

The continuing ban on girls' education in Afghanistan

by Matiullah Qazizada

27 March 2025



Animators working with female child refugees in a child-friendly space before they return to Afghanistan, 2023.

Photo Credit: OCHA/Sayed Habib Bidel

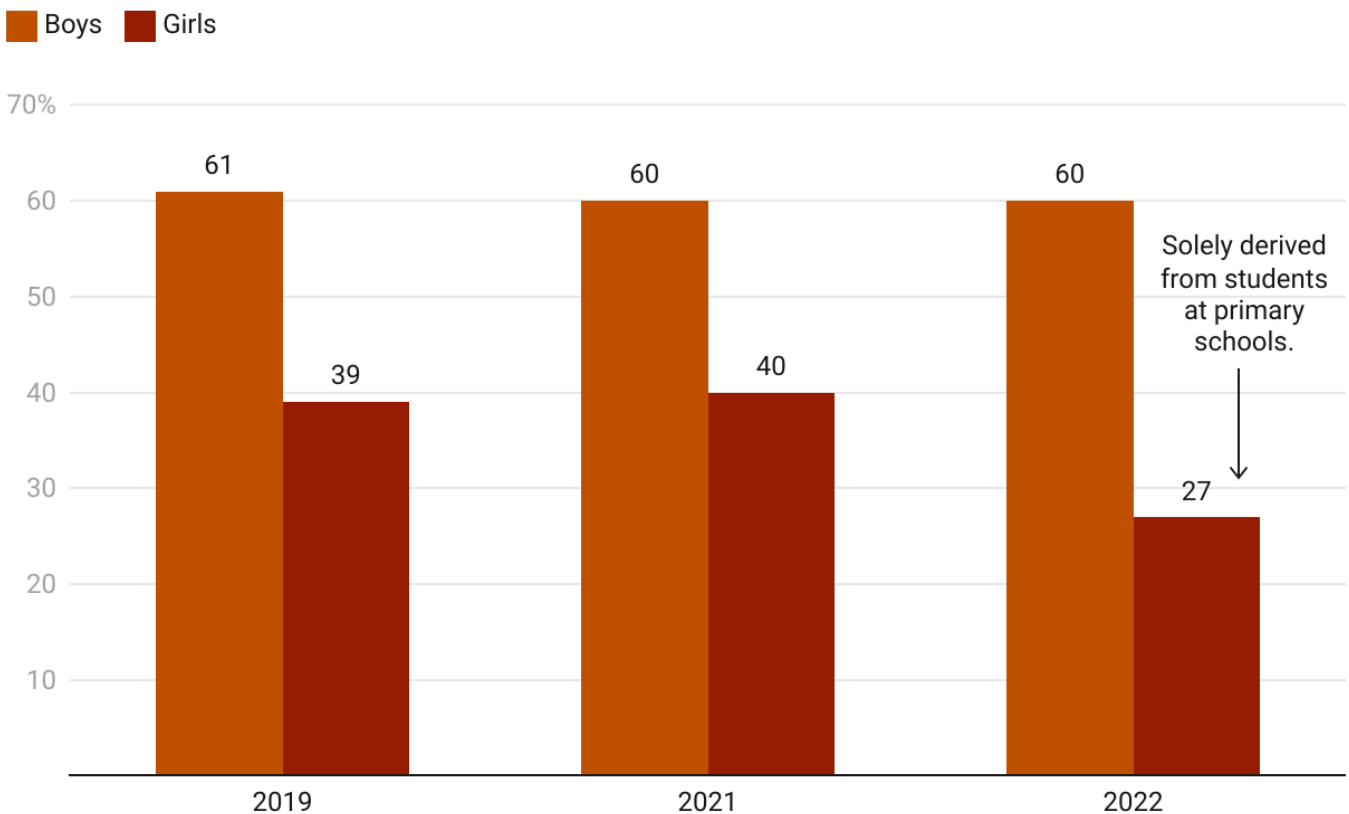
For more than 1,200 days, Afghan girls have been banned from attending school beyond Year 6. While boys started the new school year at secondary schools across Afghanistan on 22 March, there are still no plans for girls to attend. This policy mirrors **the Taliban's restrictions during their first rule** from 1996 to 2001 when they also prohibited girls from receiving an education beyond primary school.

