Afghans For Progressive Thinking (APT)

POLICY BRIEFS

The aftermath of the Taliban takeover: A generation erased.

ADVOCACY & WRITING

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Table of CONTENTS

1 Introduction

2 About us

3 Barriers to education for Afghan girls under Taliban rule. What policy interventions could protect and restore their right to education?

7 Internet Blackouts in Afghanistan: Threats to Girls' Education, Safety, and Access to Information

11 Addressing Afghan Women's Top Concerns: Policy Options for International Support and Protection

15 Existing international policies aimed at supporting Afghan girls' rights; What frameworks or interventions would be most effective under current restrictions?

18 The Urgent Need for Binding Action in Women, Peace, and Security

21 Policy options for addressing trauma among Afghan girls and women in humanitarian programs

Introduction

These policy briefs were written at a time when Afghan girls and women are being pushed out of classrooms, cut off from information, and excluded from public life. Yet they were also written at a time of courage. Through the Higher Education Mentorship Program, young Afghan women from across the country chose to think critically and write boldly about the realities they face and the futures they still believe in. This collection brings together their ideas, concerns, and solutions in response to urgent challenges. The briefs examine how education can be protected when it is denied, how internet shutdowns increase isolation and risk, how international policies fall short under severe restrictions, and how trauma and social pressure shape daily life. Each brief goes beyond describing problems. Together, they ask what can still be done and who must act.

What makes this collection powerful is its grounding in lived experience. The authors write as students whose learning was disrupted, as young women moving along uncertainty, and as witnesses to quiet resilience. Their work challenges the global community to listen more carefully and respond more responsibly. Across these briefs, one message is clear: policies about Afghan women cannot succeed without Afghan women. Protection without participation is not enough. These pages are both a warning and an invitation. They warn of the cost of inaction and invite policymakers to act with urgency, respect, and partnership. They reflect clarity, strength, and leadership and remind the world that Afghan women continue to shape their future, even under the hardest conditions.

This publication of policy briefs was made possible through the strong leadership and dedication of Ajmal Ramyar, Head Executive of APT; Abdul Rahman Jalil, Project Manager; and Nooda Nikan, Project Coordinator, whose guidance shaped the direction and success of this initiative. We are sincerely thankful to Caitlyn O'Flaherty for facilitating the writing sessions and editing the briefs, helping participants refine their ideas and express them with clarity and confidence. We also extend special appreciation to Lindsey Jones-Renaud for leading the advocacy sessions and supporting the authors in strengthening their voices and strategies. Our gratitude further goes to Yazdan Mirdad for designing the booklet and to Mursal Khairkhwa for creating the posters that visually amplify the messages of Afghan youth. Their combined efforts ensured that this collection is both impactful and professionally presented.

About Us

Afghans for Progressive Thinking (APT) is a youth-led nonprofit organization in Afghanistan that actively addresses human rights crises, with a specific focus on women's rights, while simultaneously promoting girls' access to education through creative and impactful initiatives.

APT's initiatives encompass a range of key areas. It connects female university students in Afghanistan with mentors from abroad, forging valuable relationships and providing guidance. APT also facilitates networking opportunities for youth, both within and beyond Afghanistan's borders, to encourage open dialogue, collaboration, and the exchange of ideas and experiences. In addition to these endeavors, APT is preparing to equip a team of young women with expertise in the "Internal Family System (IFS)" trauma healing technique. This training will empower them to offer healing sessions to others and create safe spaces for family members in need of support.

Furthermore, APT offers a platform for young women to express themselves by writing and publishing their stories, particularly significant under Taliban rule.

Over the course of its 13-year existence, APT has successfully fostered meaningful engagement among young men and women. Through discussions and dialogues, they have influenced policies prior to the collapse. These conversations center on critical topics and propose solutions for a better Afghanistan and a better world.

APT's work has played a pivotal role in shaping policies on both national and global levels, owing to the development of leadership and critical thinking skills among its participants. Since its inception in 2010, APT activities have impacted and inspired over 60,000 youth and children to build a vision for a just and inclusive society.

