Female Education in Afghanistan After the Return of the Taliban

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It has been over eight months since the Taliban retook control of Afghanistan, but it is still not clear how the Taliban are going to rule or how they are going to be accepted on the world stage. However, some things are beginning to become clear. It appears that the Taliban may be more conservative and draconian than was first predicted. The killing and oppression of religious and ethnic minorities continues, and despite promises to the contrary women are still not allowed to go to school beyond sixth grade and neither are they allowed to work or travel without a male escort. Public education in Afghanistan for both boys and girls has been a major requirement by NGOs and governments for resuming financial and material assistance to Afghanistan. When the Taliban took power in August 2021, they announced that education for both boys and girls beyond the 6th grade would be suspended, but would resume after the Afghan new year, that is March 23, 2022. The Taliban said that it needed time to revise the school curriculum so that it would better reflect Islamic values, and so that a female curriculum and school uniforms for women could be developed. The Taliban also ruled that only women could teach women's classes in high schools and universities. It also announced that university courses could be coed, but that there would need to be a physical partition between the female and male students (Jackson, 2022).

Further on September 17, 2021, the Taliban announced that schools would open as planned, but in the announcement only schools for males were mentioned. It appeared that no decision had been made regarding women's education. Then in January 2022 Deputy Minister of Culture and Information Zabiullah Mujahid told the Associated Press that the government hoped to open all schools by March 23, 2022, apparently including schools for females. He also emphasized that Afghanistan did not have the capacity to support education across Afghanistan and asked the donor community to help fund Afghan education. Then in January 2022, Taliban Acting Minister of Education, Nurulla Munir and Deputy Minister of Education Abdul Hakim Hemat promised various international parties that the Taliban did not oppose female education and that older females, that is those twelve or older, could return to school once they could create a "safe environment for girls" (Jackson, 2022).

What a "safe environment for girls" actually meant was not clarified, but news that schools might reopen for women was well received by the international community. Many governments and NGOs, including the United States, promised to support education in Afghanistan if schooling for women was allowed. Tom West, the United States Special Representative for Afghanistan, announced that the United States would pay the salaries of all teachers in Afghanistan if the Taliban reopened girls' schools (West, 2022). Likewise, in early March of 2022 the World Bank pledged more than one million US dollars for aid to Afghanistan which would include support for education. Other donors including the Educational Cluster, a coordinating body which includes UN agencies as well as Afghan and international NGOs, pledged to supported public education in Afghanistan if schools for women were opened (Jackson, 2022).

It appeared in early 2022 that women's education was a go. Yet despite international pressure and the promised resources from the international community, on March 23, 2002, the Taliban leadership announced that girls' schools would not open. This decision was announced at the last minute on the very day girl schools were to reopen. Many girls around the country had already gone to school that day excited that schools were reopening only to find that their school was closed. This announcement also surprised many teachers who had gone to work expecting that their

schools would reopen. Many young women and their families were shocked and deeply disappointed that the opportunity to attend school was blocked (Jackson, 2022).

How the Taliban makes decisions is not well known. Clearly some of their decisions have been puzzling and seemingly in many cases self-defeating. The decision not to open schools for older girls beyond six grade was apparently made at a three-day leadership conference in the Taliban headquarters in Kandahar which began on March 20th. According to the *Etilaat-e Roz*, an Afghan newspaper, (Jackson, 2022) the conference brought various segments of the Taliban leadership together to resolve issues that had been of growing concern among various factions, particularly tensions between the Taliban leadership in Kabul, which has to deal with international pressures, and the Taliban headquarters in Kandahar which is more isolated from international pressures.

Specifically, the Kandahar meeting was apparently meant to reemphasize the leadership of the ultimate leader of the Taliban, Haibatullalh Akhundzada, whose official title is the *Amir ul-Mumenin,* the Leader of the Faithful, and the Shura, or high religious council of Islamic scholars, that advises the *Amir*. The leadership in Kandahar is considerably more conservative and isolated than the Taliban leadership in Kabul. The Kandahar Shura follows its own version of Islamic Sharia, while the Taliban leadership in Kabul must deal with the day-to-day issues that arise running the country and interacting with international parties. In addition to women's education, several other issues were decided at this conference. These include the requirement that men who work at government jobs must wear beards and Islamic dress to work, that city parks must be gender segregated, and that woman may not travel by air without an accompanying male relative, or *Mahram.* They also adopted the Taliban all-white flag as the national flag of Afghanistan.

