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From Maktab to Madrassa: Afghan Girls and the Forced Choice

Report of the RWI Afghanistan Programme

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Maktab to Madrassa: Afghan Girls and the Forced Choice

A Grounded Theory Study of Girls' Transitions
from Public Schooling to Religious Education in
Afghanistan after 2021

Abstract

The key objective of this research was to investigate the education process of female former public-school students in light of the ban on their education post grade six by the Taliban regime. The study entailed fact-finding process on the state of education in the country from the prospect of education stakeholders (i.e., current teachers and employees of the MOE) and subsequent interviews of former female public-school students. Geared to generate a grounded theory of adolescent girls' education process in the face of gender bias and discriminatory education policy imposed by the de facto regime. A group of eleven stakeholders as key informants were interviewed in the fact-finding stage of the study, followed by thematic analysis of data to prepare the interview tools for interviews with twenty female former public-school students who have had continued their education under the regime post grade six. The analysis showed that the abrupt and sudden discontinuation of these girls' education post grade six in the free public school system leaves them and their families—the direct decision makers in these girls' education process—with one of two extreme choices: either stopping the girls' education or pursuing religious education. The study confirms religious instruction as a 'forced choice' and the only option to pursue for the majority of adolescent girls in Afghanistan under the Taliban. Girls undergo severe psychological pressure due to the abrupt discontinuation of their education for the reason of their gender. In cases where they pursue religious education under the regime, girls in formal and informal religious education institutions experience unfair and biased treatment: (a) girls' former school credentials and learning are not recognized, (b) public school girls are denied multidisciplinary learning accessible to boys in the same institutions, and (c) girls face institutional discrimination in the form of unequal access to education infrastructure. Simultaneously, the religious institutions serve as vessels for the regime's indoctrination of girls and women into the former's preferred position for the latter in Afghan society. This is done by the teaching and training approach being inductive, conservative and mainly focused on learners' religious conviction instead of their intellectual development and competencies. The findings also show that most girls are studying to maintain their learning skills and deepen their understanding of religion for personal enrichment as their key motivation in the current state, as the regime's pervasive gender discriminatory policies further compound the traditional barriers to girls' education in Afghanistan.

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I. Introduction

In the realm of global education discourse, the fundamental assumption often posited is the transformative power of education in fostering prosperity, peace, and societal advancement, especially in states formed of diverse communities (Alan, Baysan, Gumren, & Kubilay, 2021). Furthermore, girls' education in less developed societies is cited for its broad social and economic benefit in society as positive externalities (Somani, 2017). However, within the context of Afghanistan, a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and socio-political factors challenges this conventional wisdom. Post August 2021, the current state's gender-biased policies in education are an additional layer of institutional and traditional challenges hindering the transformational effect of education, specifically for girls immediately post primary school. The Taliban edicts on the suspension of girls' education post grade six, effectively suppressing Afghan girls' aspirations as future educated citizens, creates apprehension about the future of the society. Fears are further compounded among scholars and advocates due to the Taliban's policy of proliferation of the religious education system as a substitute for the public-school education system, especially for girls.

The report first gives a summary background on religious education strife in the country, with an introduction to the research objectives and their significance in the current situation. Section two of the study presents a concise literature review, followed by section three throwing light on the methodology of the study, which uses a ground theory perspective and thematic analysis. This is followed by section on the key findings of the research endeavor. In the last section, the report conclusion assists us in understanding the dynamic on the ground regarding the state of education and choices that Afghan girls possess to continue their education despite the heinous state law forbidding their formal education and public schools.

Background

Girls' education as a pathway to women's emancipation in society has been a battleground between modernist and traditionalist forces in Afghanistan in the past 100 years. The two distinct epochs that draw global attention are the two periods of Taliban rule in Afghanistan. The first era of Taliban governance followed a brutal civil war in the aftermath of the Cold War, spanning from 1996 to 2001. The second era began in August 2021, marking their return to power after the fall of the Republic which had been established at the initial Taliban collapse in 2001. Throughout the country's upheavals, Afghan women and girls have been subject to discrimination and deprivation of their rights; however, their situation under the Taliban rule has engendered global discourse as well as heavy criticism by human rights advocates, mainly because the system of oppression and discrimination has reached epic levels, comparable to dystopian fiction.

The imposition of gender-biased educational policies by the Taliban in Afghanistan, particularly the systemic exclusion of females from education and learning, poses a significant threat to the social fabric and development prospects of the country. This is mainly driven by the movement's

ultraconservative philosophy and specific religious views. The current girls' education suspension, now in its third consecutive academic year, shows documented incidents of psychological ailments, such as feelings of desperation due to the isolation and confinement of girls and women to basic domestic functions and an ultimately uncertain future. Further evidence of documented compounding incidents of child marriages and suicides among adolescent girls substantiate the severe impact of the exclusionary and gender-biased institutional policies. Similarly, boys are also negatively impacted in a male-dominated learning environment void of female role models and absent the qualified female teachers previously actively engaged in the teaching body of the civil service system in the country.

In this context, it is important to dissect and understand the enduring impact of gender-biased policies on female students who do not have the opportunity to continue their education as the result of a state policy. Since the Taliban's second takeover of the country, the author has engaged in multiple research endeavors that indirectly investigate the impact of the education ban on Afghan girls through teachers and communities. Through this study, the author attempts to showcase the impact of the Taliban's education ban on girls in their own words.

Research Objectives

The research initial objective has gone through multiple reiterations during the various stages of this assignment since its inception, mainly due to the ambitious objective of the study to directly reach girls in Afghanistan and present their struggle to obtain education in their current circumstances. The study objective started with a broad investigative statement exploring the impact of gender discrimination in education and its broad social, cultural and economic implications for the life prospects of girls in Afghanistan. This was in part due to the fluidity of the context as well as the desire of the researcher to delve into the field with an open mind and learning purpose. The research methodology was intentionally selected to accommodate the limitations in this research assignment and to allow the researcher to both retrospectively and introspectively analyze collected data in multiple stages, and ultimately to allow for the theory to develop through the data analysis. The objective of this research is to examine the impact of state-level gender-based discriminatory policies in education on former female students' decisions and their options to pursue education.

Significance of the Research

This study contributes to the underexplored domain of state-level exclusion of women and girls from education based on gender, and also examines the choices female former public-school students made in the changing landscape of education under the Taliban regime.

II. Literature Review

This literature review examines the impact of the Taliban's educational policies on access to education or bans from education based on gender. The review explores historical contexts,

recent developments, and the socio-economic and psychological consequences of these policies. By analyzing a range of scholarly articles, the review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by the Afghan education system under Taliban rule and the broader implications for society.

Historically, Afghanistan's education system has undergone significant changes influenced by various political regimes and cultural norms. Ahmed-Ghosh (2003) provides an insightful historical overview, highlighting that women's issues have been a crucial part of national agendas since the 1920s. Progressive policies, such as those introduced during King Amanullah Khan's reign, aimed at modernizing Afghanistan and promoting women's rights, often faced resistance from tribal leaders who upheld patriarchal norms. This historical backdrop is essential for understanding the longstanding struggle for gender equality in Afghan education.

The period following the fall of the Taliban in 2001 saw substantial progress in women's education. Alvi-Aziz (2008) documents the advancements in girls' education during the post-Taliban era, noting increased access to and quality of education. However, these achievements began to erode with the Taliban's return to power in 2021, illustrating the fragility of the progress made in the previous two decades. This regression underscores the need for a resilient educational framework that can withstand political upheavals.

Easar et al. (2023) provide a comprehensive analysis of the educational developments in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2023, highlighting both progress and setbacks. Their study, conducted by the Rumi Organization for Research, emphasizes the significant strides made by the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in transforming the curriculum from one focused on violence to one promoting peace. Despite facing numerous challenges, including security issues, corruption, and cultural barriers, notable progress was achieved in educational access and quality. However, the Taliban's return to power in 2021 marked a severe regression, particularly with the ban on girls' education above the age of six, resulting in profound psychological and socio-economic consequences.

The psychological impact of the Taliban's educational policies on Afghan girls is profound. Sharifi (2023) documents increased rates of depression, anxiety, and feelings of hopelessness among girls excluded from education. These psychological effects highlight the urgent need for mental health interventions to support affected individuals. The socio-economic ramifications are equally significant. Johnson (2021) discusses the Taliban's educational policies as a direct violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, emphasizing their detrimental effects on women's future prospects and societal roles. The systematic denial of education exacerbates gender inequality, perpetuating cycles of poverty and limiting social mobility.

