct field research due to limited access to Afghanistan. Potential bias in NGO reports stemming from political influences. Restricted availability of firsthand accounts due to censorship and security issues are some of the limitations that the article undergoes.

Discussion and analysis: The Psychological and Socioeconomic Impacts of Education Denial on Afghan Girls

Restricting Afghan girls' access to education extends beyond the mere absence of knowledge; it significantly affects their mental well-being, cognitive growth, and social identity. Education plays a vital role in shaping an individual's self-esteem, confidence, and ability to engage with the community. The deprivation of this fundamental right leads to heightened mental health issues, emotional stagnation, and enduring developmental setbacks.



Psychological Impacts of Educational Limitations on Young Minds

Education provides individuals with a sense of purpose, hope, and direction. The constraints placed on educational opportunities for Afghan girls have resulted in a notable rise in depression, anxiety, and identity crises among young women. Studies show that those who are unable to access education frequently suffer from increased psychological distress, as education serves not only as a pathway to knowledge but also as a crucial component of self-discovery and future aspirations (Ryan & Deci, Self-Determination Theory and Well-being, 2000). Research conducted by Medica Mondiale (2023), an international organization dedicated to supporting women in crisis-affected regions, has indicated that Afghan girls who are denied access to education report increased feelings of worthlessness, profound sadness, and suicidal ideation. Similarly, the United States Institute of Peace (2023) documented cases of PTSD, social withdrawal, and self-harm among Afghan girls who lack educational opportunities. A former student from Kabul recounted her experience, expressing:

"I was once a top student in my class, aspiring to become a doctor. Now, I sit at home with no hope for the future. Every morning, I wake up to nothing—I have no books, no lessons, no goals. I feel like I no longer exist." (USIP, 2023).

Early Marriages and Domestic Roles

For numerous Afghan girls, education transcends mere career ambitions; it serves as a protective barrier against forced marriage and lifelong dependency. The lack of educational opportunities heightens the risk of early and forced marriages, as families unable to educate their daughters often resort to marrying them off at a young age. UNICEF (2022) reports a significant rise in child marriage rates in Afghanistan since the Taliban reinstated the ban on education. Psychologists contend that enforced dependence—both financially and socially—fosters a profound sense of powerlessness and erodes self-worth (Nussbaum, Women and Human Development, 2001). Elevated levels of depression and anxiety stemming from a lack of autonomy; Emotional turmoil resulting from domestic abuse, as they are socially conditioned to remain silent; Intergenerational trauma, as they transmit their own feelings of helplessness to their daughters (Sen, Development as Freedom, 1999). A report published by Human Rights Watch (2023) highlights the plight of women in Afghanistan, who previously held roles as teachers, students, and professionals. These women now endure a dual confinement: one that restricts them to their homes and another that confines their thoughts. The absence of education not only strips them of their independence but also diminishes their mental fortitude.

Impaired Cognitive and Emotional Development

Formal education is essential for the development of cognitive skills, problem-solving abilities, and decision-making effectiveness. According to the World Bank (2022), when children, especially girls, are denied access to education, their cognitive growth is severely hindered, leading to:

- A reduced ability for memory retention and analytical thinking.
- Hindered advancement in language skills and communication.
- A weakened capacity for engaging in complex reasoning and cognitive processing (Piaget, The Psychology of Intelligence, 1950).

Neuroscience research indicates that learning enhances neural connections, whereas a lack of educational engagement results in diminished intellectual potential (Bruer, Education and the Brain, 1997). For Afghan girls, the ban on schooling prevents them



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from acquiring critical thinking skills and the ability to solve problems independently, adversely impacting their personal development and jeopardizing the intellectual and economic prospects of the nation.

The Social Isolation of Uneducated Girls

Education serves as a vital tool for individuals to express themselves and challenge injustices. In its absence, Afghan girls are conditioned to remain silent, which further entrenches their subservience within a patriarchal society. Feminist theorists contend that the denial of education is a deliberate strategy of control, designed to keep women uninformed, reliant, and voiceless (hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody*, 2000). Research conducted by The Afghanistan Human Rights Commission (2023) indicates that uneducated girls tend to be:

- More hesitant to confront domestic violence.
- Less likely to engage in political or social discourse.
- More susceptible to accepting subordinate positions without challenge.

The absence of education denies women the essential vocabulary, knowledge, and legal understanding necessary to advocate for their rights. This perpetuates cycles of oppression, ensuring that future generations of women remain ensnared in a system that limits their freedom.

The Effects of Learning Denial on Girls' Self-Image and Empowerment

The emotional consequences of exclusion are significant. Girls who are led to believe they are unworthy of education develop profound feelings of inadequacy, inferiority, and worthlessness. According to UN Women (2023), Afghan girls who are denied education demonstrate:

- Reduced self-esteem and ongoing self-doubt.
- Social isolation and reluctance to express their views.
- Feelings of guilt and shame for aspiring to academic success.

Malala Yousafzai, a Nobel Prize laureate who survived an assassination attempt by the Taliban for advocating girls' education, stated in her autobiography, *I Am Malala*: "One child, one teacher, one book, and one pen can change the world. But when you deny a girl education, you do not just silence her; you silence generations to come."

