Afghanistan: Restoring Girls’ Right to Education
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Abstract: Since the mid-1990s, the Taliban regime that controlled Afghanistan violated girls’ human rights by restricting them from receiving an education. In 2001, Afghan girls’ rights to education were restored after the United States’ military led action that removed the Taliban from power. The new Afghan government reestablished girls’ right to education, but it has been impeded by attacks on teachers, students and schools. These attacks are being perpetrated by Taliban forces, regional warlords and local criminals. Since power inequities are reinforced through politics, religion, culture and economics, an interdisciplinary approach to intervention is necessary since the dynamics of the Afghanistan situation are not solely one-dimensional. It is recommended that the United States provide political, economic, and military support to the Afghan government to ensure that Afghan girls retain their human rights to education.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted by the United Nations’ General Assembly in 1979, was ratified by Afghanistan in 1980. This convention provides a means by which Afghan girls and women have rights to education within their country. CEDAW attends to “the problems faced by women, in particular those in rural areas, in securing enjoyment of this right” (Afghanistan: Humanity Denied-International Law, 2007, para. 7). Inquiries into accusations of abuse of this right are predicated by a girl or woman claiming that this right is being withheld. This complicates matters as Afghan girls and women are constrained by their gender and culture.

Women are a marginalized population vulnerable to the effects of discrimination and oppression (Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, 2007; Donnelly, 2003; Ignatieff, 2001; Slaughter-Defoe et. al, 2002; Stromquist, 2005). Through political and cultural processes, women have remained an oppressed group in Afghanistan. The “notions of honor and shame underpinning cultural norms and practices emphasize female modesty and purity and define men as breadwinners and the protectors of the family” (Afghanistan Poverty, Vulnerability and Social Protection: An Initial Assessment, 2005, p. 5). Afghan culture bestows the sole responsibility of a family’s honor upon the mothers and daughters. On the other hand, men are highly regarded if their wives and daughters conform to their designated cultural roles. During the Taliban regime, women were required to wear burqas when they were in public. A burqa is an “all-enveloping veil, which covers a woman from head to foot with only a small lace to look through” (Afghanistan Poverty, Vulnerability and Social Protection: An Initial Assessment, 2005, p. iii). Even after the Taliban has been replaced by a more moderate government, women are continuing this practice. Cultural norms are enforced as women seen without their burqas are seen as shaming their husbands or fathers. In addition, Afghan men are in positions of authority in deciding upon whether women have violated cultural or societal norms, thereby reinforcing women’s oppression.

In poverty stricken areas of Afghanistan with limited legal recourse, higher rates of female victimization are reported (Afghanistan Lessons in Terror: Attacks on Education in Afghanistan, 2006; Stumbling into chaos: Afghanistan on the Brink, 2007). There are incidents and rumors of girls being kidnapped and raped. Because purity is valued within the culture, these incidents cause further oppression as the girls are no longer “pure,” thus dishonoring their families. Many girls commit suicide to end the disgrace. In regions with more instability, families are more restrictive of their daughters’ freedom. Parents keep their daughters at home from school rather than risking their daughter’s safety and the family’s honor.

In Afghanistan, religion, culture and a patriarchal society have culminated in inequities within the educational system (Afghanistan Lessons in Terror:
 Attacks on Education in Afghanistan, 2006; Stumbling into chaos: Afghanistan on the Brink, 2007; Afghanistan, 2007. Women have adopted traditional roles of child-rearing and household duties without the freedoms that Afghan men are granted. This situation was exacerbated when the Taliban controlled the region. When the Taliban’s doctrine restricted women’s education and employment, the United Nations and foreign aid workers voiced their dissent. The Taliban’s restrictions violated universal human rights that extend to people regardless of state sovereignty. Two articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights challenge the validity of restricting a girl’s education. The articles state that “[s]uch rights as equal protection of the laws and protection against discrimination on such bases as race, color, language, religion, opinion, origin, property, birth, or status (Art. 2, 7) are essential to ensure that all people are treated as fully and equally human” (Donnelly, 2006, p. 46).

Challenges occur when groups’ cultural values conflict with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The Taliban supported an extremist view of Islam that violated the human rights of Afghan women. Rather than attempting to deny or change their cultural or religious beliefs, Afghan women tried to garner support from Western human rights agencies that supported the UDHR. These women attempted “to combine respect for their traditions with an education and professional health care. They hope the agencies will defend them against being beaten and persecuted for claiming such rights (Ignotieff, 2001, p. 70).