Community responses to these challenges have shown promise in fostering educational resilience. Kakar (2022) explores how social capital can be leveraged to build resilience in conflict zones like Afghanistan. The study highlights the importance of community initiatives and grassroots efforts in maintaining educational continuity despite the Taliban's restrictive policies. These initiatives provide critical insights into how communities can support education in adverse conditions, offering a glimmer of hope for the future.

Overall, the literature reviewed provides a robust foundation for understanding the multifaceted impact of the Taliban's educational policies on Afghan society. It underscores the historical context of gender-based educational discrimination, the progress made post-2001, and the significant setbacks following the Taliban's return to power. The socio-economic and psychological impacts of these policies are profound, necessitating urgent intervention and policy reforms. Community efforts to build resilience offer a promising avenue for maintaining educational access in these challenging times. More importantly, it is vital to focus on the situation and views of girls in the Afghan context regarding education, which is the primary goal of this research. A comprehensive understanding of young adolescent girls' prospects will aid in developing strategies to counteract the detrimental effects of the Taliban's educational policies, and throw light on girls' choices and alternatives with respect to pursuing education.

III. Methodology

This study's method is inspired by Ground Theory Perspective (GTP), which allows for a systemic use of qualitative tools and procedures to analyze the situation concerning the central topic—the ban on girls' education post-grade six—to understand the impact of gender-biased education policy on girls' education process and decisions about continuing education (Creswell 479). Grounded Theory was particularly attractive in this case, because it allowed the theory to be discovered as 'grounded' in the data, thus broadening our understanding of the central phenomena by systematically discovering the important discourses and nuances around girls' education in light of the regime's ban and pervasive restrictions on access to alternative learning opportunities. This method allowed the researcher to unearth what girls are studying now and what their future education trajectory might be. The method was also suitable because of its sensitive approach to individuals in a complex settings and flexibility to accommodate all the complexities found on the ground pertaining to the topic of the study and its subjects—female former students of public schools now living under the Taliban regime (Creswell 478).

Research Design

The design format of ground theory was identified as ideal for this study. This design allowed for the development of a theory grounded on a staged data collection process from the participants and in some cases from different participant groups. Thus, allowing theory generation and theory emergence from the data collected in the field provided the flexibility to adjust the data collection tools for more in-depth insights prior to interview with the core subjects of the study. The research design was further supplemented by thematic analysis borrowed from the paper 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology' by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke. The thematic analysis method was done using Delve software to create the codes and amalgamate the codes under emerging themes or categories pertaining to the central topic of the research.

Participants and Sampling

Participants in this study were recruited on a volunteer basis at each step of the data collection process. For the key informant interviews in phase one, the researcher identified participants using purposeful sampling techniques based on her existing network of education stakeholders in the country. These eleven key informant interviewees were identified based on their extensive background in education, with their most recent or current roles being, e.g., teacher, technical staff member of the Ministry of Education, or direct involvement with youth concerning their educational affairs in the country. Interviews in this phase were done through phone or video calls. To obtain comprehensive and diverse input at this critical stage, a combination of rural and urban, and capital and provincial participants was selected. Four of the interviewees were from the provinces of Wardak, Herat, Kandahar, Mazar; five of the interviewees were from Kabul; and two interviewees resided outside the country at the time of the interview. Participants' work experience ranged between five and fifteen years of direct engagement in the education sector in Afghanistan, with work in direct employment in the Ministry of Education and international or local education NGOs, except for the two experts residing outside Afghanistan. One of the two experts was a PhD holder in education pertaining to Afghanistan and other a senior political analyst on the Taliban's ideology and politics. The interviews with these experts were based on a separate set of open-ended questions that were mainly geared to facilitate the researcher's understanding of the Taliban's vision for education under their rule, looking behind the scenes of their policies and edicts and their ideological and philosophical position as a political movement. Finally, six of the total nine key informant interviewees were female and the remainder were male, achieving a degree of gender parity as well as ensuring that women's education was fairly analyzed with a balanced view from both genders as stakeholders in the sector.

In phase two of the field work, participants were identified through selective screening and recommendation facilitated by the key informants of stage one, field surveyors, and the existing network of the researcher in the country and the diaspora overseas. The participants were tracked through their parents and/or guardians; thus, the participants' parents or guardians were the first point of contact in this process. The parents and/or guardians were identified based on their association with the target participant for the study based on two categories. First, they were parent or guardian to a female former public-school student in Afghanistan and the student was now not studying in public school because of the ban on girls' education post-grade six in public schools; and secondly, this former student had now enrolled in some form of religious education institution for the continuation of her education. The parents or guardians mainly confirmed the selection criteria for these participants and signed an informed consent form to permit the surveyor to interview their daughter or ward at a scheduled date and time. The surveyor confirmed that parents and/or guardians read through an introductory note that gave full information on research objective, why their child or ward was selected, data confidentially and their right to refuse the interview and for their daughter or ward to withdraw their agreement prior to or during the interview if they desired. They issued either a signed copy of the consent form, or sent a confirmation voice or text message in response to the consent note. All target participants

identified for interviews in this stage were female former students between grade seven and eleven of the public school system in Afghanistan. Over forty participants were identified for the second stage of data collection, and twenty were interviewed. There were six students from Kabul province, and the remaining fourteen were from the provinces of Faryab, Herat, Khost, Mazar and Paktia. The students from Bamiyan were excluded from interviews after extensive deliberation, as their inclusion would have introduced the topic of religious minorities in religious education without providing a sufficient sample for meaningful analysis. The researcher encourages further study on the situation of religious minorities under the Taliban and hopes to pursue this work when opportunities allow.

Data Collection Methods and Analysis Technique

The data collection and analysis happened in two phases for this study, and the thematic analysis method was used to analyze the datasets obtained in each phase, mainly using Delve qualitative online software for coding and theme construction. The interview tools were two separate sets of semi-structured questionnaires for KIIs and female student interviews. The experts were interviewed using a separate set of open-ended questions. The expert interview transcripts were not included as part of data analysis; they were rather used to broaden the researcher's contextual understanding of the Taliban as an ideological and political movement. Participants in stage two of data collection were each given a pseudonym to conceal their identity and preserve information confidentiality.

In phase one, the interview data from nine key informants were collected through a semi-structured questionnaire and supplemented by two interviews conducted using open-ended questions with experts on the Taliban as a political and religious movement and their education policies. This brought the total number of interviews in this stage to eleven. Each interview was audio recorded with the permission of the interviewees. As the first step in thematic analysis—familiarization with the data—the interview recordings were transcribed directly from original audio in the native language of the interviewee into English transcripts. The translated transcripts were entered into the Delve qualitative analysis tool. In the second step, these transcripts were read and reread in the Delve software by the researcher and initial codes were generated as per thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 88). These codes mainly identified features of the data that appeared interesting in regard to the central topic of the research. Subsequently, the transcripts were reread and the codes were arranged under themes or categories. At this stage, the themes were mainly driven by the codes that were nested in the data. Thus, codes that were relevant to an overarching issue were grouped together under a theme, or different codes combined to form a theme. In the fourth step, the themes were labeled and assessment of all codes under this theme were reviewed for coherence and meaningfulness in respect to the identified theme—as a title or one sentence description. Ultimately, the themes were then subsequently reviewed parallel to each other to identify clear distinctions between them. At this stage, the order of themes moved and each data extract under the theme was again read for coherence and relevance to the overarching subtopic in the theme itself. Simultaneously, some codes shifted place and were identified as relevant to another theme in the analysis. Then,

subthemes under the overarching theme were developed by collapsing relevant subtopics under the overarching theme. Finally, overarching themes were defined and labeled in association with the central topic of the study. All the necessary subthemes or categories were organized in logical fashion under the central topic, and a coherent picture developed from the dataset. Theme descriptions were also added at this stage.

