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5th Edition

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Introduction

It has been five years since young men and women in Afghanistan are navigating a reality where opportunities for education and employment are shrinking. After girls were banned from education in September 2021, the Taliban closed doors of universities for young women in December 2022. In the same month, a new decree banned women from working in NGOs, and in April 2023, the Taliban extended the ban to Afghan women employed by the United Nations. Today, women's employment in government is 0% with only limited exceptions in health and primary education.

Yet, despite all the challenges, young men and women across Afghanistan continue to show resilience. They are finding ways to learn, to connect, and to speak even when the space to do so is limited. As part of our Advancing Policy Engagement and Leadership Pathways initiative, Afghans for Progressive Thinking organization (APT) provided eight young men and women from Afghanistan an opportunity to learn policy advocacy in a safe environment. After the trainings, the youth participants worked together to draft policy briefs that reflect the urgency of the challenges they and thousands of others in their communities face.

What makes these briefs powerful is not only the words on the page but the process behind them because they are built on surveys and interviews with Afghan youth, documenting experiences of education denied, jobs lost, and daily struggles. These briefs also calls on policymakers, civil society, and international partners to listen, act, and recognize Afghan youth as important actors in shaping Afghanistan's future.

This publication would not have been possible without the leadership of Ajmal Ramyar, Head Executive of APT, and Abdul Rahman Jalil, Project Manager. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to Caitlyn OFlaherty for facilitating the writing sessions, helping participants express their ideas, and editing the policy briefs. A special thanks to Yazdan Ahmad Mirdadi for designing the booklet, and to Mursal for creating the posters that visually amplify the voices and messages of Afghan youth.

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

Five Years Without Education: Restoring Afghan Girls' Right to Learn



Executive Summary

Afghanistan is the only country in the world where girls are denied secondary education, currently excluding 2.4–2.6 million girls from classrooms (UNICEF, 2026; UNESCO, 2026). Under five years of Taliban rule, this ban has fueled illiteracy, economic collapse, early marriage, and a severe mental health crisis, systematically erasing women from public life and entrenching gender apartheid. Evidence from the Afghans for Progressive Thinking (APT) Youth Survey shows that 96% of Afghan youth identify education as the nation's top priority, underscoring the urgent need for coordinated international action to replace current fragmented and inaccessible responses. To address this crisis, this brief recommends expanding safe and accredited learning opportunities, increasing scholarships and financial support, creating flexible pathways to higher education abroad, and strengthening skills training and psychosocial support. Restoring girls' education is both a moral imperative and a strategic necessity for Afghanistan's stability, development, and future.

Problem Statement

Nearly 8 in 10 young women in Afghanistan live with the reality of being denied education and employment since the Taliban returned to power in 2021. Being denied education is the most profound loss Afghan women feel most deeply. (UN Women, 2026)

According to the research, the prolonged education ban has led to overwhelming consequences, including employment decline (87%), a mental health crisis (69%), digital life challenges (52%), visa restrictions, economic collapse, early/child marriage, and deterioration of mindsets. Fariba, a 16-year-old Afghan girl, took her own life after months of being barred from school under Taliban rule. Her suicide note stated that it was too difficult to be a girl in Afghanistan. The ongoing repression has worsened conditions for women, with broader impacts on health and the economy. Women face social marginalization, which contributes to severe mental health challenges and a desperate loss of hope. Men also face growing hopelessness, while the regime has contributed to the deterioration of the education system and curriculum.

If education and employment restrictions persist, Afghanistan could lose more than 25,400 female teachers and health workers by 2030. (UNICEF, 2026)

Policy Analysis

The barriers preventing Afghan girls and young women from accessing secondary and higher education are interconnected and require coordinated policy responses. UNESCO's report, *Banned from Education: A Review of the Right to Education in Afghanistan* (2025), highlights that Afghanistan remains the only country where girls and women are systematically denied access to secondary and higher education, with far-reaching consequences for

human rights and national development. Evidence from the APT Youth Survey and the APT Youth Consultation (2026) indicates that Afghan girls continue to face political, economic, technological, and social barriers that restrict their educational opportunities. While alternative learning pathways have emerged, they remain inaccessible to many students because of structural challenges that existing initiatives have not fully addressed.