You may read more about APT at: www.aptyouth.org

Barriers to education for Afghan girls under Taliban rule

Executive Summary:

The Taliban's ongoing ban on secondary education for girls has made Afghanistan the only country in the world where girls are denied their right to education. These restrictions have erased twenty years of efforts in female literacy. Millions of girls now face uncertain futures, greater risks of forced and early marriage, and mental health challenges. Access to female healthcare is also declining. This ban will cause severe long-term social and economic damage.
To fight this, international, institutional, and community-based actions are required. Key measures include expanding flexible and accredited educational pathways, making scholarships and visas easier to obtain, supporting local community schools, and holding the Taliban accountable through international pressure. Most importantly, Afghan women must lead this fight. Every decision about their future must be made with them, not for them.

Problem Statement:

Since August 2021, the Taliban has banned Afghan girls from secondary and higher education. These systematic restrictions imposed by the Taliban have left thousands of girls with unknown futures and daily struggles. Moreover, these rules are reversing the progress made in female literacy over the last two decades. According to UNESCO (2024), "In just three years, the de facto authorities have almost wiped out two decades of steady progress for education in Afghanistan, and the future of an entire generation is now in jeopardy."
While online education helps a few, most girls lack access to the internet and devices, leaving them excluded. These limitations not only prevent girls from achieving their dreams but also have repercussions across the would-be workforce. They make women's lives more difficult by increasing the risk of depression, early forced marriage, and lack of female medical staff. These biased restrictions not only waste the potential of millions of girls but also deeply weaken Afghanistan's social and economic future. As UNESCO (2024) reports, "The economy of Afghanistan is estimated to lose

USD 9.6 billion, equivalent to two-thirds of today's GDP, by 2066 if the suspension of women's access to higher education remains in place."
This figure shows how urgently Afghanistan needs logical and fundamental solutions to restore girls' education.

Policy Recommendation:

1. **Expand access to higher education:**

Governments of economically developed countries such as European states and members of the OECD, in coordination with their higher education institutions, should create specific scholarship paths for Afghan girls by reserving a number of fully funded scholarships for them each year, adapting the admission requirements (such as accepting alternative documents or waiving exams that cannot be taken inside Afghanistan), and making the visa process flexible. This will make sure Afghan girls are not excluded for reasons beyond their control.

2. **Recognize gender apartheid as a crime under international law:**

The international community should legally define "gender apartheid" as a crime, specifically to hold the Taliban accountable for their systematic oppression of women and girls in Afghanistan. According to UN human rights experts, "the deliberate subjugation of women and girls is so widespread and systematic that it has come to amount to crimes against humanity." (UNOG, 2024)

3. **Maintain diplomatic pressure:**

Some countries have recognized the Taliban government. This validation encourages them to continue imposing more rules for women. If the world increases diplomatic pressure, demanding the unconditional reopening of girls' schools, it will force them to constrain their actions. As Audrey Azoulay reminds us, "the international community must remain fully mobilized to obtain the unconditional reopening of schools and universities to Afghan girls and women" (UNESCO, 2024).

4. **Increase community-based education:**

Some nonprofit organizations, NGOs, and online schools offer school-equivalent lessons and English courses.

Although they cannot replace a physical school, they are a glimpse of hope for Afghan girls. These options need direct funding to expand women-led networks and ensure access to education to some extent.

According to Carol Mann, Project Manager at FemAid (personal communication, January 15, 2026), some French NGOs* have operated undercover schools since 2021 across 22 provinces, providing education to approximately 3,000 students with the support of about 200 staff members.

This model demonstrates how community-based, NGO-led initiatives can sustain girls' education in restrictive environments and should be prioritized for international funding and protection.

5. **Empower a permanent, funded advisory body of Afghan women experts:**

The international community should create and fund a permanent committee of Afghan women to advise them on all decisions about Afghanistan.

Conclusion:

Banning Afghan girls from education is not only a violation of basic human rights but also a direct threat to Afghanistan's society and economy. To get girls back to school, urgent, sustained, and coordinated actions are required at institutional and global levels. This includes expanding flexible and accredited educational opportunities, codifying gender apartheid as a crime in international law, keeping diplomatic pressure on the Taliban, supporting community-based education, and creating a women's advisory board to enable women to participate in the decisions that affect them. Without strong action, an entire generation of Afghan girls will be permanently excluded from education, with consequences that will continue far beyond Afghanistan.

