
INVEST IN AFGHAN WOMEN:

— A REPORT ON —
EDUCATION IN AFGHANISTAN

Presented by the
George W. Bush Institute's Women's Initiative



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“I HOPE AMERICANS WILL JOIN OUR FAMILY IN WORKING TO ENSURE THAT DIGNITY AND OPPORTUNITY WILL BE SECURED FOR ALL THE WOMEN AND CHILDREN OF AFGHANISTAN.”

— MRS. LAURA BUSH



INVEST IN AFGHAN GIRLS

In October 2012, a Taliban operative shot 15-year-old Pakistani student Malala Yousafzai in the face and neck while she traveled home on a school bus. The assassination attempt was punishment for her “crime” of advocating for girls’ education. After surgeons repaired her shattered skull, Malala made a full recovery. And on July 12, 2013, she gave a rousing speech at the United Nations, becoming a global voice for girls’ access to education.

Malala’s story is inspiring, but unfortunately the evils she’s combating are all too common in her region of the world. Just next door, in Afghanistan, religious fanaticism and deeply entrenched cultural practices have led to the systematic oppression of women and young girls.

The Afghan situation is particularly desperate. While her peers in the United States prepare for their freshman year of high school, a typical 14-year-old Afghan girl has already been forced to leave formal education and is at acute risk of mandated marriage and early motherhood. If she beats the odds and attends school, she has reason to fear an attack on her schoolhouse with grenades or poison. A full 76 percent of her countrywomen have never attended school. And only 12.6 percent can read.¹

Afghanistan has made significant gains in female education in recent years, but major challenges remain. For the sake of individual welfare, as well as for the future of the country, it is essential that the international community continues to invest in the education of Afghan girls.

A CHECKERED HISTORY

Historically, women and girls in Afghanistan have faced significant obstacles to education. Decades of conflict — marked by a lack of public safety and the destruction of vital infrastructure — severely limited access to schools. When the Taliban came to power in 1996, it strictly forbade female education and closed the majority of girls' schools. Under the Islamic fundamentalist group's control, girls' enrollment plunged from 32 to 6.4 percent.²



It was during those years that Sakena Yacoobi founded the Afghan Institute of Learning (AIL) after she returned to her native country from studying and working abroad. Launched in 1995, AIL supported 80 underground home schools for 3,000 girls during the Taliban years. Today, it works with communities to find inventive ways to deliver education, especially to those who find that their roles as mothers and wives cut off access to schooling.

In the years immediately after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, education became a top priority for the Afghan government, and in 2006 the constitution guaranteed the right to education for all citizens,³ committed to developing female education,⁴

and encouraged the establishment of basic literacy schools and higher education institutes.⁵ The international community contributed nearly \$1.9 billion to the Back to School campaign, which the Afghan ministry of education launched in 2002.

As a result of this concentrated effort, primary school enrollment expanded nearly seven-fold, from 900,000 students in 2000 to 6.7 million in 2009.⁶ For girls, the improvement was even more dramatic: enrollment increased from an estimated 5,000 under Taliban rule to 2.4 million.⁷ Some 120,000 Afghan girls have now graduated from secondary school, and 15,000 are enrolled in universities.⁸

Razia Jan is among those aiding this transformation. In 2008, she returned to Afghanistan after 38 years in the United States to start a girls' school in a village outside of Kabul. She understands the challenges and threats that girls face and finds creative ways to solve them. For instance, she worked to win the support of her students' male relatives, who are now proud of their daughters' and sisters' ability to read and write. At Jan's school, guards test the drinking water and air every day for poisons, lest her students come under attack. She has created a haven where girls can learn in safety.