Themes emerging from the Key Informant Interviews were:

- Restricted or Limited Education Opportunities for Girls
 - o Restricted Access to Education
 - o Notable Increased Illiteracy among Adolescent Girls
 - o Limitations on Access to Alternative Learning Options
- Devaluation of Formal Education System and its Psychological and Emotional Effects
 - o Taliban Official Statements and Actions Devaluing Formal Public Education System
 - o Loss of Education Objectivity
 - o Hopelessness and Despair Among Community of Educators
 - o Loss of Motivation to Pursue Education
- Societal and Economic Impact
 - o Socio-Economic Mobility of Girls in the Current Situation
 - o Anticipated Future Skills Gap
 - o Regime's Rulings in Education Further Exacerbate Social Inequalities
 - o Intergenerational Impact of Gender Discrimination in Education
- Supply-Side Issues
 - o Curriculum Issues
 - o Shortage of Teachers
 - o Gender Discrimination in Teaching Profession
 - o Resource Constraint (i.e. Textbooks)

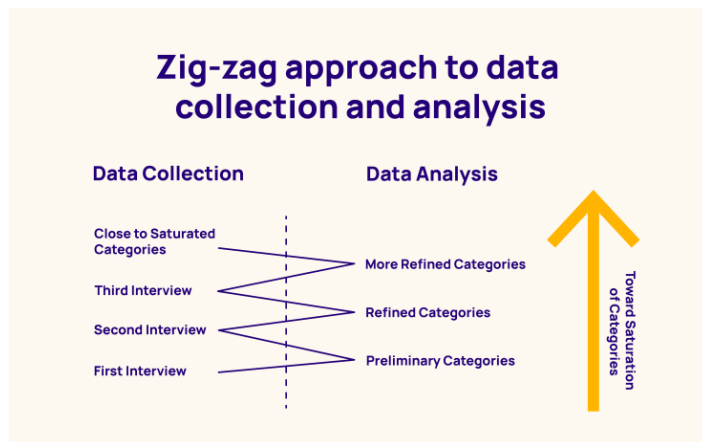
The thematic analysis at this stage allowed for a nuanced understanding of the interview data, the emergence of themes, and finally identification of information gaps in fully understanding the context around the research subject—girls' education—as reflected the situation on the ground. The thematic analysis at this stage was most critical in identifying the need for and including the expert interviews as part of the phase one interviews; thus, the approach enabled the researcher to return to the field to obtain more nuanced information and acquire a more concise and full picture of the situation and context

around the central theme of girls' education post-grade six in Afghanistan from the ideological perspective of the de facto authority.

Stage one interviews were critical in constructively paving the way to identify the right participants and a conducive engagement approach in phase two of the data collection, especially concerning the sensitivity around the theme of girls' education. In other words, the data-driven thematic analysis in phase one allowed for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within the dataset to decipher the context—girls' education in Afghanistan under the Taliban. Logistically, it was determined that this was best done if a local female surveyor was hired in the country to undertake the interviews of the core participants of this assignment—female former students of public schools—since engaging with the prospective participants required the utmost caution and flexibility. Furthermore, it was equally important in the trust building process for girls and their families to realize that someone in the country shared the risks and stakes in the process of this survey.

The zig-zag approach to data collection and analysis was used in phase two of the study. This approach allowed for the refinement of the data collection process, and a subsequent efficient theme definition in the interview process, until saturation of data was reached. This phase, as well part of the analysis, took place during the field work. Without a theoretical framework—as grounded theory permits—the zig-zag approach to data collection and analysis allowed the researcher to work around the fluidity of the context and complexity of access to the target group, female students grade seven and above and currently enrolled in Madrassa or religious education institution. Another critical advantage of this method was its flexibility in including new participants on a rolling basis, and new locations based on the availability of participants, for a broadened and comprehensive analysis. Lastly, of greatest importance was the flexibility to investigate participants for information exactly as much as they were comfortable providing and which would not jeopardize their situation and that of the surveyor on the ground. This was a fine line that could not be crossed at any point, as any possible leak of intent to the authorities would mean end of the fieldwork, jeopardizing the participants and possibly their families.

Beside Kabul, interviews were conducted in major cities such as Herat and Kandahar, where girls above grade seven were mainly formally studying in registered private Madrassas that taught equal Maktab and Madrassa subjects, or Madrassas that were under formal registration with the Ministry of Education. The other category of Madrassa students interviewed were those of informal—and in some cases unregistered—short-term centers where rural and girls from lower socio-economic background enrolled. This was to include

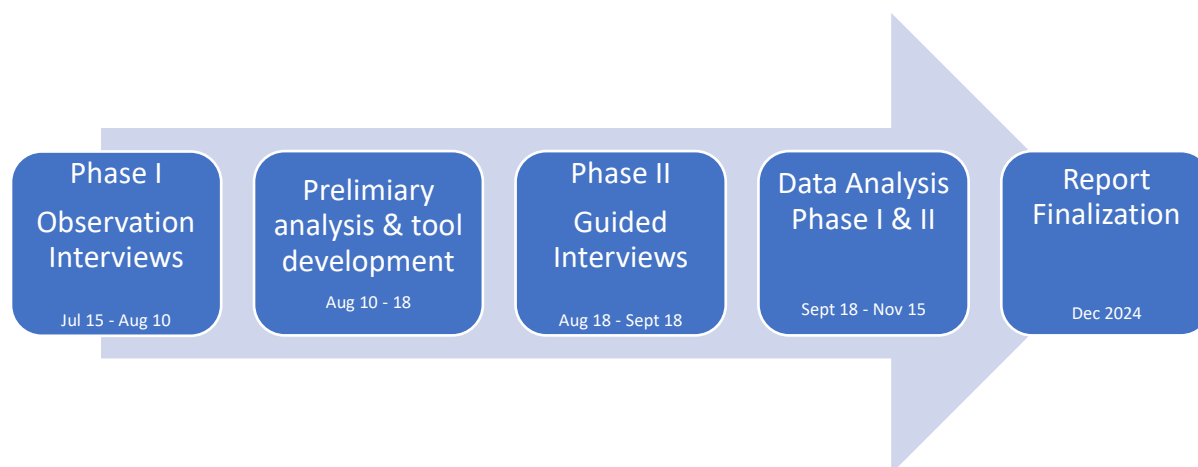


students of lower socioeconomic status in the study and those from other provinces and rural areas. This adjustment enriched the dataset with inputs from participants with diverse backgrounds to reflect on structural barriers to education for girls. In this category of participants, the questionnaire had to be sifted or adjusted to the context of the target group, who were in private informal Madrassas and community-led informal Madrassa. The questions had to be specific because the unique structures of each type of religious institution provided very different kinds of education services. For example, a private informal Madrassa had class categorization and included subjects outside core religion subjects. The community-based informal Madrassas strictly focused on religious subjects, mainly aiming at daily religious practice for students, and their proficiency in personal religious learning concerned mainly their daily practices. Study tools were prepared relevant to the context of each category, preventing irrelevant questions.