Apparently, one of the concerns the conservative members of the Taliban have regarding education for older women, that is women over 12 years old, has to do with proper dress or school uniforms. The Taliban have expressed concern that the school uniforms older girls wear to class may be too revealing and that they needed time to find the proper uniform for women to wear to class. Several Afghan women educators have pointed out that this is a false issue. Pashtana Durrani, an education activist and founder of Learn Afghanistan**,** an Afghan NGO that promotes female education, pointed out that "the excuse over uniforms is a very last-minute attempt to hide internal disagreements", and that the Taliban are grasping at branches. "Do they need a fashion designer to help them decide the color and design for trousers and shirts" (Glinski, 2022).

The issue of women's public, that is non-madrasah or secular, education has been an issue for many decades in Afghanistan and is part of a larger debate about the proper role of women in Afghan society in general. In the last twenty years during the time of the Islamic Republic and the American and international presence in Afghanistan, there seemed to be great progress of women in Afghanistan and their roles in Afghan society. But this progress may be more an illusion than a fact. True, more women attended school than at any time previously and women were allowed to hold jobs previously thought only appropriate for men. During the Republic there were female professors, journalist, judges, doctors, TV personalities, and executives. There was even a female general in the Afghan Army, Khatool Mohammadzai who rose to the rank of Brigadier General (she was quickly removed by the Taliban). And, while Afghan women continued to dress modestly, in the last twenty years the strict veiling of women found in traditional society had begun to change and women had greater freedom in what to wear.

This women's progress was especially seen in education. In the past twenty years of the Republic more women than ever were able to attend school, including schooling beyond 6th grade, and many women were able to obtain a college degree. Women's literacy, while still below 50 percent, increased dramatically. More than 3.6 million girls were enrolled by 2018 – more than 2.5 million in primary school and over 1 million in secondary**.** The increase in girls in secondary education was particularly marked, with nearly 40% enrolled in 2018 compared with 6% in 2003, according to the UN (Batha, 2022).

Afghanistan housed over 49 colleges and universities, most; before the arrival of the Taliban, welcomed women students. These colleges and universities include Kabul University which was closed by the previous Taliban government between 1996 and 2001 and reopened in 2002. Before the Taliban take over in 2021, Kabul University had 24,000 students, including many women students. Beginning in 2015, the University offered the first master's

degree courses in gender and women's studies. Other universities include American University of Afghanistan, which is sponsored by the American government, Polytechnical University in Kabul, Nangarhar University in Jalalabad, and Herat University, Herat. In total there are 17 public universities in Afghanistan and 2 private universities. Before the Taliban take over in 2021, most of these universities and colleges were open to female students. The American University of Afghanistan, which was housed for security reasons in the American Embassy compound, had 763 students of which 44 percent were female, and 42 full time faculty, of which 31 percent were female (Bickford, 2022). With the arrival of the Taliban most, but not all, of the students were able to flee the country and AUA is now offering classes in Doha and Venice (Bickford, 2022).

There are other educational alternatives for women. In the last decade several Islamic schools, *madrassas,* have opened in Afghanistan for women. They are mostly found in cities outside of Kabul in areas of Afghanistan where traditional Islamic values are strong (Azad, 2014). Ashraf-ul Madres madrassa in the city of Kunduz claims over 6,000 female students enrolled of all ages and was established by two influential mullahs in 2008. Kunduz is in the Northeast corner of Afghanistan and is largely populated by Uzbek and Tajik ethnic groups. The school is not sanctioned by the Taliban, but neither is it prohibited. The older students, that is over 12 years old, are required to wear clothing that covers their heads, faces, and eyes, and wear gloves and socks for Islamic purity. The school also teaches that listening to the radio, watching television, and taking photos is unIslamic and that women should not work outside the home. The curriculum includes memorizing the Koran and the Hadiths (the sayings of Mohammed and his followers), and other religious topics. There is little or no teaching of a modern curriculum such as mathematics, science, or other topics (Azad, 2014). It is not known how many religious schools for women exist in Afghanistan. Most madrassas, or mosque schools, are strictly for men.