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Internet Blackouts in Afghanistan: Threats to Girls' Education, Safety, and Access to Information

Executive summary:

Afghan girls face two major barriers: bans on education and internet blackouts. For thousands of girls studying online feels like the only window to continue their education. Yet even those who are studying online face internet blackouts. Internet blackouts cause girls to fall behind in digital learning and lose access to information. Over 63% of girls have reported that internet blackouts have happened more than 10 times this year. Each year their studies become slower, causing harm to their futures, and harming the society. Afghanistan is losing human capital–potential doctors, journalists, teachers, and leaders who could help rebuild the country. This policy brief calls on governments, international organizations, and UN bodies to take urgent steps to mitigate the impact of internet shutdowns by supporting education-focused connectivity, reducing financial barriers to access, strengthening monitoring and accountability, and recognizing internet access as essential to girls' right to education and information.

Problem Statement:

Since the Taliban returned to power in 2021, Afghanistan has experienced repeated nationwide internet shutdowns, regional blackouts, and conditional restrictions on connectivity, particularly during political tensions, protests, and exam periods. These internet disruptions have directly affected access to online education, communication platforms, digital livelihoods, and humanitarian services (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

At the same time, girls and women have been banned from secondary and higher education, making online learning one of the few remaining pathways for continued education. Internet shutdowns therefore compound existing education bans by cutting off the only alternative learning option available to many Afghan girls. During blackout periods, connectivity is either completely unavailable or severely limited, and mobile data prices rise sharply, further restricting access for low-income families.

For girls already excluded from formal education, the internet has become a critical tool for learning, skill-building, and staying

informed. Afghan women frequently describe online education as their “last hope” following school closures. When internet access is disrupted, this final opportunity disappears. Our survey of Afghan students shows the scale of impact: 90.9% reported that internet shutdowns affected their learning “very much.” Many students lost access to essential study materials (81.8%), contact with teachers or classmates (63.6%), and the ability to use learning applications (63.6%). (Authors’ survey, 2025) Students also reported feelings of helplessness and isolation when unable to attend online classes or access information.

In addition, over 60% of girls reported difficulty affording mobile data during blackout periods, especially those from low-income households. (Authors’ survey, 2025) These disruptions deepen educational inequality and disproportionately affect girls who rely entirely on online platforms for learning.

Human Rights Watch (2025) documents that internet shutdowns in Afghanistan block access to education, online classes, livelihoods, and communication channels, with women and girls among the most affected groups. BBC News (2025) reports cases where students were cut off mid-exam, including IELTS candidates, due to sudden internet blackouts. In one documented instance, only nine out of 28 university students, most of them women, were able to attend an online class during a blackout (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

International organizations, including the the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and other international human rights bodies warn that shutdowns intensify gender inequality and prevent access to critical information and support services.These bodies warn that shutdowns intensify gender inequality and prevent access to critical information and support services. (UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2025)
Continued internet shutdowns risk long-term educational loss, economic exclusion, and social isolation for Afghan girls and women.

These disruptions slow learning progress, reduce future employment opportunities, and weaken women-led initiatives that provide education and community support. Over time, Afghanistan risks losing an entire generation of potential doctors, teachers, journalists, and leaders.

Policy Recommendations:

- International organizations, donors, and UN agencies should support education-focused humanitarian internet exemptions by funding secure, low-bandwidth, education-only digital access for Afghan girls studying online. These mechanisms should prioritize affordability, privacy, and continuity during shutdowns, ensuring girls can access essential learning platforms even when broader connectivity is restricted (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

- International donors and development partners should subsidize mobile data and digital learning tools for Afghan girls, particularly those from low-income households. Reducing the financial burden of internet access can prevent girls from being forced to abandon online education during blackout periods, which disproportionately affect marginalized families (BBC News, 2025; UN Women, 2025).

- UN bodies and international human rights organizations should systematically monitor, document, and report internet shutdowns in Afghanistan, with specific attention to their gendered impact on education, safety, and access to information. Regular reporting to international mechanisms can strengthen accountability and prevent shutdowns from remaining invisible (OHCHR, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2025).

- International legal and policy institutions, including the UN Human Rights Council and the International Telecommunication Union, should explicitly recognize internet access as essential to the right to education and freedom of expression and integrate this recognition into resolutions, funding conditions, and diplomatic engagement related to Afghanistan (UN Women, 2025).