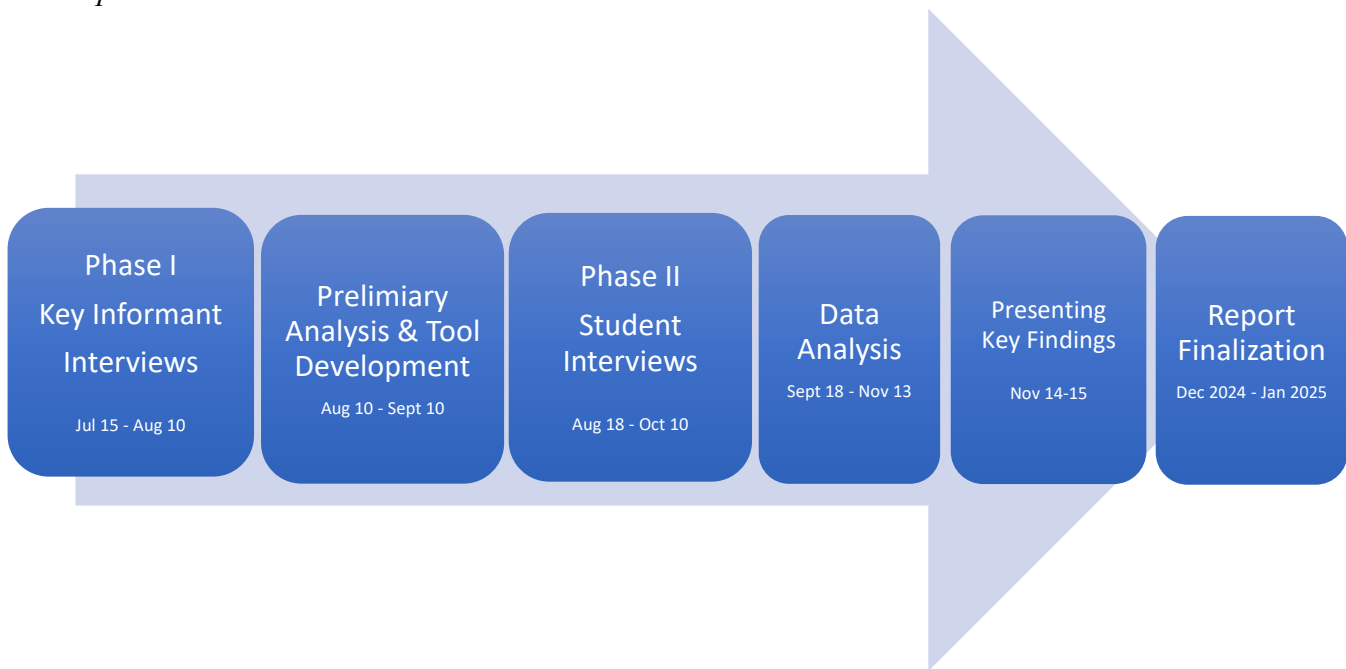
Field Work Timeline

The field timeline was adjusted from its original schedule, as shown in the figure below, the reasons being that phase one took longer than anticipated due to extensive analysis processes, and that there was deliberation to identify the right course of action for stage two of the fieldwork. Furthermore, the interviews with experts were carried out during phase one of the fieldwork, which took more time than originally stipulated.

June 2024



Sept 2024



Ethical Considerations and Limitations

The lead researcher's inability to take part in fieldwork was the most significant obstacle in this study. To mitigate this challenge, the fieldwork was divided into two parts: first, the observation phase through interview of the key informants; and second, the interview with the participants in phase two. Phase one interviews with the KIIs were done by the lead researcher through phone calls. In phase two, the interviews were done through phone by a local surveyor hired in Afghanistan. Call interviews at this stage were a security precaution and not limitations. This allowed for safety of both interviewees and surveyor on the ground. The surveyor's identity remained strictly confidential. The caveat for onboarding a single surveyor from the field for interviews was surveyor fatigue, as well as biases for preexisting knowledge of the situation. The zig-zag data analysis process was instrumental in correcting the surveyor bias, as it allowed the researcher to return to the field for the next interview being aware of their bias and correcting for it from the earlier interview by asking follow-up questions. This way, the interviews were word-by-word recorded and transcribed and the surveyor was given additional questions for more details and specifics during the interview.

All participants in phases one and two were informed about the purpose of the study and were given the liberty to discontinue the interview at any given time or refuse to take part in the study post-interview (by asking to discard their data). Parents and guardians of the female students were all asked to provide their written or audio consent to the interview and the target participant interviewees were also informed that they could discontinue the interview at any time they felt uncomfortable or wished to not continue due to personal or security risks. Interviews were held at a time that was fixed by the participants, and some interviews were interrupted at the request of the participants and continued on a different day and time preferred by the participants.

A caveat to this research was the inability to obtain information from religious education institution personnel and their perspective on the situation. Therefore, this study is only able to speak from students' perspective, their experience in religious education institutions and their insights from a learner's perspective. Contact with administrators, staff or teachers in these religious education institutions would have assisted in verifying some of the analysis of this study and as well as throwing light on broader education and institutional dynamic in the religious education system.

Interviews in the province of Laghman were discontinued after an incident with a male household member of one particular participant. This heightened the sense of risk in the province and interviews were subsequently suspended in the province. Consequently, the main contact person for the participant reached out, and the situation was explained. Fieldwork was suspended for two full days, the surveyor was given sufficient time to retreat from fieldwork and recover from the incident prior to resuming fieldwork in another province. Finally, the surveyor on the ground was also hired based on a confidential process. Her credentials and identity remained undisclosed.

IV. Key Findings

Typology of Madrassas in this Study

This study interviewed 20 female former public-school students, who are currently enrolled in religious education centers that are synonymously known as Madrassas. Madrassa is a general term used for seminaries of all kinds that are primarily focused on religious education and training. This section elaborates on kinds of religious education that the study participants attended during the fieldwork in phase two, from August 18th to Oct 10th, 2024. This is for the purpose of expanding the reader's understanding of the religious education landscape, as well to give a sense of the scale and scope of study and its analytical depth pertinent to the religious education system in Afghanistan. This study does not claim to be a comprehensive overview of religious education institutions pertaining to girls' learning and education; however, it is one of its kind and possibly the first account of female students enrolled in these religious education institutions under the Taliban regime. Therefore, the author is conscious of generalization and thus aims to define the precise scope this study's analysis specific to institutions whose students were interviewed.

The study interviewed twenty female student enrollees of twenty different religious education institutions in six provinces of Afghanistan. Three students were studying in public Darul Ulums in Herat. Darul Ulum literally translates as *School of Knowledge* in Arabic. Public Darul Ulums that are MOE operated teach a combined stream of religious and mainstream formal public-school subjects and are primarily focused on the advancement of Islamic studies at associate level—grade 1 to 14 (Ministry of Education 18). One student from Paktia province was studying in a public Madrassa, which was MOE operated and structured mainly to teach primary and secondary levels—grade 1 to 12—with the main focus on religious subjects and the teaching of regular public-school subjects at foundational level only (Ministry of Education 12). This made a total of four research participants who were actively enrolled in public or MOE operated seminaries. The remaining 16 research participants were enrolled in private seminaries that were either running with or without formal registration with MOE. One participant was studying in a private and MOE-registered Darul Ulum in Kabul province. Four participants were studying in private and MOE-registered Madrassas in Kabul province. Eleven students were enrolled and actively studying in tuition-based small local Madrassas in Paktia, Khost, Mazar, Faryab, and Kabul provinces, none registered with MOE or any other government entity. These tuition-based small local-operated Madrassas were independently operating seminaries that trained students on a tailored and usually institutional-based curriculum without formal certification or recognition. These local Madrasas function based on local demand, mainly recruit students from the neighborhood, and do not have grade specification.

In this study, the term Madrassa is used synonymously with seminary. The author attempts to specify the analysis related to each type of Madrassa and the individual participant's experience in that specific seminary, mainly aiming to make the analysis as specific as possible and context-related.

Afghan Girls' Anguish Amid the Pervasive Restrictions on Education

In this section, the paper attempts to analyze the impact of the Taliban's ban on girls' education from the latter's own unique perspective. The analysis draws on female students' self-expression in the face of the gradual and pervasive constraints on access to education in public schools, and their own circumstances in a world without education. Theoretically, this understanding of girls' situations from their own perspective is of paramount importance to deciphering the specific circumstances and thinking that eventually influenced these girls' decision to seek enrollment in religious education institutions accessible to them under the current regime.

"It has been three years since we are living in very uncertain times. We don't have a clear idea or picture of our future and what we should expect. For the past three years we didn't have any achievements and made no progress. We are still waiting to hear if the schools will reopen. We are very apprehensive about our future. This uncertainty that we live in right now means darkness for society and country overall." - Nilofur

Girls in Afghanistan are allowed to obtain public schooling until grade six under the Taliban. Afghan girls' education is abruptly discontinued after grade six, due to the Taliban's edicts issued in September 2021 and subsequently in December 2022, banning female students' education at grade seven and above from both public and private schools respectively (USIP). This strictly limits Afghan girls' education options to scarcely available and commonly unaffordable private schooling, inaccessible online schooling, or enrollment in seminaries, Madares (plural of Madrassa). In the face of pervasive restrictions on their education, many former schoolgirls express profound feelings of hopelessness and despair regarding their future due to the education ban immediately after grade six. As shown in the above quote by Nilofur, enrolled in a registered private Madrassa, the abrupt halt to her education by the *de facto* authority is a source of discontent and tension for girls.