Political and Educational Restrictions

Political restrictions remain the most significant barrier to girls' education in Afghanistan. The continued closure of secondary schools and universities has interrupted the education of millions of girls, limiting their academic progress, future employment opportunities, and participation in public life. The APT Youth Consultation identified restricted access to education as one of the most urgent challenges facing Afghan youth (APT, 2026). Without access to formal education, many girls experience learning loss, uncertainty about their future, and reduced opportunities to develop the knowledge and skills needed to contribute to their communities.

Continued exclusion from education also threatens Afghanistan's future workforce. UNICEF warns that ongoing restrictions on girls' education and women's employment could result in the loss of up to 20,000 women teachers and 5,400 healthcare workers by 2030, while already costing Afghanistan an estimated US\$84 million annually in lost economic output (UNICEF, 2026). This demonstrates that the consequences of the education ban extend beyond individual students and affect Afghanistan's education system, essential services, and economic future.

Digital and Economic Barriers

As access to formal education has declined, many girls have turned to online learning as an alternative. However, unreliable internet access, electricity shortages, limited availability of digital devices, and financial hardship prevent many students from benefiting from these opportunities. These challenges are particularly severe for girls living in rural and low-income communities, where families may struggle to prioritize educational expenses alongside basic household needs. As a result, online education can provide an important pathway for some girls, but it cannot serve as an equal substitute for formal education without greater investment in digital access and financial support.

Barriers to Scholarships and International Education

International scholarships and accredited online programmes provide important pathways for girls whose education has been interrupted, but access to these opportunities remains limited. The APT Youth Consultation identified scholarships and international mobility as important concerns for Afghan youth (APT, 2026). Visa restrictions, travel difficulties, complex application procedures, scholarship age limits, application costs, and official nomination requirements can prevent qualified Afghan applicants from accessing opportunities abroad. These barriers are particularly significant for students whose education has been delayed for reasons beyond their control. Changing visa policies can further limit

the ability of scholarship recipients to travel and begin their studies. Therefore, without more flexible eligibility requirements, alternative nomination pathways, and stronger visa and travel support, international scholarships cannot reach many of the students who need them most.

Social and Cultural Barriers

Social expectations and family pressures also influence girls' ability to continue their education. The APT Youth Consultation highlighted early and forced marriage, traditional gender roles, and limited family support as challenges affecting young women (APT, 2026).

When education is no longer available, girls may face increased pressure to remain at home or marry rather than continue developing their education and skills. These pressures can reinforce dependency and reduce girls' ability to make decisions about their own educational and professional futures. Addressing these barriers therefore requires not only educational opportunities but also greater engagement with families and communities to support girls' continued learning.

Gaps in Current Responses

Although online education initiatives, scholarships, and community-based programmes have created valuable opportunities for some Afghan girls, existing responses do not fully address the scale and interconnected nature of the barriers. UNESCO and Sida launched a two-year initiative in 2026 to expand accredited alternative learning opportunities for Afghan girls and women and strengthen pathways from education to employment (UNESCO, 2026). However, financial hardship, digital inequality, international mobility restrictions, and limited recognition of some online qualifications can still prevent students from benefiting from available programmes. This suggests that alternative pathways need to be accompanied by financial, technological, accreditation, and mobility support.