Given the poor state of government schools in the last 20 years there has been a growth of private schools, including schools for girls. By 2020 there were 803 private schools in Afghanistan, teaching over 170,000 students of which 44 percent were women. Over half of these private schools 420 were in Kabul and 124 in Herat (Sherani, 2014). These schools taught a variety of topics and many were specialized, for instance a school for cosmetology, while others offered a broader education. These schools were also shut down by the Taliban. While it seems that Afghan women have made great strides in education, this apparent progress in women's education during the past 20 years of the Republic may be misleading. The upper-classes in Kabul and a few other cities, such as Jalalabad and Herat, were able to make gains, but women in much of the country, especially in the rural areas and among the lower classes, did not. In fact, even after 20 years of governmental support and millions of dollars of international aid, in 2021 only 37 per cent of Afghan women could read and write, compared to 66 percent of boys (Batha, 2022).

The United Nations Development Program's 2020 annual reports shows that Afghanistan is ranked 169th in women's education, one of the lowest in the world (UNDP, 2020). One reason for this is corruption. Much of the aid money for schools and educational facilities ended up in the pockets of corrupt Afghan officials and American contractors. According to Reuters, officials in the Afghan Education Ministry, "embezzled millions of dollars from the international community" (Cooper, 2018). Bribes were being paid for schools to be licensed. It is reported that during the Republic teachers seeking jobs were required to pay $US 1000 in bribes to get a teaching position (Wilkes, 2017). Another reason for the lack of progress in women's education is the traditional role females are expected to play in Afghan society. At its core Afghanistan is a conservative country where traditional ways of life are still valued and practiced. While many Afghans have moved to the urban centers, over 70 percent of Afghans still live in rural areas where traditional and conservative ways of life remain. The Taliban represent these values.

In traditional Afghan society, girls are allowed to be seen in public and therefore to attend school, until they enter puberty, that is about the age of 12 or 6th grade. Beyond that age girls are considered nubile, that is sexually mature and able to bear children, and therefore should not be seen in public lest they attract men. The appearance of chastity, or purity, is important in traditional Afghan culture and a women's value in marriage depends in large part on the degree to which she is seen as "pure", that is untouched and unseen in public. In this conservative tradition, referred to as *Purdah*, which directly translate as screen or veil, involves the seclusion of women from public observation by means of concealing clothing, including the veil, and high walled family compounds. Although Purdah is thought to be an Islamic practice, it is found in many traditional tribal societies. In addition, if women in this traditional custom, do go out in public, they must be accompanied by a *mahram*, a member of women's family with

whom marriage would be considered *haram*, that is illegal in Islamic culture.

These traditional beliefs regarding the restrictive role of women is still followed by many traditional Afghans, including the religious conservatives. It also found among Afghans who live in tribal societies, particularly the Pashtun in southern Afghanistan, and less among other ethnic Afghans particularly the Hazara and the Tajiks who do not have a strong tribal social structure. It is this belief, in part, that is has led the Taliban officials to prohibit schools for girls beyond 6th grade. This of course would also exclude women from attending university or college. The concept of Purdah and the resulting limitations on the freedom of young women is beginning to change, especially those among the urban upper class. The value of education for both men and women is growing in Afghanistan. To this point, many of those in the Taliban leadership have daughters attending school, either in secretive private schools or abroad. Many of the families of the Taliban leadership live abroad in Pakistan or in other Islamic countries, particularly Qatar, so that their daughters may attend school.

Despite promises to open schools for women, the Taliban reversed course and ruled that it will not allow women to attend school beyond the 6th grade. During the 20 years of the prior government, there was a dramatic growth in educational opportunities for both men and women. Yet Afghanistan remains a largely rural and conservative society in which young women are expected to remain secluded, a practice referred to as Purdah. As a result, the Taliban government remains isolated from international recognition and Afghans continue to suffer.

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About the author:

Grant Farr is a Profesor Emeritus at Portland State University. He has lived and worked in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran, and has published several articles and books on those countries. He is currently working on a major research project on Afghan refugees.