



RESEARCH REPORT

Schooling Under the Taliban Era: Human Rights Violations in Education and Their Long-Term Impact on Peace in Afghanistan

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Research Report

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1. Introduction and Methodology

The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan occurred in 2022, and since then, the de facto government's education policies have reportedly violated the right to education. As a result, the status of education, particularly school education, has worsened dramatically, with millions of children lacking access to education. At present, Afghanistan is the only country in the world where girls are not allowed to receive formal education beyond primary school. According to statistics reported by OCHA in December 2023, girls under the age of 12 are permitted to go to school; however, enrolment in primary education has decreased from 6.8 million in 2019 to 5.7 million in 2023.¹ This problem represents a significant threat to the prospects of an entire generation, as well as to the country's long-term peace, and has received widespread condemnation from both national and international sources (see, e.g., Human Rights Watch 2023; Nasir, 2025; Rawadari, 2024). However, there has been limited attention devoted to examining schooling under the Taliban from a human rights and violence perspective.

This research combines Tomasevski's (2001) 4As framework,² and Galtung's (1969) violence triangle,³ using them as analytical lenses, and drawing on both primary and secondary data to examine human rights violations in school education under the Taliban and their implications for stability and peace in Afghanistan. The findings indicate that the Taliban is systematically violating the right to education, reintroducing violence in schools, and using indoctrination as a tool to implement their ideology and to consolidate long-term power and control in the country. The research presents first-hand insights into the effects of the Taliban's education policies, practices, and objectives and analyses them through established theoretical frameworks.

The author uses an exploratory qualitative research design to investigate the main research question: **What human rights violations occur in school education under the Taliban, and what are their long-term impacts on peace in Afghanistan?** As part of this, the author developed three separate semi-structured interview guides for different participant groups.

¹ For an overview of the situation of the right to education in Afghanistan see—among others—Protecting the Right to Education for All Afghans – UNESCO's Emergency Response and, UNESCO & UNICEF, Afghanistan Education Situation Report 2025.

² See “4As” framework—availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability—developed by former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, Katarina Tomasevski.

³ See the framework of Johan Galtung's “violence triangle,” which encompasses three interconnected forms: direct, structural (indirect), and cultural violence.

The author gathered secondary data from a range of sources, including books, academic journals, organisational reports, news articles, government records, and online materials. Subsequently, 65 semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers, parents, high school students, and human rights and education defenders⁴ in nine provinces of Afghanistan—Bamyan, Farah, Herat, Kabul, Kunduz, Mazar-e-Sharif, Nangarhar, and Sheberghan—between May 2025 and November 2025.

Over half of the respondents (58%) were female, and 42% were male, with ages ranging from 17 to 54 years. Among the interviewees, 24 were teachers, 21 parents, 17 experts, and 3 high school students. The author used a snowball sampling strategy to identify participants and made initial contacts through personal and professional networks. These key informants then referred other participants to the study.

The research encountered numerous obstacles. Local researchers were in constant fear for their personal safety and potential prosecution by the Taliban, which made their work quite challenging, particularly for the female researcher. The time difference, poor internet connectivity, and the unstable security situation also made it difficult for the author to attend all the interviews. Furthermore, a 48-hour nationwide internet and telecommunications shutdown imposed by the Taliban in Afghanistan in September 2025 significantly disrupted the data collection process.⁵

Where possible, the author attended the interviews online; where this was not possible, local researchers conducted them. The interviews were conducted in the national languages, Dari or Pashto. Where possible, interviews were audio recorded, and detailed notes were taken when recording was not feasible. All interviews were afterwards transcribed in both English and the original language (Dari or Pashto) and analysed using a thematic qualitative approach. The analysis was guided by Tomasevski's 4As framework and Galtung's violence triangle as analytical lenses, while also allowing patterns and meanings to emerge inductively from the data.

To ensure credibility and validity, pattern matching and triangulation were used to cross-verify interview data against secondary materials, including policy documents, reports, and media coverage. This multi-layered analytical process ensured both theoretical alignment and empirical rigor, enabling

⁴ Some of the human rights and education defenders interviewed are residing in Afghanistan, while others live in exile.

⁵ See Human Rights Watch, "Afghanistan: Internet Shutdowns Imperil Rights," October 1, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/10/01/afghanistan-internet-shutdowns-imperil-rights>

a comprehensive understanding of the Taliban's violence in education and its implications for the future peace and stability of Afghanistan.