Conclusion:

When women and girls lose internet access, they lose the ability to learn (UN Women, 2025). If internet shutdowns and high internet prices are ignored, girls will miss online classes and lose access to

learning opportunities and important information about health, and news. Girls from low-income families will be most affected because they cannot afford expensive internet. Ignoring this problem can limit girls' rights, reduce their opportunities for education and work, and may completely change their lives. It also affects the future workforce, economy, and stability of Afghanistan and the region.If international legal bodies (including the UN Human Rights Council and International Telecommunication Union) and the de facto Afghan authorities act within the next three months, the internet will be stable enough providing space for every girl to learn, to lead, and to rebuild a more equal and connected Afghanistan. It is not about one girl, it is not about one country. It is about all of us. When we lose one girl we lose a voice, a leader, and a future.

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Addressing Afghan Women's Top Concerns: Policy Options for International Support and Protection

Executive Summary

Since the Taliban returned to power in August 2021, Afghan women have faced severe restrictions on their basic rights, especially in education, employment, and freedom of movement. These restrictions have deeply affected women's daily lives and weakened families, communities, and Afghanistan's future. This policy brief focuses on the main concerns Afghan women face today and reviews how the international community has responded so far. It presents practical policy options that governments, international organizations, and civil society can adopt to better protect Afghan women's rights and safety. The aim of these policies is to support Afghan women so they can live with dignity, access education and work, and participate in society.

Introduction

Afghan women once took part in education, public life, and government. Since the Taliban takeover, many of these gains have been reversed. Today, Afghan women face one of the most serious women's rights crises in the world, as described by the United Nations and human rights organizations. They are largely excluded from education and employment, restrictions which have deeply affected their lives and limited their future opportunities.
This policy brief identifies the main concerns Afghan women face today and suggests policy options that the international community, including governments, UN bodies, NGOs, and donors can use to improve support and protection for Afghan women.

Problem Statement

1. **Educational Exclusion**

Girls and women in Afghanistan are denied access to secondary and higher education. This ban affects millions, stunting the growth of a generation and threatenin the ability of millions to contribute to the country's development.

2. **Employment and Economic Exclusion**

Women are barred from most forms of employment, including government work and jobs with NGOs and UN agencies.

This deepens economic vulnerability, especially for female-headed households. In some cases, women's employment has been removed altogether, even in sectors like beauty salons, which had previously been one of few sources of income for women.

3. **Limited Freedom of Movement and Public Participation**

Women must often be accompanied by male relatives to travel, and they are excluded from many public spaces. These restrictions reduce their access to healthcare, legal services, and community life.

4. **Mental Health and Social Isolation**

Restrictions on education, work, and social activities have harmed women's mental well-being, contributing to anxiety, depression, and social isolation. Over 70% of Afghan women reported significant psychological distress after restrictions on education and employment were enforced (AMHPSSWG, 2023). Women living under these conditions often describe feelings of loss of identity, inc reased fear, and helplessness due to their exclusion from public life.

Recommendation

- **Diplomatic and Political Engagement:**

International governments and multilateral bodies should link financia l assistance and political recognition with clear, measurable steps, such as reopening secondary schools for girls. Conditioning aid on these specific actions provides leverage and ensures international pressure has a real, practical impact, rather than being only symbolic.

- **Expanded Humanitarian Aid with a Gender Focus:**

Aid should target women's education and health, delivered by female aid workers to ensure women can safely and directly access

services. This combines education, healthcare, and funding into one clear action, avoiding repetition.

- **Support for Refugees and Displaced Afghan Women:**

Neighboring countries and international partners should create safe and legal pathways for Afghan women to leave the country, such as humanitarian visas, evacuation programs, or temporary protected status. Countries hosting refugees, such as Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey, should provide access to education, legal assistance, healthcare, and employment programs for women. These programs should operate under international human rights frameworks to protect women from exploitation and gender-based violence.

- **Economic and Skills Development:**

International NGOs and donors should fund vocational training and microfinance programs for women. Help women start small businesses and access digital work platforms, especially where travel or public employment is restricted.

- **Mental Health and Community Programming:**

Support the creation of safe community spaces and provide mental health services. Train local women leaders and counselors to offer psychosocial support to women affected by restrictions, isolation, and trauma.