Afghan women sought protection from the Taliban who was denying their rights to education. Michael Ignotieff (2001) finds that the universal human rights provide a means by which women can challenge their oppression. He states these standards should entitle individuals to oppose and resist unjust laws and orders within their own states; and, finally, when all other remedies have been exhausted, these individuals have the right to appeal to other peoples, nations, and international organizations for assistance in defending their rights (p. 55).

Culture and politics have been the means used to restrain Afghan women from exercising their rights to civil liberties. While Afghan women respect their culture, they are challenged by the restraints within it. When humanitarian organizations and the global community became aware of the Taliban’s oppressive control upon women, political and economic means were implemented to challenge the Taliban’s laws governing women.

Although universal human rights usually “are almost never pursued with military force”, there are instances where force is sanctioned (Donnelly, 2006, p.164). Conditions where military action is legitimized in the international community for human rights abuses are (1) the abuses are ongoing and persistent; (2) it has to be potentially threatening to the security and stability of the surrounding regions; and (3) the intervention should be successful in ending the abuses. Moreover, the application of a fourth condition can be implemented; “the region in question must be of vital interest, for cultural, strategic, or geopolitical reasons, to one of the powerful nations in the world and another powerful nation does not oppose the exercise of force” (Ignatieff, 2001, p. 40). This fourth condition was utilized in the situation between the United States and Afghanistan in 2001. Although the U.S. military intervention was initiated for national security reasons, it resulted in removing the immediate barriers to Afghan girls’ education.

A Historical Perspective

Historically, Afghanistan’s instability in retaining political leadership has hindered its progress within the global community. After the Soviet’s withdrawal in 1989, the region became a battleground where opposing political leaderships fought for control (Background Note: Afghanistan, 2007). During this period of instability, a group of students, known as the Taliban, began seizing control in the southern areas of Afghanistan from the warlords. The Taliban, an “ultraconservative political and religious faction that emerged in Afghanistan in the mid 1990s,” ensured its political success through military force (Taliban, 2007, para. 1). After the Taliban’s success in the south, it moved into the northern regions to gain further control of the country.

Prior to the Taliban’s control, women were employed outside of their homes and attended schools (Graph 1). There were large educational disparities between the male and female genders; however, this gap was narrowing prior to the Taliban’s restrictions. Although gender was not a deterrent to education, the system was limited by the lack of available schools and the governing forces’ ideology. School attendance in the southern and rural regions of Afghanistan has consistently remained low be-
cause of the lack of accessibility to schooling. This was the result of schools being targeted during the Soviet occupation, leaving fewer schools in those regions (*Afghanistan Lessons in Terror: Attacks on Education in Afghanistan*, 2006). Universities were limited to urban areas where it was easier to protect these schools from becoming military targets. This further reduced higher education to the Afghan people in the rural areas. Another problem with the educational system was the lack of a universal curriculum. The system was marred by the political and religious influences of the Afghan government, resulting in an educational system that reflected Afghanistan’s leadership—a constant state of fluctuation. Traditionally, Afghan’s governing authority has resisted a modern educational curriculum; instead, the set of courses has included religious beliefs that valued the traditional roles of women.

Graph 1: (Samady, 2001, p. 24)

In 1996, the Taliban controlled Kabul, the country’s capital, and harsh restrictions were implemented. The Taliban’s laws forbid women to attend school, to work in many occupations, or to be in the presence of men who were not relatives. Additionally, women were to be fully covered in public, wearing the traditional Muslim clothing (*The World Factbook: Afghanistan*, 2007). Many women whose husbands had died while in battle found themselves unable to provide for their families. Severe penalties were administered to women who attempted noncompliance of the mandates. While men were restricted to more fundamental roles as well, the Taliban regime did not limit their educational opportunities. Though the Taliban stabilized the region, its practices in violating citizens’ human rights drew criticism from the international community.

Since 1996, Afghanistan harbored Osama bin Laden and other radical groups. When the attacks on the United States occurred on September 11, 2001, the Taliban refused to extradite bin Laden who stood accused of organizing those attacks as well as the attacks on U.S. embassies in Africa. Their refusal prompted a military response in which the Taliban was forced from power (*Taliban*, 2007). In December 2001, the United Nations sponsored a conference in Bonn Germany where Afghan leaders forged a new interim government before a national election would give Afghans the opportunity to vote for democratically elected officials. On October 9, 2004, Hamid Karzai was elected president for a five-year term in office. Newly elected, he appointed three women to his Cabinet (*Background Note: Afghanistan*, 2007).