Beginning in the 20th century, **girls' education in Afghanistan** has remained a deeply contested issue, with **three regimes** enforcing such exclusions: under Amir Habibullah Kalakani's rule in 1929, under the Taliban from 1996 to 2001, and again under their current rule since August 2021. Additionally, during the Mujahideen era (1992–1996), access to education was significantly limited because of civil war and restrictions imposed on women. This blog explores the far-reaching consequences of banning girls from education.

Under Amir Habibullah's rule in the early 20th century, modern education was formally introduced, and the country's **first modern secondary school**, Habibia, was established in 1903. King Amanullah Khan (1919–1929) took significant steps to expand education, mandating primary schooling for both boys and girls and establishing dedicated **schools for girls**. By 1991, before the Taliban's first rise to power, Afghanistan had a coeducational school system, with **7,000 women pursuing higher education**, 230,000 girls enrolled in schools, 190 female university professors and 22,000 women working as school teachers. Women also made up half of the country's **public servants and 40% of its medical professionals**. This progress was reversed under the Taliban's rule.

Afghanistan now ranks last — 177th out of 177 countries — on Georgetown University's **Women, Peace, and Security Index**, reflecting the dire state of women's inclusion in society. Over the course of one year, the education of approximately 1.3 million girls in lower and upper secondary schools was abruptly halted (Figure 1). This figure has likely increased in subsequent years as the Taliban's long-term stance on women's education remains uncertain.

Figure 1: Percentage of children in Afghanistan enrolled at primary and secondary schools



Source: Data from Afghanistan National Statistics and Information Authority and author calculations.
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Three primary drivers are cited for the ban: first, the Taliban deem that the current **education curriculum** does not align with Islamic principles and Afghan culture. The Taliban claim that modern education promotes western culture and values. Second, the ban persists not only to demonstrate who is in control in Afghanistan but also **as a political tool** to bargain with the international community for formal recognition. Last, a small circle with **conservative ideologies** upholds the belief that a woman's place is solely within the household. However, these claims are not valid and the vast majority of Afghans reject them, recognising the ban's devastating effects on individuals, families, the economy and the nation's overall well-being.

Education is a key driver of **financial stability for families**. Lack of access to education perpetuates generational poverty. Studies indicate a strong inverse correlation between education levels and poverty rates. A UNESCO report estimates that if all adults completed secondary education, 420 million people could be **lifted out of poverty**, with an additional 60 million escaping poverty if adults gained just two more years of schooling. Given that more than **half of Afghanistan's population** lives in poverty, denying girls access to education only worsens the crisis.

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The ban also leads to an increase in **early marriages, heightens gender inequality**, suppresses the emergence of **female leaders and contributes to high maternal mortality**. A 2017 study by the Afghanistan Central Statistics Organization found that 28% of Afghan girls were **married before turning 18**, with 4% married before age 15. By August 2023, research from the local organization Bishnaw-Wawra, which interviewed **over 3,000 young women**, revealed that 70% were aware of girls being forced into marriage before adulthood. These figures illustrate the severe impact of the Taliban policy on Afghan families and society at large.

A UNICEF report highlights **the staggering economic cost** of banning girls from secondary education, estimating a loss of 2.5% of Afghanistan's annual Gross Domestic Product. Conversely, if all three million Afghan girls completed secondary education and entered the workforce, the nation's economy could experience a boost of at least US\$5.4 billion. Providing equal educational opportunities for women is not just a matter of justice and equality — it is essential for sustainable development and national progress. The education ban undermines Afghanistan's potential and cripples its future prospects.

The prohibition of girls' education beyond Year 6 imposes a profound burden on Afghan society and the economy. The ban should not be seen as a new normal. History shows that girl's education has been an important part of Afghan society, and it should be revived.

While further research is needed to quantify the exact cost of this policy, its severe ramifications are undeniable. This ban violates fundamental human rights and must be urgently overturned for the well-being of Afghanistan's people and its future prosperity.

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