Conclusion

Afghan women are facing one of the most serious rights crises in the world today. Their exclusion from education, work, healthcare, and public life not only harms individuals but also destabilizes communities and undermines national development. The international community has the ability and responsibility to act through coordinated, sustained, and rights-focused policies that protect, empower, and support Afghan women. Only through international solidarity and concrete action can the rights of Afghan women be upheld and their futures restored.

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Existing international policies aimed at supporting Afghan girls' rights

Executive Summary

Afghan girls face severe restrictions on education, leaving millions out of school despite global frameworks like CEDAW, UN Resolution 2681, and UNICEF/UNESCO initiatives. With implementation limited, community-based and digital models, home learning spaces and online education, remain the few viable paths. Sustaining these requires safe digital tools, international funding, and local coordination. Without action, a generation risks losing its right to education, harming families, communities, and Afghanistan's future development.

Problem Statement

Since the Taliban returned to power in 2021, Afghan girls have lost their right to education and work. According to UNESCO and UNICEF, more than 2.2 million school-aged girls are currently unable to continue their education, which is a clear violation of their basic rights (UNESCO, 2025; UNICEF, 2025). This situation directly affects the girls themselves, limiting their chances for future jobs, education, and personal growth (UN Women, 2024). Their families and communities also feel the impact, because when girls cannot learn, households lose potential economic and social benefits. Organizations like UNESCO and UNICEF have stepped in with alternative education programs, such as community-based classes and literacy initiatives for girls, but these programs are still limited and face big challenges due to political and operational barriers. Under the current conditions, UNESCO and UNICEF policies focused on providing access to education for Afghan girls are more effective than other existing approaches like CEDAW and UN security Council Resolutions, and this policy brief, therefore, emphasizes improving and expanding these interventions (United Nations, 1979).

At the national level, Afghanistan's current policies contradict international agreements like CEDAW and UN Security Council Resolution 2681, which guarantee girls' right to education and women's participation in public life. Overall, these restrictions increase gender inequality, weaken human capital, and make it harder for Afghanistan to develop socially and economically in the long term (UNAMA, 2025).

Policy Recommendations

1- UNICEF should expand its community-based programs to high school and university students, who cannot continue their education as they are directly affected by current restrictions. As of right now million girls are banned from higher education. They can hold classes in building they may rent, they should focus more on international systems for girls. In case they face Taliban's pressure, they may alter that to an online platform so that it is safe and accessible to everyone. If anyone cannot afford a data package or device, UNICEF should provide them.

2- UNESCO should continue teaching training and expand them to a learning cycle. Each batch of trained teachers should now teach and train others until qualified teachers are available across the country. To ensure there is quality and safety, a team should be responsible for taking reports and monitoring the overall program. And now the safest place that students can reach teachers is home. They may continue their learning at home, and their prioritized subjects must be English, Math, and Digital literacy. In this way not only will girls become educated, but there will be job opportunities specially for girls, which don't exist today.

3- UNICEF and UNESCO should create courses for all levels available offline in an app or on a shareable drive. This way they can assure that everyone can access to learn and study without internet problems.

4- UNICEF and UNESCO must partner with NGOs inside Afghanistan and hold capacity building programs for Afghan girls. Programs should include raising awareness about their rights, motivating them, and improving their skills, so that they become more independent and educated.

Conclusion

Despite strong international commitments to girls' education, Afghan girls continue to face serious restrictions under the current political regime in Afghanistan (UNESCO and UNICEF, 2025; United Nations Security Council, 2023). In this context, UNICEF and UNESCO education programs offer the most practical and effective ways to support girls' access to learning.

Expanding these initiatives through community-based education, teacher training, and accessible learning tools are essential ways to protect girls' rights, strength human capital, and reduce long-term social and economic harm until broader policy changes become possible (UN Women,2024).

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The Urgent Need for Binding Action in Women, Peace, and Security

Executive Summary

Even 25 years after the landmark UN resolution about women, peace and security, UNSCR 1325, women in conflict affected countries still face serious rights violations. The collapse of women's rights in Afghanistan after the Taliban took control of the government in 2021 shows that voluntary commitments are not enough. Women are excluded from education, work, politics, and public life. International frameworks also fail to protect women human rights defenders, leaving millions at risk. Strengthening the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda needs clear laws, transparent monitoring, proper funding, and guaranteed participation of women in peace talks and rebuilding.
Without these changes, WPS risks staying symbolic rather than making a real impact.