**Afghanistan Compact**

At the conclusion of the Bonn Process, the international community rallied in an effort to support the new Afghan government. Called the Afghanistan Compact, it focused on three areas that needed to be addressed: “security, governance and human rights, and economic development” (*Afghanistan Lessons in Terror: Attacks on Education in Afghanistan*, 2006, p. 15). The agreement discusses the global community’s roles in cooperation with Afghan reconstruction efforts to transition into a stable, self-sustainable region. The United States is a key component in providing military and financial support to the newly established government. While there are improvements within the region, unpredicted problems are emerging as well.

Security in Afghanistan is essential in enforcing the nation’s constitution and retaining a stable government. The Taliban, regional warlords and criminals are obstacles to this security which is becoming increasingly threatening to the safety and welfare of the Afghan people. After the Taliban was expelled from Kabul, the group’s members scattered into the southern regions of Afghanistan and into Pakistan along Afghanistan’s border. It has been in these regions where the militant group has begun to recruit new members and begun its resurgence
In a November 2007 report, the NGO Senlis Afghanistan concluded that “54 percent of Afghanistan’s landmass hosts a permanent Taliban presence, primarily in southern Afghanistan” (Stumbling into chaos: Afghanistan on the Brink, 2007, p. 4).

In addition to the Taliban, regional warlords are a threat to Afghan security and stability. When the Taliban was in power, the warlords were in control of the more rural areas. They used force and intimidation to maintain power within their regions while operating in conjunction with the Taliban forces. When the Taliban was overthrown, these warlords took on positions of power within the new government without changing their tactics (Afghanistan Lessons in Terror: Attacks on Education in Afghanistan, 2006, p. 7).
Although the warlords are in legitimized governmental positions, the Afghan people remain fearful of these leaders who are heavily involved in the narcotics trade.

In the southern regions, criminals are creating security issues for the new government as well. They are in control of the production and distribution of opium from the agricultural regions in the south. Opium from Afghanistan is “accounting for about 92 percent of the world’s supply” (Riedel & Inderfurth, 2007, para. 9). Criminals who are controlling the drug trade “are a major source of violence and insecurity in Afghanistan” (Afghanistan Lessons in Terror: Attacks on Education in Afghanistan, 2006, p. 20). This group is operating without restrictions from the government or international community which is challenging Afghan citizens’ perspective of the new central government as a powerful, stable entity (Afghanistan Lessons in Terror: Attacks on Education in Afghanistan, 2006).

One of the goals that the Compact addresses is an increase in education for girls and boys, but it did not account for schools being used as soft targets, vulnerable to attacks by resurgent forces, warlords, and criminals. The south and southeastern regions of Afghanistan report higher rates of attacks (Graphs 2 & 3). Reasons for these attacks vary from the Taliban’s resistance to a woman’s right to education, the belief that Afghan students are being influenced by international forces, and the concentrated effort at weakening the central government by targeting a vulnerable population.


Graph 3: Taliban Attacks in the Afghan and Pakistani Regions
(Stumbling into chaos: Afghanistan on the Brink, 2007, p. 6).
correspondence with Jonathan Cohen, an associate in the Asia Division of Human Rights Watch, confirmed,

attacks on education continue: based solely on reports to the Afghan NGO Security organization, from June 20, 2006, to August 1, 2007, we’ve tracked 93 reported attacks on schools (46 in 2007 alone), 27 attempted attacks on schools (16 in 2007), 25 students and teachers killed (24 in 2007), 16 students and teachers injured (15 in 2007), and 5 student and teachers abducted” (2007).

Although these statistics show a reduction in school attacks, Cohen states that the situation may not reflect an improvement in the situation as a whole. Instead, attacks have increased in the areas around Kabul, the nation’s capital. In some areas in the south and southeast regions, schools have not been rebuilt, so there are no schools to attack. In addition, many schools have effectively been shut down as teachers and students are afraid to attend.