The education ban has led to significant emotional distress among schoolgirls who were not unable to continue their education in public schools. Sonam, studying in a tuition-based private and unregistered Madrassa in her neighborhood, described feelings of depressed and anxiety about her circumstances: "when schools were banned on girls, I felt really depressed and mentally I was in a bad situation." This quote highlights the mental health challenges posed by the restriction on educational opportunities for girls. Additionally, these students' inability to continue their education contributed to reports on loss of identity and purpose for many girls now barred from education in public schools. There is also an expression and acknowledgement of ostracization in society mainly because of gender. As an attendee of private Madrassa in her community, Akhtar Bibi articulated her feelings as, "when I see my brothers going to school, I feel like I no longer have a place or role in society," indicating that education is linked to a sense of self-worth and societal contribution. Other prominent emotional states quoted by the participants are isolation and idleness at home, in effect due to the restrictive gender

discrimination of the Taliban's policies in education and society that ban all kinds of activities for women and girls exclusively. Pashton stated, "being at home with no school makes us feel cut off from the world," indicating that the ban not only restricts education but also diminishes social interactions and connections, deepening the sense of isolation and seclusion.

While isolated and anxious at home, the situation and the education ban generate anxiety about the future and the uncertainty it brings. Participants frequently mentioned being worried about their prospects: for example, Normena expressed, "we have no clear picture of what our future holds." This uncertainty exacerbates feelings of fear and helplessness when coupled with disorientation about girls' aspirations and life goals. Gulsom's statement, "I had dreams of becoming a doctor, but now I feel those dreams are fading away," highlights how the ban disrupts long-term ambitions and aspirations of girls. It is not unusual to see girls take refuge and search for solace in religion in difficult times, as expressed by this former schoolgirl now attending a private tuition-based Madrassa teaching Quranic memorization and interpretation:

*"First of all, I am facing mental problem because of our school ban and including me all my Madrassa classmates are very sad and every day in Madrassa they do Khatm Quran for the girl's schools to reopen so we can continue our education."
Normena*

The accumulated effect of loss of identity, purpose and lack of vision for the future could be linked to girls' reported feeling of resentment towards gender inequality, stemming from the ban on education. Asyia, studying in a public Darul Ulum, mentioned that, "we feel resentment towards boys who can continue their education while we are left behind." This sense of injustice can lead to deeper emotional scars as girls have very few options to navigate their restricted roles in society.

"I feel very disappointed and hopeless from this situation, because the boys who use to be of my school period are graduated now and got admission in different departments in universities. I feel I am equal to a backward house bound woman, who had no choice to study or make a future, this gives me mental torture. I had many dreams to become a doctor and take my education to greater levels. But I got admission in this Madrassa, because in the current circumstance this is better than nothing at least something than doing nothing and wasting time." - Gulsom

The feelings of resentment and frustration among girls regarding gender inequality can also be a factor in their decision to avail themselves of any opportunity that may be within their reach. One participant stated, "I try to focus on my studies in Madrassa to keep my mind occupied," reflecting an attempt to cope with the situation while maintaining a connection to education. Another female student states, "the main reason being that we were wasting time being idle at home and the sooner we resume our education, the better." In the face of regime adversity toward

their education, the former schoolgirls demonstrate resilience by appreciating the social interaction and existing potential for learning in a Madrassa under the oppressive regime that has managed to shut almost all venues of education accessible to girls. Subsequently, comparing the two responses from the same participant on views on her education in Madrassa and her hope for her education in this Madrassa, shows that the enticement from enrollment in this Madrassa is the sense of community in the center and support that is available in the institutions.

What's your view about the education in Madrassa?

“Education in this Madrassa is excellent. I have newly joined as a teacher, but as a student I am satisfied with their teaching and the quality of education. I really like Tamana Jan, as she is a colleague, a friend, a companion and a leader. She provides all the necessary support, and I really like her. There isn't anything that I don't like about this Madrassa. I really like reading Quran and its very contenting to read Quran in this place. ...even older women come and study in this Madrassa. Even my own mother goes and studies in this Madrassa. Its women and girls exclusive Madrassa.” - Pashton

Would your Madrassa education pave the way for your plans in the future?

“No. Just Madrassa will not enable us or pave the way for our future career plans. It is impossible and I would never agree that just Madrassa education would be sufficient for any future education or career plans in life for anyone and myself.”- Pashton.

The analysis reveals that the current situation has profound adverse effects on girls, characterized by feelings of hopelessness and despair, emotional distress and anxiety, loss of identity and purpose, resentment towards gender inequality, isolation and loneliness and fear of an uncertain future. These elements collectively interact to define girls' state of being in the wake of educational restrictions and the return of the Taliban regime and their oppressive ruling. Thus, it may be concluded that, as a coping mechanism and resilience strategy, girls have yielded to their individual, family and communal decision to enroll in religious education institutions that are accessible and available in their respective areas and which they are permitted by the regime to join in lieu of a formal school system. They serve as one source to alleviate their stresses and reduce their anxieties either by finding solace in religious text or the social engagement possible through these centers, at the cost of aspirations and dreams for the future. Next, the study throws light on the exact reasons that the female former public school students cite for joining the seminaries.

Key Reasons for Enrollment in Religious Education Institutions

A primary reason for enrolling in Madrassas was the absence of alternative educational opportunities for girls post-grade six. The Taliban have managed to close all forms of education venues for this category of students, both formal and informal, since their takeover in

Afghanistan. This leaves the Madrassa as one option for girls who are eager to obtain education under the Taliban regime.

When Taliban took over and suspended and banned girls from pursuing their education, I decided to enroll in Madrassa to continue my education in Islamic studies. - Fatima

Girls' strong desire to continue their education is another key reason for pursuing religious education, despite the challenges they face. Girls surveyed for this study predominately cited their parents' approval of enrollment and continuation of their education, as well as other family members such as elder sisters or brothers or an uncle supporting them in the process of investigating the target Madrassa for enrollment. This was indicative that female former students of public schools have immediate family support, as education for these girls is a collective investment. Zahra, currently enrolled in a local non-registered private Madrassa stated that, "it is better that a girl pursues her education in any way possible and learn something." The statement indicated a commitment to learning and a recognition of the importance of education in these girls' lives.

Furthermore, the study findings showed that the formal public-school students enrolled in Madrassas with a clear understanding of their reasons for pursuing their education in a religious education system. First, in the milieu of uncertainty about the future under the Taliban regime, community and social engagement in these seminaries are welcome factors for girls, who are mostly in rural communities or from relatively disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. Many participants mention that attending a Madrassa allows them to interact with peers and form supportive networks. Farzana, student of a private community-based Madrassa in the North of the country, noted, "it keeps us engaged socially when going to Madrassa daily," indicating that the Madrassa setting fosters connections among students. Tahera, studying in a Darul Ulum in Herat, explained, "It is obvious that the situation is bad for us. We are already in a dark era. Therefore, I give it a positive perspective. In my view, we have the opportunity to continue our education and there is an opportunity for us to make the best of it. It is better than nothing. This is a better alternative to sitting at home and feeling pathetic and depressed."

For another group of former public-school students who come from better socioeconomic backgrounds and urban settings in provincial centers of capital or major cities, the purpose of joining seminaries, according to the participants, was categorically for the certification purposes. The girls generally recognized the potential of obtaining certification that could allow them to pursue education pathways in private universities or obtain types of employment permissible under the regime. Zahra, a student in the capital city who was studying in a MOE-established Madrassa stated, "the Madrassa issues certification, and it is better to learn something instead of sitting idle." This illustrates a pragmatic approach to education, where girls seek credentials that may provide them with some level of professional opportunity in the future. Asyia, from a Western province who is currently enrolled in a public Darul Ulum, says:

We are not really interesting in subjects that they teach in this Madrassa, nor we are satisfied with their education system or their teachers. We don't even need or fine use for the education that they provide. The main reason for our attendance is to obtain their certification. Certification is our main goal for enrolling and studying in this Madrassa. - Asyia

The analysis on reasons for why students have enrolled in religious education institutions revealed that these female former public school students are joining seminaries mainly to avail themselves of the Madrassa system as a space for social engagement among peers and the pursuit of certification for future opportunities, despite the current restrictions and limitations on their education. Thus, these girls were, in a way, navigating the prevailing restrictions and barriers on their education. With the situation of girls under restrictive policies limiting their access to education and other opportunities now clearer, as well as their reasons for turning to religious educational institutions better understood, it is timely to explore their experiences and perspectives on the learning environment and education processes within these seminaries.

Systemic Discrimination of Girls in Religious Education System

This section deciphers the kind of content that girls were exposed to in these learning institutions. The kind of schooling process in the religious education centers were investigated, as well as the learning and teaching environment that is created by state-level gender-biased policies in education sector.