The systematic exclusion of Afghan girls from education is not only a violation of their individual rights but also poses a threat to the future of Afghanistan.

The Socioeconomic Consequences: Threatening a Nation's Future

Education is a vital component in promoting economic development, social progress, and overall public health. In its absence, Afghanistan risks descending further into poverty, economic stagnation, and gender inequality.

The Financial Consequences of an Uneducated Female Population

Education is widely recognized as a key tool in the fight against poverty, particularly for women. Educated girls are more likely to attain stable employment, contribute to household income, and break the cycle of poverty that spans generations (Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 1999). The World Bank (2022) reports that each additional



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year of schooling for girls can increase their future earnings by 10-20%, which directly benefits their families and communities. Nevertheless, in Afghanistan, where the Taliban's restrictions have resulted in 80% of school-aged girls being out of school (UNESCO, 2023), the potential for financial independence is severely compromised. Women lacking educational opportunities are often relegated to low-wage, informal employment or are entirely dependent on male family members for financial support (UN Women, 2022). The absence of formal education prevents Afghan women from entering skilled professions such as healthcare, education, and entrepreneurship, thereby intensifying the nation's poverty challenges.

Women's Economic Dependence on Male Guardians

In many Afghan families, men are the primary earners, which perpetuates women's financial reliance and subordinate status. Girls who lack educational opportunities possess minimal decision-making authority, rendering them vulnerable to financial domination, exploitation, and abuse (Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*, 2001). Women without education are at an increased risk of experiencing poverty, homelessness, and financial insecurity, particularly if their male guardian dies or abandons them (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2023), the participation of women in the labor force in Afghanistan has decreased to below 10%, primarily due to restrictions on education. When women do find employment, they often earn significantly less than their male counterparts, a situation exacerbated by their lack of formal education and vocational training (World Economic Forum, 2023).

Economic Implications of Limiting Female Education in Afghanistan

The economic prosperity of a nation is intricately linked to the educational levels of its populace. The World Bank (2023) reports that countries that limit women's educational opportunities experience at least a 15% decrease in GDP, as they effectively exclude a significant portion of their labor force. Afghanistan is currently grappling with economic contraction, with the United Nations Development Programme (2023) noting that the country's GDP has shrunk by over 20% since the Taliban regained authority.

Denying girls access to education undermines Afghanistan's pool of skilled labor, leading to shortages in essential fields such as healthcare, engineering, and technology (UNESCO, 2023). Restrictions on women's education have also resulted in international sanctions and a reduction in foreign aid, further destabilizing Afghanistan's economic landscape (World Bank, 2023).

By continuing to deny educational opportunities to women, Afghanistan is deliberately hindering its economic progress, perpetuating cycles of dependency, poverty, and financial instability that are likely to persist for generations.

Consequences of Education Restrictions on Women's Health and Maternal Mortality

A significant outcome of banning female education is its detrimental impact on women's healthcare. Afghanistan is already grappling with one of the highest maternal mortality rates globally, recording 638 deaths per 100,000 live births (UNICEF, 2023). The Taliban's imposition of educational restrictions on women has critically undermined medical training initiatives, leading to a shortage of female doctors, nurses, and midwives, which poses a direct threat to women's lives.

Cultural practices in Afghanistan discourage women from consulting male doctors, yet the education ban results in fewer women being trained as healthcare providers (WHO,



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2023). The lack of access to qualified midwives and obstetricians means that more women are likely to encounter complications during childbirth, contributing to higher rates of infant and maternal mortality (Lancet Global Health, 2022). In Afghanistan's conservative society, many families restrict women from receiving care from male physicians, creating a critical healthcare crisis. The WHO (2023) warns: "The lack of trained female doctors leaves millions of Afghan women without necessary medical care, resulting in preventable deaths from pregnancy-related complications, infections, and chronic diseases." The Taliban's policies extend beyond educational limitations—they are actively endangering women's health and survival.

Conclusion

The exclusion of Afghan girls from educational opportunities represents not merely a temporary setback but a significant and lasting wound inflicted upon an entire generation, with consequences that will resonate for years to come. The psychological toll of enforced isolation, the economic downturn stemming from the removal of half the workforce, and the societal decline resulting from ignorance and oppression paint a grim picture for Afghanistan's future under such stringent regulations.

Nevertheless, amidst these challenges, a spirit of resistance endures. Afghan girls pursue their education in secret, educators risk their lives to teach, and international organizations persist in their efforts to ensure access to education. The resilience of Afghan women and girls illustrates that knowledge cannot be permanently stifled, nor can the innate human aspiration for growth and contribution be entirely extinguished.

Education is not merely an indulgence; it is a fundamental right, an essential need, and a foundation for progress. The global community, advocates, and those within Afghanistan who aspire to a brighter future must not adopt a passive stance. Ongoing advocacy, innovative learning approaches, and unwavering diplomatic pressure are crucial until every Afghan girl can reclaim her right to education.

The international community must recognize that a nation that silences its women effectively silences its own future. Yet, history has shown that oppression, no matter how severe, is never absolute. The determination of Afghan girls to learn, grow, and free themselves from imposed ignorance serves as a testament to an undeniable reality: education is power, and power cannot be contained indefinitely.

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