Increased access to education for women and girls is one of the greatest success stories in Afghanistan over the past decade. These gains, though, remain fragile. Despite tremendous surges in school enrollment, only 55 percent of all primary school age children and 32 percent of secondary school age children attend school, with high disparities between urban and rural areas.⁹ Afghan girls attend school at lower rates than boys, and primary school completion rates for girls remain at only 13 percent.¹⁰

After the Taliban fell from power it became an insurgent force, contributing along with other armed opposition groups to ongoing instability. Since 2005, because of security issues, both the Afghan government and international donors have shifted attention and funds away from initiatives like education and economic development to focus increasingly on stabilization and counterinsurgency. Decreased funding for education, together with ongoing violence, threaten the important gains Afghan girls have made in the past decade.

WHY INVEST IN GIRLS' EDUCATION?

A growing body of international research demonstrates that girls' education is vital to their personal success as well as the health and prosperity of their families, communities, and countries.

At the most basic level, educating girls saves lives. Societies where girls are married as children have high maternal death rates, but educated girls tend to delay marriage and have fewer children. When they do marry, they are less likely to die in pregnancy or childbirth, and more likely to have healthy children.¹¹ For mothers with a primary school education, the mortality of their children under five falls by nearly 50 percent, and for each additional year of schooling, infant mortality falls by an additional 10 percent.¹²

Educating girls also increases their lifetime incomes, affecting all those around them. Girls who have one more year of education than the national average earn 10 to 20 percent higher wages; while girls with a secondary education get an 18 percent return in the form of future wages.¹³ And women are more likely than men to reinvest their income in their families, spending 90 percent of earnings on their children compared to men's 30 to 40 percent.¹⁴

Educating girls and women also encourages them to resist discrimination,¹⁵ vote, and participate in civil society. Half the citizenry, once silent, becomes engaged in public life. That may be why, in nations where girls go to school, corruption decreases and conditions that lead to violent extremism are reduced.¹⁶ In short, female education has a tremendous impact on a country's wealth and stability. That's why the World Bank's 2012 *World Development Report* argues that investing in women and girls is "smart economics."

GETTING FROM HERE TO THERE

According to a 2012 UNICEF report, “the education level of women emerges as a reliable predictor of almost all [development] indicators” in Afghanistan.¹⁷ And the country is very young — fully 70 percent of the Afghan population is under 25 years old.

So smart investments in girls’ — and boys’ — education are essential for securing the nation’s future health and economic stability.

Where, then, should the Afghan government, non-governmental organizations, and international donors concentrate their efforts? **THEY SHOULD:**

CONTINUE TO BUILD MORE SCHOOLS.

Today, more schools in Afghanistan lack buildings than have them.¹⁸ Increasing the number of school buildings will ensure that girls’ have better access to education, regardless of whether they were born in urban or rural areas.

INCREASE QUALITY EDUCATION FOR ALL.

Beyond basic infrastructure, equipping schools with trained staff and adequate materials is necessary for child development and learning. Training female teachers will alleviate cultural concerns about mixed-gender education, and promote higher attendance rates.¹⁹

GIVE YOUNG MOTHERS OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN.

Currently only one percent of the national education budget is targeted at education for adults and out-of-school children. Young mothers and those in early or forced marriages still deserve the opportunity to learn. Local learning centers that can accommodate mothers with children will help close the gender literacy gap.

IMPROVE THE SAFETY AND SECURITY OF SCHOOLS.

A better understanding of why schools are attacked and how to mitigate this threat is required. Pro-government groups — military and police forces especially — should avoid using schools as bases of operation. Election planners should consider not using schools as polling stations in light of attacks on schools during the 2009 presidential elections.

Continued, strategic investments are needed to ensure that gains in Afghan girls’ education are upheld and expanded. We must support Sakena Yacoobi, Razia Jan and others who are working to ensure that millions of Afghan girls have the opportunity to pursue a quality education. And the Afghan government must prioritize programs that help keep young women in school and equip them with the knowledge and skills they’ll need to flourish as adults.

The future of Afghanistan, the health and prosperity of its people, and the strength of its democracy depend on the success of our efforts.



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- ¹⁶ "Girl Rising: The Campaign," Girl Rising, accessed at: <http://girlrising.com/the-campaign/?id10x10=5E64423185375319>
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