Taliban Severely Restrict Girls' Education Pathways

The Taliban, since their takeover of Kabul and resuming power in August 2021, have declared a covert social and political war against women's progress in Afghanistan. Over one hundred of their edicts issued are women related, mostly suspending and barring them from their fundamental rights like education, employment and public spaces (USIP). The process pervasively shut all venues of formal learning and education for girls and women in Afghanistan after grade six.

The regime has steadily restricted girls' education in the formal school system and systemically curtailed girls' options to solely to learning in religious education institutions. This limits girls' education to traditional and regime-controlled education offerings of Madrassa system focused exclusively on religious subjects. In December 2023, the Taliban stated that they would allow girls and women of all ages to enroll in and join religious education institutions that teach religious subjects (Dawi). This led to an overwhelming demand for enrollment in already established religious education institutions and an unprecedented proliferation of informal and nonformal religious education institutions commonly identified as Madrassa. The overwhelming demand for enrolment by girls has further pressured the existing infrastructure of the religious education system, in some instance leading to three shifts operating in a Madrassa to manage the influx of students. Tahera, a student of a Darul Ulum stated that "this year the number of enrollees in grade 10 were so many that they could not be accommodated into the available classes. I saw over 45 female students in just one class." In rural and semi-urban areas where formal Darul

Ulum do not exist already, there has been an exponential increase of informal and nonformal Madrassas. Often evolving around the agency of an entrepreneurial local educator to provide somewhat structured learning environment for thousands of girls deprived from pursuing education.

Thus, the ban on formal schooling of girls and women since their takeover and permission for learning and pursuit of religious education has led to unprecedented growth in the religious education sector at the cost of formal schooling system. This is at the core of Taliban's progressing restrictions of girls through education, which is further analyzed in the following subsection.

Denial of Multidisciplinary Learning Opportunity

Girls under the Taliban are denied the opportunity to engage in multidisciplinary learning and education. In the religious education institutions, girls' education and learning process are limited to the single discipline of a religious stream and subsequently very few future career options. Girls and women are deprived of a broad-based curriculum due to their gender, previously available to

"[Madrassa education] is valuable for me, but the knowledge and subjects do not really support human development at individual levels that enables one to think on your own." Tahera

them through formal school system. Boys in Afghanistan continue to pursue their education in public schools, higher education, and careers in various fields. According to the study participant, Asyia, from a Western province studying in an MOE-operated Darul Ulum, "the Taliban don't allow multidisciplinary learning because its gateway to opportunities. Languages like English and sciences like mathematics are enabling factors to access scholarship and the world." Another respondent, Fatima, from the Northern province and enrolled in an unregistered Madrassa reaffirmed, "restricting learning of multidisciplinary subject is to further restrict girls' ability to explore multiple career paths in the future and prevent them from pursuing higher education."

Informal seminaries or unregistered Madrassas that are established in neighborhoods through community and individual initiatives teach a limited number of subjects. They mostly concern girls and women's basic religious practice and daily obligations. These seminaries function under fear and intimidation of the de facto authority and risk punishment from the administration should they be found teaching any formal school subjects or anything outside religious education. Nilofur, enrolled in one of these tuition-based and private Madrassa, stated, "If anyone is caught teaching school subjects to female students, the center will be closed, and the administrator and teachers will be punished." This indicated the level of control and fear that the regime exerts on local informal and unregistered community-level initiatives that operate to facilitate girls' teaching in religious subjects.

*"...Other subjects in addition to religion subjects are English, Science and Social Sciences and History. But they are taught at basic level. They are not taught at level that is suitable for the grade that we are enrolled. For example, the subjects covered in English, Sciences and etc are those trained in grade six of the Maktab (formal school). I am in grade 10 now in this Madrassa.
- Tahera*

On the other hand, the formal Darul Ulum and Madares teach formal school subjects, with two caveats of fewer contract hours and basics topics that are below the competency of girls in their grade. In other words, the learners reported that they study lower secondary science content in higher grades. They reportedly expressed their dissatisfaction and grievance for inefficient use of their time and talent in the learning process in Madares. Elham, studying in a public Darul Ulum in Herat, reported that “*Moharaf* - formal school - subjects are not taught seriously”. The following quotes further elaborate on how formal school subjects are taught in these Madares.

“...in Darul Ulum, they have one subject called science that compiles Chemistry, Biology and Physics all together and is very abbreviated. We don't learn anything substantial from this one subject. The Social Science subject also is a compilation of History, Geography and Civilities all in one textbook.” Elham

The subjects that make education in this institution tough are the religious subjects. This aspect of education is very difficult for us, because its very first time for us to study religious subjects. Another very disturbing matter for me is that main Moharaf (public school) subjects are not taught seriously. Basically, the value placed on religious subjects is not given to formal school subjects. This makes education and the learning very difficult. - Elham

Students almost exclusively and fully understand that their seminary education at any level does not contribute to their future and professional ambitions. They all agree and know categorically that religious education and subjects in Madares only pave their way to become a teacher for the same subjects they receive training on or alternatively pursue career in the theology department of the Shariat Faculty of private or public universities; it is currently not permitted for girls under the regime to pursue higher education in any field at all. A student of a private Madrassa, Roqia, stated, “if students wish to pursue their higher education in Shariat (Islamic Theology) they can do that. Because in Madrassa, many of the subjects are religious subjects and these subjects, to my knowledge, can only lead your way to Shariat Faculty in the University. The breadth and depth of the religious subjects that we are trained on pave your way to pursue your higher education in Islamic Theology in the future.” This study also concluded that, while the education in Madares do pave the way for some female students to perfect their religious knowledge and fulfil their desire to professionally recite the Quran and be a learned person in Islam, it does not necessary mirror their deeper desire for life or future.

“Education in Madrassa makes me a learned person in Islam and it teaches the meaning of Quran. Earlier, I could recite Quran with great accuracy, now I am learning the meaning. I understand what the instructions for us as human beings are and how do we comply with the Law of God. Otherwise, this education is not sufficient, nor can it help me to get to my hopes that I always wanted to become a doctor. Yes, if I will learn the full meaning of Quran and become a Quran teacher and it can be source of an income.” - Gulsom

No single participant in this research expressed their desire to exclusively pursue religious scholarships or were inspired to pursue religious studies at higher level with authority in the field. On the contrary, they unanimously expressed their dissatisfaction with their inability to further their knowledge and scholarship in diverse fields and subjects because of the ban on girls' education. The following 11 quotes from 20 former public-school students interviewed for this study distinctively showcase limitations and restraints that exist in the religious education institutions due to their restrictive curriculum.

“Our current madrasa studies are not enough at all for journalism or any other profession or officer work.”

“This is valuable for me, but the knowledge and subjects do not really support human development at individual levels that enables one to think on your own.”

“... in Madrassa not many useful subjects are taught.”

“Certification from the Madrassa will only allow us to study Shariat (Religious Theology) at the university level, not the field of my own choice.”

“Except for becoming a teacher of a Madrassa. We can't be doctors, judges, or engineers...”

“The instructions for us as human beings and how do we comply with the law of God. Otherwise, this education is not sufficient or can it help me...”

“Fine! We do appreciate learning Islamic subjects, but we want to learn physics and other subjects at higher level and progressively.”

“They (subjects) are good, but they won't help me achieve my dream.”

“Just so they are not idle, they don't waste their time, then they turn to religious education institutions.”

“I don't want to be tight to one field of study like Shariat.”

“I attend it because we don’t have any other kind of education or learning opportunity in our area.”

Institutional Discrimination in Seminaries

Multiple limitations and restrictions apply to girls enrolled into religious education institutions as part of their education process that amount to gender based institutional level discrimination. The existing and newly established religious education institutions cannot accommodate the influx of female students despite the exponential proliferation of these centers across the country. The existing religious education centers are over capacity and those newly established are irregular and ad hoc in their nature. Further, significant barriers to mobility of girls, primarily due to restrictive policies and already biased societal norms further limit girls’ ability to access education in these religious education centers. For instance, Mahnaz noted that “girls are restricted to their neighborhood and can only attend Madrassa in certain hours,” indicating a lack of access. This reflects an institutional framework that limits girls’ mobility and educational prospects both in general as state policy and as well as in religious scholarships. Girls culturally are not permitted to travel long distances or commute for education or other purposes. Shutting formal school system deprives them of the one opportunity available to them next door as part of past 20 years of education development strategy. Another participant from Khost province mentions that there is only one female Madrassa in their province that enrolls women so girls in villages mostly have to rely on small home-based Madrassa that are highly unregulated and ad hoc in their institutional structure.