Since the Human Rights Watch report was filed, there has been an increase in attacks targeting students, teachers and civilians (J. Cohen, 2007; Stumbling into chaos: Afghanistan on the Brink, 2007; Background Note: Afghanistan, 2007). Cohen reports that, “according to Human Rights Watch’s Afghanistan Casualty Database, at least 374 Afghan civilians have been killed during Taliban attacks in 2007, and at least 631 civilians have been injured, resulting in more than 1,000 civilian casualties” (J. Cohen, personal communication, August 8, 2007). These attacks on civilians are considered war crimes.

The Taliban continues to be a resurgent force in Afghanistan. Using more sophisticated tactics that have been successful in Iraq, the Taliban has resorted to strikes directed at the civilian population and security forces through roadside bombings and suicide attackers. As the attacks continue, civilians become more disillusioned with President Karzai’s leadership. The Taliban is “gaining more and more political legitimacy in the minds of the Afghan people who have a long history of shifting alliances and a regime change” (Stumbling into chaos: Afghanistan on the Brink, 2007, p. 4). The growing insecurity in the region weakens their belief that the government can provide adequate protection for citizens and control of the region.

The Taliban stabilized their forces in Pakistan following their removal from power in Afghanistan. Since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on American soil, President Bush has forged a political arrangement with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, whereby Pakistan would receive financial rewards for the capture of al Qaeda members or allies. Although the Pakistani government has captured over six hundred members of the terrorist organization, security at the Afghanistan-Pakistan border is often ineffective. A U.S. colonel reported “watching in disgust as a two-mile line of Taliban fighters walked across the border from Pakistan into Afghanistan, unchallenged by any Pakistani security forces” (Monaghan, 2007, para. 29). There are an increasing number of insurgency attacks along the border where the Taliban is making a strong effort at reclaiming their former power within Afghanistan. As their insurgency continues and the region becomes more unstable, the Afghan people keep their children at home rather than sending them to school. The growing instability is creating further barriers to girls’ access to education.

Afghan Girls’ Barriers to Education

While a new central government, national and international agencies support a girl’s right to education, active and violent resistance to this right remains high within Afghanistan (Fang, 2006; Afghanistan Lessons in Terror: Attacks on Education in Afghanistan, 2006; Stumbling into chaos: Afghanistan on the Brink, 2007; Background Note: Afghanistan, 2007; Afghanistan Background, 2007). Even if successful security measures were enacted, Afghan girls face additional barriers to education within their country. These barriers include distance to school, inadequate school facilities, parents’ discriminatory ideology, and lack of female teachers. When surveyed, parents responded that distance to school was the most common factor preventing their daughters from attending school. In Afghanistan’s rural regions, parents state that inadequacy of schools and the lack of separate girls’ schools are additional factors in restricting education. Parents in the rural and urban areas reinforce gender stereotypes stating that girls are needed at home to help with household chores and that education for their daughters is not necessary (World Bank Report, 2005; Afghanistan Education, 2007). In addition to these restraints, there is a lack of female teachers. Although NGOs have increased the amount of qualified female teachers to the region, the instability in the south and southeast regions as well as the threat of violence prevents them from
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accepting positions in those areas. Until these areas have effective security measures in place, accessibility to education will be limited.

For many girls, formal education ends after primary school (Fang, 2006; Afghanistan Lessons in Terror: Attacks on Education in Afghanistan, 2006; World Bank Report, 2005). When girls reach puberty, they begin to prepare for marriage which can occur as early as thirteen years of age. Poverty in the region prevents parents from affording the cost of a burqa, which older girls wear in public. Many parents also need their children to work to provide income for the family. Afghan families allow their sons to stay in school longer than their daughters. Additionally, many families are fearful of attacks on their daughters and keep them at home for their safety. Violence against Afghan girls and women is a growing concern as the region becomes more unstable. Currently, the Afghan and international security forces have not proven successful in curbing the insurgency or the violence upon women.

Developing Afghanistan

Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world, ranking “173rd of 178 countries in the United Nations 2004 Human Development Index” (Gall, 2007, para. 1). Currently, Afghanistan is reliant upon global community, NGOs, and civil society to ensure that the basic needs of the Afghan people are met; “$26.8 billion has been made available to Afghanistan since 2001” (NATO in Afghanistan: Reconstruction and development, 2007, para. 1). Life expectancy within Afghanistan is 44.5 years which is at least 20 years lower than occupants in nearby regions (Afghanistan Country Overview, 2006; The World Factbook: Afghanistan, 2007; Gall, 2007; Background Note: Afghanistan, 2007). Although there is an increase in agricultural production, Afghans are still susceptible to famine as drought impacts the nation’s food supply.