Overall Analysis

The evidence demonstrates that Afghanistan's education crisis cannot be addressed through isolated initiatives alone. Political restrictions create the initial barrier, while digital and economic inequality, limited scholarship access, international mobility restrictions, and social pressures further prevent girls from finding sustainable alternatives. Effective policy responses must therefore address these barriers together. Expanding safe and accredited learning opportunities, improving digital and financial access, creating more flexible scholarship pathways, and providing mobility support would help ensure that Afghan girls are not excluded from education because of circumstances beyond their control.=

Policy Recommendations

The issues identified in this policy brief require coordinated action from international organizations, governments, education providers, and communities. The following recommendations are proposed:

1. Expand safe and accessible education for Afghan girls:

International organizations, donors, and education providers should expand safe and accredited secondary and higher education opportunities for Afghan girls. This can include recognized online schools, university programmes, community-based learning, and offline learning materials for girls who have limited internet access. The United Nations and other international actors should also continue advocating for the reopening of schools for girls beyond grade six. These efforts respond directly to the strong demand among surveyed youth for the restoration of girls' education, scholarships, online and safe learning spaces.

2. Support girls' financial and mental well-being:

International organizations and donors should support girls who cannot afford the costs of continuing their education. For those studying through digital programmes, this support can include internet costs, devices, and other basic learning needs. Education providers should also make psychosocial support available to girls experiencing stress, isolation, and hopelessness as a result of prolonged exclusion from education.

3. Address barriers to online education:

For many girls, online education is now one of the few ways to continue their studies. However, many girls still do not have what they need to study online. Organizations should support girls, especially those in rural and low-income areas, by helping with internet costs and providing digital devices. Offline learning materials should also be available for girls who do not have regular access to the internet.

4. Expand scholarships and improve access to international education:

Universities and international organizations should increase scholarships for Afghan girls and reduce or waive application fees for applicants facing financial difficulties. Scholarship providers should also use more flexible eligibility requirements, particularly regarding documents and age limits, as many girls have experienced long interruptions in their education. Governments that have imposed visa restrictions on Afghan nationals should remove or ease these restrictions, particularly for students, girls, and women seeking to study abroad. Where possible, embassies and governments should provide e-visas or digital visa procedures for eligible Afghan applicants to reduce the need to travel to a third country for visa processing. Universities should also allow students affected by visa or travel delays to begin their studies remotely until they are able to travel.

5. Help prevent early and forced marriage:

International and local organizations should help families understand how keeping girls out of school can increase the risk of early and forced marriage. They should raise awareness about the importance of girls' education and support families who want their daughters to continue studying. Girls who are at risk of early or forced marriage should also

be able to access appropriate support and guidance.

6. Work with families and communities to support girls' education:

International and local organizations should work with families, teachers, community members, and local leaders to encourage support for girls' education. Community awareness programmes should challenge the idea that girls' main role is marriage and household responsibilities and instead highlight the value of girls' education for families and communities. Greater family and community support can help girls continue their education despite the difficult circumstances.

Conclusion:

Afghanistan stands at a crossroads where the denial of girls' education threatens both individual futures and the nation's collective stability. The evidence from Afghan youth is clear: education is the country's most urgent priority. Five years of silence in the face of gender apartheid is a profound shame for the world and must never be normalized.

What is needed now is decisive, coordinated action that dismantles barriers and opens real pathways to learning. Expanding safe and accredited opportunities, easing financial burdens, enabling access to international education, and restoring youth to decision-making spaces are essential steps. This is not simply about classrooms, it is about dignity, confidence, and the survival of hope.

Restoring girls' education is both a moral duty and a strategic necessity for Afghanistan's peace, development, and future. The time for fragmented responses has passed; the world must act decisively now.

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Beyond Barriers: Advancing Afghan Women's Access to Employment



Executive Summary:

Although women's access to employment has been severely restricted in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime, some women and girls are creating online and small in-person businesses through their own efforts, with little or no support.

Funding cuts are putting women-led organizations under severe pressure, with nearly three-quarters of surveyed organizations expecting to close within the next year (UN Women, 2026).

Women make up nearly half of Afghanistan's population and have the potential to contribute significantly to a better future for the country. Yet under the Taliban authorities, many women have been confined to their homes, with their opportunities, aspirations, and dreams severely restricted.

Despite these challenges, Afghan women have never remained silent. They have raised their voices for justice, freedom, participation, equality, dignity, and the rights to education and employment.