“There are Madrassas that are mainly for boys and girls can attend some classes on the side. Boys are able to go to all kinds of education institutions in any hour of the day or night. Girls are only restricted to their neighborhoods and can only attend Madrassa in certain hours. Boys can even enroll in dormitories. Girls are limited to make best of the one-hour time they are given in Madrassa and make best of this opportunity.” - Mahnaz

“Now the Darul Ulum is teaching in three shifts. Morning shift, its girls from grade 1 to 14th. Middle day shift is for middle grade boys and late afternoon shift is for the adolescent boys.” Tahera’s statement highlighted the unequal distribution of shifts between girls and boys in their Darul Ulum in Herat. Tahera also reported that the influx of female students in this Darul Ulum was evident from overcrowded classes in the beginning of the academic year. Another student of Darul Ulum in Herat province said, “This year the number of female enrollees in grade 10 were so many that they could not be accommodated into the available classes. I started this year, and I saw that every class had close to or over 45 female students. During the summer the classes

were super congested, and the space was very small. There weren't enough chairs and tables either." The limited shifts for girls despite the demand for enrollment in seminaries shed light on the lack of capacity in these seminaries that result into unequal treatment and limited opportunities for girls in the already biased and gender insensitive education institutions.

In the same Darul Ulum in Herat, this former public-school student reported that when girls make their way to obtain admission in religious education institutions their broad public-school achievements are undermined. This practice is reported by all female students who are currently enrolled in formal public seminaries, established by the Ministry of Education. This is mainly done for the purpose of curbing the influx of female students and as well as devaluation of girls' former education achievement compared to religious education.

"I should have start 12 grade this year. However, the directive was issued saying that everyone who wish to enroll should take grade 9 entrance exam and if they pass that examination then they will be enrolled into 10th grade of this Madrassa or they will start from grade 9. No one was allowed to take their grade exam as per their Maktab (public school) grading. Everyone was required to take grade 9 examination. Even those who have studied grade 12 until mid-term, they should take grade 9 examination for this Madrassa and would be only allowed to sit in 10th grade if they pass the exam, otherwise, they will start from 9th grade." - Tahera

In the religious education system, girls' broad achievements are undermined differently than in private religious education institutions, where seminaries have the liberty of selecting subjects beyond the requirement of the Ministry of Education. Those additional regular subjects are not recognized in the certification process by the Ministry of Education for these female students. They receive a non-MOE-certified statement mentioning the credit hours of training they received in those non-religious subjects without formal recognition or certification. Roqia, a former public-school grade 9 student from Kabul who has joined private Madrassa this academic year, reported, "This Madrassa will only certify religious subjects training in their 12-grade certificate. Not the Maktab or regular school subjects that we study on daily basis in this exact Madrassa." Tahera, who is grade 10 from Herat province, currently enrolled in a Darul Ulum and quoted earlier, also reports institutional practices that devalue formal learning and inadequate recognition of modern subjects for girls. Tahera reported, "there are subjects that I like, and they are taught in this Madrassa. But I would have liked to focus on those subjects a lot more than is required in the Madrassa teaching plan now. I wish those subjects were taught at advanced levels suitable for my grade and we train more hours than what allocated in this Madrassa." In other words, girls are learning the regular subjects in MOE-established seminaries at a very basic level where these subjects are permissible; again, Tahera reports on specific subjects, saying, "Other subjects in addition to religion subjects are English, Science and Social Sciences and History. But they are taught at basic level. They are not taught at level that is suitable for the grade that

we are enrolled”. Roqia, from a private Madrassa, reports a similar situation on priority being given to religious subjects, and their excessive number.

“Arabic is one of the religion subjects. All Moharaf subjects are treated completely separately. They are not many taught in the Madrassa either compared to the religion subjects. At the end, the Madrassa will only issue a certificate that certifies religion subjects only, they will not state Maharaf subjects.” - Roqia

The analysis shows the pattern of institutional discrimination against girls in education, marked by restricted access and further exacerbated by a narrow curriculum and authorities’ reluctance to recognize girls’ learning beyond religious subjects as a system of institutional discrimination against girls’ education. Furthermore, inadequate acknowledgment of past achievements and forcing girls to start from one specific grade categorically discredits the talent and knowledge compiled through their years of schooling in formal public schools. Concurrently, the transition from a coherent and structured path in the formal education system for these girls to fragmented and disjointed learning pathways in the religious education system further hinders these girls’ intellectual and self-development, and ultimately their potential prospects, as a result of state gender-biased policies in education.

Dogmatic Indoctrination of Women and Girls

The regulatory and education framework in religious education institutions fosters the dogmatic indoctrination of women and girls, ushering former public-school girls to align with the Taliban’s ideologically permissible role for women in society. This conformity to the Taliban’s doctrine was witnessed in the data through participants’ experience of the subversion process of promoting submissiveness, limiting aspirations, and actively suppressing students’ agency and freedom.

Ideological Indoctrination of Women and Girls

Girls and women in Afghanistan are restricted to religious education institutions. A closer look at girls' education experiences in these institutions shows that learning is predominately focused on strengthening religious knowledge and convictions, according to majority of interviewed female students currently enrolled in these seminaries. This in turn strictly and solely allows conformity to the Taliban's ideal view of women's and girls' roles in society. The Taliban education framework prioritizes religious instructions over a comprehensive education in the religious stream, thus limiting girls' and women's education prospects. Asyia, a 10th grader enrolled in public a Darul Ulum in Herat, expressed that, "we don't have that excitement and motivation like before. Going to Madrassa is a compulsory thing, we are forced to have one kind of education and way of learning. Subjects taught in Madrassa are very limited in their scope and prospect. Madrassa system is not student centric, and priority is not to nurture talent among girls." This quote emphasizes how the Madrassa system does not prioritize nurturing girls' talents, which is crucial for their empowerment and autonomy.

"The fear that I have is that girls' future prospects are very dark. Its unimaginable. I think the future generation of girls would only be able to carry with their ordinary lives at best. Their function would be limited to bringing children, serving their husband, maintain a household, or even worse they may get married at a younger age. Once they get married then their life prospects are associated with children, marriage and household conditions. Every day, regular and ordinary things. There is no prospect in the future from here." Pashton

The Madrassa education predominately focuses on strengthening students' religious convictions; as a local tuition-based *Madrassa* student, Fatima from Faryab stated, "they are more interested in the conviction of students than the prospect of their future. There is nothing relevant to modern subjects or preparing students for the future." While the girls understand and accept this as the purpose of religious education, they are not entirely accepting of this kind of education; they expressed their reservations, such as another female student, Pashton, in a local tuition-based Madrassa elaborated: "there are many other important things that enables a human being to pursue dignity and better future. We may be complete through the education of a Madrassa from religious perspective, but for the humanity, our society and the world community overall, Madrassa alone does not serve us at all." This shows Afghan women's desire for inclusive and comprehensive education to meet the demands of their time and society, given that the Taliban's permitted education framework for girls makes zero contribution to those needs and aspirations.

We had many dreams and hopes for the future. But those dreams and hopes are gone now. Now those who graduate from Madrassas they can't have professional career or prospects. Madrassa only educates you on education and makes you a learned person on religious matters. Shazia

Girls' experience in current religious education institutions showed a void of, and their desire for, a well-rounded education that prepares them for future careers or incorporates modern subjects. This was prevalent in all kinds of seminaries involved in this study. The education girls received in these institutions is either not sufficient or does not allow women's scholarship to

develop, thus curbing girls' capacity to be future productive citizens capable of contributing to the well-being of their society, as well as the development of the country.

Education and Learning Dichotomy in Madares

Here, we explore the education and learning dynamics in Madares as part of the indoctrination process of girls in these religious education institutions. The education atmosphere in Madares were structured and rigid, with strict adherence to schedules and learning plans. Sonam, a female student enrolled in one of these seminaries, described education as being, "limited to learning letters and words," or "strictly rote learning of religious script and subjects," or "very conservative and there are a lot of restrictions on students." Other students' descriptions of learning in Madares were "severe restrictions" in "a very closed environment and restricted for learning"; "one way education process and specific to learning everything by letter." The study also observed that these qualities were more specific to conservative Madares that are private and locally established, or tuition based. These Madares were within the neighborhood of the students, and came about because of the goodwill of a former teacher or a community initiative, and entertained extreme fear that if they deviate and teach any other subject but religion, then their establishment will be forced to close.

