

Breaking Chains: Examining the barriers to women's education in Afghanistan

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The sudden and harsh return of Taliban rule in Afghanistan marked a significant deterioration in women's educational opportunities, redrawing the contours of life, particularly for women, turning classrooms into echoes of a forbidden quest for knowledge. Only a month into their return, most women saw their dreams and aspirations dramatically cut short in an instant as the Taliban announced that all girls would be banned from attending secondary schools and universities from September 2021 and instituting a growing number of measures since then to further restrict and deny women and girls access to education across the country.

Nearly three years since the Taliban takeover, this global tragedy has largely faded from the media and popular consensus. With each day, the restrictions placed on women and girls grow, and the education gap with the rest of the world expands. As fewer girls can access higher education opportunities within Afghanistan, their ability to seek opportunities externally also dwindle every day they are unable to continue their studies. Lacking any consensus or cohesive response from the larger international community, the event ['Breaking chains: Examining the barriers to women's education in Afghanistan'](#) brought together three esteemed speakers to contextualize the social and historical roots in order to fully appreciate the consequences of and potential approaches to mitigating an ever-growing disaster for Afghanistani women.

The event, held on 8 February 2024 at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), brought together Shagofah Ghafari, a social researcher and the Secretary General of Afghanistan Centre for Peace and Democracy, Ofran Badakhshani, a famous Afghanistani poet and businessman who graduated from the University of Amsterdam in political philosophy, and Anne Kwakkenbos, a gender expert with Cordaid who has extensive experience in different projects in Afghanistan.

A tale of two Afghanistans: Contextualizing history

No approach or conversation should be considered without an in-depth understanding of the historical currents that continue to underpin aspects of Afghan society. The Afghanistan presented by Ofran Badakhshani described a tale of two Afghanistans: one that existed prior to 1893 under a hegemonic Persian culture. and that of the colonial conception of a state now known as Afghanistan. Prior to 1893, women held 'traditional' roles within the household similar to many societies of the time but remained free to express themselves through education, culture and professions. However, with the turn to the colonial state in 1893, a hegemonic Pashtoon system allied with an increased religious base to slowly deride the status of women in the country, forcing women back into the households and restricting their opportunities.

But a simple duality of historical systems does not provide sufficient understanding of how to approach Afghanistan within the colonial parameters of the state. Afghanistan continues to support a network of over twenty ethnic groups and 45 local languages, each one offering insight into different cultural identities and practices. Resulting from such differences within each of these groups, Badakhshani emphasized that an approach to a 'one Afghanistan' has failed to reach those groups ready to integrate with the larger community and instead focused on bombing those unwilling groups to force them to do so.

Shagofah Ghafari further contextualized women's rights in the post-2001 society as that of a normalization of gender marginalization. While undoubtedly more open than that of the Taliban-controlled society prior to 2001, the system continued to reflect the historical legacy of marginalized women in many aspects, including within education. Anne Kwakkenbos recalled gender segregation within their organization's Afghanistan office which provided both safety and comfort for women employees but was instituted to placate a patriarchal system unwilling to fully change to accommodate full integration. Within education, while the country experienced steps to ensure women and men held the same access and right to education, barriers, laws and regional customs continued to restrict full access for women.

Further, the model implemented by Western powers upon Afghanistan continually failed to reflect the diversity identified by Badakhshani, emphasizing urban centres while disregarding rural and peri-urban communities, and approached the Taliban as a uniform group rather than a diverse group of regional and communal power structures. The coalition intervention force continued to utilize meaningless metrics with a continued focus on physical security which was easily undermined throughout the twenty-year occupation. As this veneer of 'security' rapidly crumbled in August 2021, the concept of security remained a particular question.

Security from what and for whom?

Since their abrupt return to power in 2021, the Taliban have continually touted a regime of security that never existed throughout the coalition invasion period. Even in anecdotal examples, the panellists recall conversations with friends and colleagues that emphasize the return of stability and an end to large scale violence as enough of a justification for Taliban rule. Such expressions continue to emphasize this veneer of security, but the panellists emphasized the necessity to question: security for whom?

As the Taliban continue to expand the decrees that further marginalize women in society and induce men to implement ever stricter punishments, a recent UN report noted that '90 per cent of young women respondents reported bad or very bad mental health, and that suicide and suicidal ideation are everywhere' (United Nations, 2023). Shagofah Ghafari echoed this concern, noting that that since the return to power of the Taliban, researchers have noticed a significant increase in women's

suicide rates, alarming statistics related to the increased prevalence of arranged marriages and child marriage, and increased maternal and child mortality rates across the country.

This juxtaposition reveals the stark reality behind the facade of security: while some may perceive a reduction in overt violence, the erosion of women's rights and the pervasive fear and anxiety among the female population paint a different picture altogether. The emphasis on security by the Taliban conveniently masks their egregious violations of human rights, particularly those of women, under the guise of maintaining order and stability. It is imperative to see through this manipulation and advocate for a comprehensive understanding of security that prioritizes the well-being and rights of all members of society, regardless of identity.

Furthermore, with a return of gender apartheid comes a return or increase in practices that degrade the value of women even further within society. There is a growing risk of the normalization of the extreme situation in Afghanistan as it is permitted to continue to unfold in the background alongside a significant threat of increased child marriage, infant mortality rates, child pregnancy and religious indoctrination replacing education throughout the country. The panellists noted that the current education structure within Afghanistan has further been eroded through a strict implementation of a religious-based curriculum which threatens to indoctrinate both young girls and boys, potentially forced migration from regions of stricter implementation and a growing schism even among those fortunate enough to continue their studies in other countries.

Intermediate solutions start small

Acknowledging the immense challenges that remain as long as the Taliban retain central control of the country, each of the panellists envisioned different approaches that might help mitigate the unfolding crisis for young women and girls. While challenges to internet access restrict the universal adoption and implementation of online education platforms, international actors can explore offline or analogue systems that can easily scale within communities. Through [Stichting Gilgamesh](#), Badakhshani is currently supporting pilot activities with the open source learning app OneBillion.org to localize and contextualize the learning modules to further facilitate the uptake and usage of this software. In other cases, finding ways to connect with young women in Afghanistan through virtual platforms or systems can also prove to be a vital outlet and connection to knowledge that might otherwise be restricted. While remaining hampered by internet connection and costs, the panellists spoke to minor interactions with friends, family or strangers through WhatsApp as well as the potential of virtual mentorship interactions.

Universities outside Afghanistan can also consider how to increase scholarship initiatives for Afghanistani women to seek opportunities outside of Afghanistan. While

not a longer-term benefit to a society that provides no clear economic or social benefits to the human capital investment, such scholarships may provide women with the opportunity to advance their education and advocate for change from outside Afghanistan, to serve as mentors through virtual or informal networks, or to support families through remittance networks. Universities and governments outside Afghanistan can amplify the voices of Afghanistani migrants, refugees and academics through existing networks or platforms so that the plight of women in Afghanistan can be continually registered within our societies. As noted during the event, Afghanistani women do not need empowerment – they are already empowered – but they need an outlet for their voices and support in ensuring their voices do not fade into the background.

The authors of this article wish to explore opportunities within institutions of higher education on how we can create new initiatives to extend the opportunities for women to continue their studies and create the necessary platforms to advocate for inclusive opportunities within Afghanistan. We cannot continue to permit the normalization of this atrocity to continue without the due attention it deserves and seek partners in helping to collectively create new avenues to ensure the women and girls of Afghanistan can continue to follow their dreams.