According to statistics from World Bank, primary level school enrollment in 2000 at 19.2% increased to 86.5% by 2005 (these statistics include male and female students) (Summary Education Profile, 2005). The growth in school enrollment occurred after the Taliban’s removal from power and the gender barriers to education were removed. Resulting from the Taliban’s restrictions on girls’ education, illiteracy rates are approximately 79% for women and girls (Afghanistan, 2007). The global community, NGOs and the private sector has continued to focus on illiteracy in Afghanistan (Afghanistan Country Overview, 2006; Afghanistan Education, 2007; Afghanistan Lessons in Terror: Attacks on Education in Afghanistan, 2006; Afghanistan, 2007). United Nations’ Secretary General Kofi Annan stated, “illiteracy is the single greatest barrier to women’s progress in Afghanistan” (Afghanistan: Real Lives, 2007, para. 1).

The global community and national organizations are making an effort in both stabilizing the region and ensuring that Afghan girls have access to education (Afghanistan Lessons in Terror: Attacks on Education in Afghanistan, 2006). For example, the U.S. government is providing funds through the United States Agency for International Develop-
USAID reported that “the U.S. Government will contribute $22 million, over 5 years, to support the Education Ministry’s vision of a literate Afghanistan”. Additionally, USAID has succeeded in:

- Training 65,000+ teachers via radio
- Establishing the International School of Kabul K-12 American style grade school
- Establishing a 4 year liberal arts university, American University of Afghanistan
- Constructing and/or refurbishing over 670 schools as of August 2007
- Printing 60+ million grade school textbooks (08/07)
- Trained 9,200+ literacy learners in 190 villages in five provinces

Global and national educational efforts have progressed to the point in which “millions of girls are back in school with 400,000 new female students starting school for the first time this year” (NATO in Afghanistan, 2007, para. 8). Table 2 lists the direct and indirect benefits in narrowing the gender gap in education. Educating the region’s population is a necessary requirement in enabling the nation to become self-sufficient upon its own resources.

**United States Involvement**

The U.S. has an interest in stabilizing the Afghan region and with restoring human rights to women. On September 11, 2001, the U.S. was vulnerable to attacks by an extremist terrorist organization that resided in the Afghan region. An immediate and immobilizing attack upon the Taliban leaders who harbored bin Laden was effective in removing Afghan’s controlling leadership. At this point, the

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<th>Gender Gap</th>
<th>Investments/Actions needed</th>
<th>Expected Direct Benefits</th>
<th>Expected Indirect Benefits</th>
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<tr>
<td>Education/Literacy</td>
<td>Adult literacy courses available for women</td>
<td>Increased schooling for girls</td>
<td>Family well being</td>
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<td>Open new girl’s schools</td>
<td>Schooling-education-employment linkage strengthened; more women in paid work</td>
<td>Increased child survival</td>
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<td>Recruitment of female teachers</td>
<td>Positive image of women that goes beyond emphasizing women in traditional roles</td>
<td>Lower fertility</td>
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<td>Ensure transport facilities where school is at a distance</td>
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<td>Higher age at marriage</td>
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<td>Gender sensitive curriculum</td>
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<td>Lower rate of population growth</td>
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<td>Incentives to bring all girls to school</td>
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<td>Reduced family expenditure on health care</td>
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<td>Crèche facilities to release girls from burden of sibling care</td>
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<td>Bridge courses, accelerated learning opportunities</td>
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<td>Second chance education</td>
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Table 2: Benefits of Closing the Gender Gap (World Bank Report, 2007, p. 121).
The resurgence of the Taliban forces has created a situation whereby military reinforcements are necessary. Additionally, security measures must be strengthened as reconstruction will be ineffective if resurgent forces target those facilities and roadways for destruction. Unless the Afghan government, na-
tional and international communities work at eradicating the Taliban, regional warlords, and criminals, Afghanistan’s government will fold. It becomes a matter of time before the Taliban controls the region and the people of Afghanistan once again. If the Taliban regains their hold over the region, then there is no hope that the human rights for Afghan girls will be restored. The reality is human rights become an unintended benefit when a repressive regime is removed from power and the region is stabilized.

References