The international community is witnessing Afghanistan's continuing economic hardship, widespread poverty, political challenges, and increasing isolation. The exclusion of women from decision-making further limits the country's ability to address these challenges and build a more sustainable future.

Women in Afghanistan want real action, sustainable support, and help beyond condemnation and expressions of solidarity.

Problem Statement:

Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, Afghan women have been systematically pushed out of the economy through a mutually reinforcing set of de facto authority (DFA) decrees restricting employment and access to finance.

Women's overall employment fell by 25% between June 2021 and the end of 2022, compared with a 7% decline for men (ILO, 2023, cited in UN Women, 2024). The December 2022 ban on women working for national and international NGOs — extended to UN entities in April 2023 — stripped over 15,000 women across 183 organizations of their livelihoods (ACBAR, 2022, cited in UN Women, 2024). Financial exclusion compounds these losses: only 5% of Afghan women held a personal bank account in 2021, against 15% of men (World Bank, 2021).

The infrastructure meant to support women economically has itself collapsed. The number of operating women-led civil society organizations fell from 675 before the takeover

to 260 by early 2023 (UN Women, 2023), and by 2026 nearly three-quarters of surveyed women-led organizations reported they expect to suspend operations or close within the year because of further aid cuts (UN Women, 2026). This is not only a services gap — it is the erosion of the very channels through which women’s economic conditions are documented and addressed.

The consequences are measurable at national scale: UNICEF estimated a first-year GDP loss of 2.5%, or USD 500 million, from the education and employment bans alone (UNICEF, 2022), a loss UN Women projects will compound to USD 920 million (5.8% of GDP) cumulatively between 2024 and 2026 (UN Women, 2026). Afghan youth confirm the urgency directly: 81% of Afghan youth identify employment as a national priority, yet only 12% see jobs and employment as an issue requiring the UN’s immediate action (APT, 2026). International forums must therefore move from documenting exclusion toward funded, coordinated mechanisms that respond to it.

Policy Analysis:

The barriers documented above persist not because they are undocumented, but because the international response remains constrained by three structural gaps. First, the collapse of women’s civil society has damaged the very infrastructure needed to track and respond to the problem. With the number of operational women-led organizations falling from 675 to 260 (UN Women, 2023), and nearly three-quarters of surveyed women-led organizations now expecting to close within the year due to funding cuts (UN Women, 2026), the channels that once supplied community-level data and services on women’s economic conditions are actively disappearing in real time — not a historical loss to be repaired, but an ongoing one.

Second, financing for women’s economic programming remains badly mismatched to the scale of need, and international actors are already aware of the fix. UN Women’s own 2025 gender alert explicitly calls for sustained, flexible funding for women’s organizations and a minimum of 30% of aid directed to gender equality (UN Women, 2025) — yet funding has moved in the opposite direction, with continued aid cuts driving the closures described above. This is not a case of the international community lacking a recommended solution; it is a case of a known, endorsed threshold not being met.

Third, Afghanistan’s obligations under international economic and labour rights instruments remain formally in force but are difficult to enforce, because no government in Afghanistan is internationally recognized. The DFA lack an official counterpart for engagement on gender equality and women’s empowerment; the UN General Assembly Credentials Committee has repeatedly postponed considering any DFA credentials claim (UN Women, 2024). This leaves treaty-based accountability mechanisms in the same legal grey zone documented elsewhere in relation to CEDAW: real obligations, but no clear counterparty through which to enforce them.

Together, these three gaps point to a common conclusion: the international response needs (a) alternative, women-led channels for economic data and services that do not depend on a civil-society infrastructure that is actively shrinking, (b) financing that finally meets the funding floor the international community’s own agencies have already recommended, and

(c) coordination and advocacy channels that route around, rather than depend on, negotiation with an unrecognized authority. This last gap is measurable in its own right: while 81% of Afghan youth identify employment as a national priority, only 12% currently see it as an issue requiring the UN's immediate action (APT, 2026) — a sign that economic exclusion is still being treated as secondary to education and physical safety in the international response, even though Afghan youth themselves rank it near the top of their own agenda.