Problem Statement

Women in conflict zones, especially in Afghanistan, face systematic exclusion and rights violations. Since the Taliban takeover in 2021:

- Women are banned from secondary schools, universities, and many workplaces (UNESCO, 2023a).
- Activism is criminalized, putting women human rights defenders at risk of arrest, violence, or exile (HRW, 2023).
- Women are still absent from peace processes and political decisions, despite WPS commitments.

Current WPS mechanisms are non-binding, underfunded, and weakly monitored. This gap between international promises and reality leaves women's protection and participation mostly symbolic. Globally, women face high risks: one in three experiences physical or sexual violence (WHO, 2025), 122 million girls are out of school (UNICEF, 2024), and over 60 million displaced women and girls face gender-based violence and trafficking (UNHCR, 2024).The Women, Peace and Security Index 2023/24 provides empirical evidence that accountability and measurable implementation are central to advancing the WPS agenda. By systematically tracking women's inclusion, justice, and security, the Index highlights how the absence of enforceable mechanisms limits the practical impact of WPS commitments, particularly in conflict-affected contexts (Rustad et al., 2023). Voluntary frameworks alone cannot protect women without proper enforcement.

Recommendations

To make WPS more effective, we recommend:

1. Adopt a legally binding global WPS treaty that guarantees women's participation in all peace talks. Making WPS commitments legally binding would ensure that women cannot be excluded from critical decision-making processes, rather than leaving their participation symbolic. Experiences from countries with strong national WPS frameworks show that legal obligations significantly increase women's involvement in peace negotiations and improve protection outcomes.

2. Implement a Global WPS Monitoring Index with independent, transparent verification by UN Women, HRW, or Amnesty International. A monitoring index would provide a clear and objective way to track progress, identify gaps, and hold governments accountable. Evidence from the Women, Peace and Security Index 2023/24 demonstrates that systematic tracking encourages better compliance and enhances the effectiveness of WPS commitments.

3. Ensure women's mandatory participation in UN-recognized peace negotiations, transitional governance, and post-conflict rebuilding. Requiring women's participation ensures that their perspectives shape peacebuilding and governance processes. Research shows that peace agreements created with women's involvement tend to be more inclusive and sustainable over the long term.

4. Provide direct international funding to local women-led organizations and human rights defenders. Direct funding strengthens the capacity of local actors to respond effectively to community-specific challenges. Studies indicate that supporting women-led initiatives improves protection for vulnerable populations and contributes to long-term stability in conflict-affected areas.

5. Introduce penalties for states that do not comply with commitments. Establishing consequences for non-compliance reinforces the seriousness of WPS obligations and discourages neglect. Lessons from international compliance frameworks show that enforceable penalties increase adherence to gender-focused agreements and help translate commitments into real-world action.

These steps will strengthen women's protection, increase participation, support activists, and improve global accountability.

Conclusion

Strengthening WPS is both a moral duty and essential for lasting peace. Clear laws, monitoring, funding, and women's participation will help close the gap between policy and reality. Immediate action is needed to protect and empower women in conflict zones.

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Policy options for addressing trauma among Afghan girls and women in humanitarian programs

Executive Summary

In recent years, girls and women in Afghanistan have confronted many health issues to highlight Mental Health Trauma, which are the consequences of far from education, unemployment, gender based violence, decades of war as well as poverty. On the other hand, these conditions have led to the increase of anxiety, depression plus feeling of hopelessness. According to the National Library Of Medicine, the prevalence of depression symptoms was 80.4% and the prevalence of mild to extremely severe anxiety was 81.0%. This brief call for Expanding educational opportunities ,Empowering Afghan girls to have a healthy income, Humanitarian program and International agencies (NGO Or UN). Essentially, addressing trauma is crucial not only to deduce calamity but also facilitate permanent community, and enhance humanitarian support in Afghanistan.

Problem Statement

1. Since 2021, Afghan girls have been banned from schools and universities, causing severe emotional and psychological problems. Many girls who are forced to stay home face family pressure and trauma, and they are often feeling depressed and hopeless. A survey distributed to 100 Afghan women and girls through Google Forms received a 70% response rate, and most of those respondents reported constant depression caused by educational and social restrictions. During the face-to-face discussions with 10 Afghan girls aged between 17–25 from different parts of Afghanistan, many of them explained that the lack of educational opportunities has increased family pressure on them, and some of them are being encouraged or even pushed into early marriage.