"We did propose to the administration to include Maktab subjects and hire suitable teachers for those subjects. We were told that the Taliban won't allow teaching of those subjects in the Madrassa, and we cannot include them. They were concerned that if we teach non-Islamic subjects, the Taliban will close our Madrassa. Therefore, they never agreed to including regular Maktab subjects in our learning plan." – Nilfour

Education happens in an environment lacking interaction and inclusiveness in these seminaries. Mahnaz explained that "The Madrassa is a very closed environment and restricted for learning. The education process is also not inclusive, meaning there isn't much happening beyond just receiving information and learning it. You just learn and that's it." Students report their absolute inability to interact with administration to understanding basic logic for some subjects that they learn, and the student do not see the benefit of or logic to their study.

"No, we never objected or asked why we are studying Urdu. They don't have proper administration that can facilitate this kind of interaction. There is a Mofti (a scholar) who is not physically present in the Madrassa. Teachers are there but we can't ask them anything or make inquiries. They are strict and often times very aggressive. We can't ask questions or make inquiries. We follow instructions and do whatever we are directed to do." – Shazia

Control and compliance in Madrassas are strictly regulated, especially pertaining behavior and dress code, which are enforced by the administrator and supervised by the Taliban.

“Madrassa is a lot more conservative in their practice compared to high school and formal schools. Obviously, because it’s a Madrassa and religious education institution so it’s a lot more conservative. For example, the clothes or uniform is very conservative, even talking. Some basic things that were OK in high school are not part of the education system here in the Madrassa.”
- Zahra

The learning process in Madares was one sided, rote learning and most often lacked intellectual engagement and dialogues that are a preliminary part of the education process. These dictation and induction processes in learning religious subjects are common modes of learning in the current situation and often the administration is intimidated and fear the closure of their institution if they do not comply with the strictest form of learning process. There are no regulations that dictate the mode of education and administration process; therefore, a lot of madrassas start with the strictest standard, teaching exclusively religious subjects, complying with the strictest dress code and exercising severe segregation without any deviation, for fear of being caught by the Taliban in a random spot check on their institutions. Girls’ education in these institutions is ad hoc, irregular and void of any standard structure of learning and teaching that remotely resembles the education system in which they were previously involved.

Faryab province, compared to Kabul and Mazar, is a small province. Unfortunately, learning opportunities of modern subjects for girls in private tuition course and centers is very limited. Therefore, we are not able to pursue our education. There are few in-house education centers, but they charge fees, which we are not able to attend due to economic status of our families. This is a binding constrain for all girls who were able to benefit from free education in public schools. Fatima

Compounded Structural Barriers to Girls’ Education

In Afghanistan, multifaceted barriers existed to girls’ education and empowerment prior to the Taliban’s takeover. Girls’ education and development were hindered due to binding constraints influenced by social and cultural factors, as well as the further influence of family socioeconomic conditions, e.g., whether the girl lives in urban or rural communities. These were the levers that further supported the Taliban’s egregious treatment of women and girls in education and make it easy for them to apply small amounts of pressure to inflict great damage and ultimately impose greater restraints on girls’ development societally.

One of the immediate structural barriers to girls’ education is a lack of access to free public education. Restrictions on education institutions, particularly the public schooling system, means

that girls are deprived of education systemically, as it was the only option for the vast majority of girls to obtain free and accessible education. Zala, currently studying in a private Madrassa, expressed that “the girls who used to study in free government schools Maktab has bigger issues as all of them cannot enroll in these Madares as they are private and charge fees.” Financial constraints and economic barriers play a significant role in limiting girls’ educational opportunities in Afghanistan, limiting them exclusively to free and accessible public education. In the absence of a free public school system, family economic and financial limitations bar girls from opportunities in the form of private schooling and private tuition to supplement their learning process. Fatima stated, “the economic status of our families is such that we can’t attend these centers.” Now that public education is banned for girls, the alternative private education for girls is inaccessible to many due to their financial situation. For example, girls living in rural and third-tier provinces like Faryab and the Spinboldak district of Kandahar are less likely to be able to access technology or resources like electricity and internet to facilitate their learning.

Institutional barriers to girls’ education are multifaceted, encompassing restricted access to education institutions, financial constraints of families and inaccessible resources like internet and electricity. These barriers collectively hinder girls’ educational opportunities and perpetuate inequality in access to education, and therefore amplify the impact and effect of girls’ education as banned by the regime.

VI. Conclusion

In Afghanistan, girls who are inspired to continue their education are forced into limited and rigid learning and education institutions in seminaries under the Taliban. The educational and institutional frameworks of the religious education system serve as an extension of the regime's ideological architecture, institutionally and structurally discriminating against girls in education based on their gender. Afghan girls turn to religious education to alleviate their sense of ostracization and loss of identity due to their prohibition from public education, and are faced with a multitude of discrimination practices in the religious education system.

Former public-school students enrolled in formal MOE religious education institutions are categorically enrolled into lower grades irrespective of their public-school credentials. The non-religious subjects in these institutions are limited in number, rudimentary in level and multiple grades below the competency of former public-school grades. The extensive religious curriculum taught in formal MOE seminaries —permissible up to grade 14—does not lead to high academic pursuits for women due to the Taliban's ban on female access to higher education. The situation in private seminaries where female students are taught public school subjects means that they do not receive formal certification for their learning of non-religious subjects, as authorities prohibit girls' education outside of religious subjects. The community-based seminaries serving girls in neighborhoods based on demand exclusively focus on basic religious subjects which mainly concern the individual's daily religious practice and rudimentary knowledge of the religion with respect to girls' convictions. Nationwide, girls and women are forced into the single education pathway of religious education and its inequitable structures of power and knowledge, resulting in the Taliban's monolithic ideology surviving and encountering no resistance fundamentally.

Furthermore, mass indoctrination is evident in the education environment in the seminaries, as they are restrictive, conservative and void of critical thinking and constructive engagement between instructors and students. Learning methods were described as involving memorization through repetition and no exchange or dialogue with the instructor or among peers, ordaining girls as the recipients of information and facts and failing to prompt deeper understanding and critical thinking of the subject matters, similar to the Taliban's dogmatic belief on gender roles. The Taliban have deprived girls and future women of a broad-based curriculum previously available to them nationwide through public schools due to their gender. Concurrently, the transition from a coherent and structured path in the formal education system for these girls to fragmented and disjointed learning pathways has hindered their intellectual and structural development and ultimately their potential prospects. Ultimately, the Taliban are depriving women, girls, and through them the society of multidisciplinary knowledge, aspiration and pathways to self-reliance, in order to fit their definition of womanhood and cement the group's ideology of political dominance.

Conformity to the Taliban's doctrine through the religious education institutions was witnessed through the subversion process of promoting submissiveness, limiting aspirations, and actively suppressing students' agency and freedom. The regulatory and education frameworks in religious education institutions foster the dogmatic indoctrination of women and girls, aligning them with

the Taliban's ideologically permitted role for women in society. In and through education, the Taliban attempt to create a society in their own image, molding the next generation to align with their belief system and uphold the social and cultural norms they deem acceptable. It can be said that the Taliban, through these religious institutions where they hold authority and control, are building the foundations of submissive constituents.

The dictation- and induction-based learning system in seminaries means that girls are inevitably forced to daily practice of and compliance with the specific interpretations of Islam, particularly concerning the ideological status of women and girls and their permitted roles and prospects in view of the Taliban, if they wish to continue their education. Finally, institutional barriers to girls' education are multifaceted, encompassing restricted access to education institutions, the financial constraints of families, and inaccessible resources like internet and electricity. These barriers collectively hinder girls' educational opportunities and perpetuate inequality in access to education, and therefore amplify the impact and effect of girls' education being banned by the regime. Ultimately, isolating Afghan girls to the restrictive option of religious education comes at the cost of their future aspirations and prospects to be able citizens.

The discrimination against and severe restriction of girls from formal education and their impact are stark and fundamentally devastating for the society as a whole. Clipping girls' inspiration, and indoctrination of their minds, will have an irreversible impact on society and further shroud Afghan society in the patriarchal ill-practice of gender discrimination and bias.

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