Recommendation:

1. **Establish a UN Women–ILO Women's Employment Monitoring Mechanism.** Only 38.6% of the gender-related SDG indicators needed for Afghanistan are currently available (UN Women, 2025). UN Women and ILO should therefore establish a common system to track women's access to employment, skills training, and entrepreneurship. Women-led organizations should also be involved in collecting data on informal and home-based employment. UN Women and ILO should maintain and update the national employment dashboard every 6–12 months, while UN agencies and donors should use its findings when making programme and funding decisions. The ILO's assessment of employment conditions estimated that female employment fell by 25% between the second quarter of 2021 and the fourth quarter of 2022, while home-based self-employment became the main form of women's labour-market participation (ILO, 2023).

2. **Establish a five-year Women's Economic Empowerment Fund.** International donors and UN agencies should provide multi-year funding for women-owned MSMEs, employment-linked vocational and digital skills, women-led organizations, finance and market access. Existing programmes should be expanded rather than duplicated. For example, the EU committed €10 million to UNDP's WE-LEAD Phase II in 2026, focusing on women's access to finance, markets, skills and income opportunities (UNDP, 2026). Funding should be measured by results, including how many women obtain employment, increase their income or keep their businesses operating after 12–24 months.

3. **Create an Afghanistan Women's Economic Participation Compact.** UN Women and UNDP should lead, in coordination with ILO, donors, the World Bank, private-sector actors and Afghan women-led organizations. The Compact should coordinate existing programmes, identify gaps and duplication, set shared employment targets, coordinate funding and connect skills → finance → markets → employment. UN Women and UNDP should produce and publish an annual report tracking funding, implementation and actual employment outcomes, with input from participating partners. ILO programmes in Afghanistan also show the value of combining employment opportunities with skills development, entrepreneurship and market support (ILO, 2026).

4. **Establish an Afghan Women and Youth Economic Advisory Mechanism.** Since 81% of Afghan youth identify employment as their national priority but only 12% see it as requiring immediate UN action (APT, 2026), Afghan women and youth should have a direct role in shaping employment programmes. UN Women should lead, with support from UNDP, ILO, women-led organizations and youth representatives. The mechanism should include women entrepreneurs, young women, women-led organizations, rural and home-based workers and youth representatives, with at least 50% women. It should review programmes,

identify barriers, recommend funding priorities and participate in evaluations. UN Women should report the recommendations, while UN agencies and donors should show which recommendations were incorporated.

Cross-cutting priority: Support safe and flexible employment through digital and remote work, e-commerce, home-based businesses, women-owned MSMEs and community-based employment where appropriate. These options should help women protect their income and skills but should not replace advocacy for their full right to work. ILO experience in Afghanistan shows that safe worksites, inclusive recruitment, community engagement and entrepreneurship support can help women participate in employment (ILO, 2026).

Conclusion:

Women's exclusion from employment in Afghanistan is not only a violation of their basic rights; it is also limiting the country's economic potential and putting greater pressure on families and communities. Since 2021, restrictions on women's education, employment, movement and access to economic opportunities have reduced their ability to earn an income and contribute to the economy. At the same time, Afghan women continue to find ways to work, run businesses and support their families despite these barriers.

The international community already has substantial evidence about the scale of the problem, but evidence alone has not been enough to change the situation. The main challenge now is turning that evidence into coordinated and sustained action. Better employment data, predictable multi-year funding, stronger coordination between existing programmes, and meaningful participation of Afghan women and youth can help make the international response more effective.

Supporting women's employment should therefore be treated as both a human rights priority and an economic priority. Immediate support for safe and flexible employment can help women maintain their income and skills, while continued international advocacy should address the restrictions that prevent women from participating fully in the labour market. Afghanistan cannot achieve long-term economic resilience while a large part of its population remains excluded from economic life. Investing in Afghan women's ability to work, earn and build businesses is therefore an investment in the country's families, economy and future.

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