One girl from Herat said: “I really understood what stress and mental problems are after the Taliban came. I was suddenly banned from going to the gym, studying, working, and even going out comfortably with the clothes I choose.” With no access to counseling, Afghan girls struggle to cope with ongoing trauma. If ignored, these restrictions will damage Afghan society for generations, since women make up half the population.

2. In Afghanistan, women and girls are officially banned from working, and most female employees were laid off after the regime change despite having high educational qualifications and years of experience. Only a small number of women are still able to work, such as teachers below 7th grade and those working informally from their homes with humanitarian organizations. This circumstance has caused many women who lost their jobs to feel depressed, as they live in a society that gives them neither human nor social value. Work had provided financial and personal independence, but inequalities created after the Taliban took power have made them feel judged and unwelcome in their own communities.

According to Afghanistan's Ministry of Public Health, 46% of the population struggles with mental health problems, and around 72% are women and girls. A 24-year-old girl from Ghazni said, "I studied for 16 years, but there are no jobs." This situation affects not only unemployed women but also those who still work, as many live in fear due to restrictions, the need for a male guardian, and the risk of being removed from their positions. These fears and anxieties create trauma and take away the joy and meaning of working.

Based on information from 87 female employees, many fear losing their jobs due to reductions and restrictions in governmental sectors. Unemployment, combined with Afghanistan's weak economy, has led to depression, anxiety, sleep problems, and other psychological difficulties, worsened by lack of income and high treatment costs. In 2024, a 22-year-old woman in Afghanistan died by suicide after losing access to her university education and future job prospects following the ban on women's higher education. Her case illustrates how the loss of education and employment opportunities can severely affect women's mental health and survival.

Afghanistan is the only country where women's rights are restricted to this extent and ranks at the bottom globally for women's conditions. These mental health challenges affect families and children and urgently require stronger support and access to mental-health services.

Policy Recommendations

1- Provide online education with financial support for Afghan girls:

According to the survey of Afghan girls through the google form, more than 50% responded that international organizations should provide

accredited online and community-based programs for Afghan girls. Including scholarships and support for internet, devices and learning materials. This works because education will give the girls hope, and a sense of future. It will reduce their stress caused by education disruption and help them protect their mental well-being.

2. **Providing a safe income and skill-building opportunities for Afghan girls:**

Our assessment findings show that a high number of women are under the pressure of mental and economic problems due to very limited access to work and complete loss of education rights. To address these challenges, international organizations should offer skill-based and work opportunities such as tailoring, embroidery, baking, digital literacy and small business grants. This will work because earning an income will reduce their financial concerns, and increase their confidence, independence and social connections.

3. **Providing free access to mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS):**

According to our research, more than 70% of Afghan girls responded they don't have access to mental health services. Humanitarian programs should prioritize providing mental health mentorship programs to raise their awareness, reduce stigma, and ensure girls know where and how to seek support to protect their well-being. In addition, confidential phone and online counselling should be available, along with community-based services led by trained female counsellors. This will ensure safe access to mental health support and reduce their long- term trauma.

4. **International NGOs and UN agencies advocate for the restoration of Afghan girl's education:**

Our research finds that the major source of psychosocial distress for Afghan girls are education bans. International organizations should advocate and keep global attention and pressure on decision makers to restore education for the girls. They can raise the voice of Afghan girls and women in Afghanistan to all over the world, applying policy pressure and creating programs that ensure a safe and recognized environment for the girls. This will help the Afghan girls to access their basic rights and mental well-being.

Conclusion

Afghan women and girls are living under heavy restrictions that have taken away their right to study, to work, and to live with respect. The effects are not only about money but also about human pain bringing trauma, loneliness, and a loss of hope for the future. These problems are not just numbers; they are real lives that touch families, communities, and generations.

Answering this crisis needs care and commitment. Giving skill-based and online opportunities can bring back independence and purpose, while psychosocial support can offer healing and comfort that many women urgently need. These steps are more than short-term help; they open doors to strength, dignity, and active roles in society.

The future of Afghanistan rests on the health and strength of its women. By supporting their education, work, and mental health, we are not only easing today's suffering but also planting hope and building stability for tomorrow.

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