The research is organised as follows: after this introductory chapter, Chapter two provides the contextual background of education in Afghanistan, presenting an overview of modern and religious education, followed by an examination of Taliban violence in education during 1996–2001 and their control of and violence in the education sector from 2001 to 2021. Chapter three discusses schooling under the Taliban, violence in education, and their long-term impact on peace and stability in the country. Chapter four analyses and interprets the findings in light of the research questions, connecting them to the theoretical framework. The final chapter presents a discussion, implications for theory, policy, and practice, suggestions for future research, a conclusion, and proposed recommendations.

2. Context and Background

In Afghanistan, the term *maktab* refers to schools that offer modern education. *School education* spans 12 years and is structured into primary, secondary, and high school levels. A child who begins schooling at the age of six is expected to complete the full 12 years of education by the time they reach eighteen.⁶ Both public and private institutions provide school education in Afghanistan. Public schools are free of charge, whereas private schools charge tuition fees that may vary across institutions, as there is no standardised fee structure. However, in Afghanistan's education sector, institutions that offer religious education, referred to as “madrasas,” also play an important role.

This research primarily focuses on schools or *maktab*, institutions that provide general education. However, institutions of religious education, or madrasas, are also given specific attention, as they have assumed an increasingly significant role under the Taliban administration, and in practice it has become an alternative educational system that has starting to be substituted for the formal education system.

2.1. An overview of Modern and Religious Education in Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, religious education originally developed in line with development trajectories observed throughout the Persianate regions. However, the country began to shift its cultural, political, and social

⁶ See Education Policy and Data Center (EPDC), 2015, June; Afghanistan's independence in 1919 (Samady 2013, p. 4). Spotlight on Afghanistan.

orientation after the Safavids built a Shi'a dynasty in Iran and as Western colonial enterprises reshaped the Indian subcontinent. Geographically isolated from the Arab-Sunni-Muslim sphere by Safavid Iran and increasingly influenced by the political and cultural hub of British India, Afghanistan gradually oriented itself toward the subcontinent. Later, as Afghans began migrating to India and subsequently to Pakistan for Islamic education, the Deobandi curriculum extended throughout southern and eastern Afghanistan (Rahimi & Watkins, 2025, p. 5). Until the early twentieth century, education in Afghanistan was primarily provided by madrasas, mosques, and home-based instructors. However, in 1903, Amir Habibullah Khan founded Habibia High School, marking the beginning of modern schooling in the country. Efforts to modernise education expanded in the 1920s following Afghanistan's independence in 1919 (Samady, 2013, p. 2). Nevertheless, soon these efforts sparked resistance from conservative factions who saw schooling as a threat to traditional norms (Barfield, 2010).

Many of the extremist groups that opposed modern education in Afghanistan in the early 1920s had been educated in Deobandi madrasa, particularly after the establishment of the first girls' high school, *Mastorat*, in 1920 by Amanullah Khan's wife, Queen Soraya Tarzi. These groups resisted Amanullah Khan's educational policies and reforms, leading to conflict. Similarly, they resisted ideas originating from outside the country, viewing them as threats to their political power. Afghanistan during Amanullah Khan's regime was very much disconnected from the global world, and the Mullahs (clerics) held social power. By using religious texts and institutions, they stood against Amanullah Khan's government, contributed to the collapse of the monarchy, took control of the schools, and brought Bacha-e-Saqqao into power, who turned everything upside down (Interview with Expert). Habibullah Allah Kalakani (February–August 1929), known as Bacha-e-Saqqao, came to power and, within the nine months of his rule, shut down the schools (Hasht-E Subh, 2023). In one of his speeches, he said, "There is no need to go to school anymore, just enjoy."⁷

After Kalakani, Nader Shah (1929–1933) came to power and opposed reforms, banning girls' schools and women's organisations. After his assassination, his son, Zahir Shah (1933–1973), assumed power and gradually allowed reforms to resume (Hasht-E Subh, 2023). Following the adoption of the 1964 constitution, the policy was to gradually develop the education system while not triggering the Mullahs (Muslim Clerics). Education slowly moved from ideology between 1963 and 1972 (Interview with

⁷ Interview with respondent, May 19, 2025

Expert). However, during the Communist regime (1978–1992), schools became ideological battlegrounds and targets of violence for the Mujahedin, who viewed secular education as anti-Islamic and a symbol of Soviet influence (Human Rights Watch, 2006; Giustozzi & Franco, 2011). After 1992, under President Burhanuddin Rabbani’s government, attempts to merge secular and religious curricula further politicised education. Schools became militarised spaces in which weapons were common, and teachers were often unqualified (Giustozzi, 2010).

2.2. The Taliban Violence in Education during 1996–2001

During the Taliban’s first rule (1996–2001), they imposed a strict religious model that banned girls’ education and prioritised religious indoctrination. This era institutionalised gender segregation and laid the foundation for the systematic exclusion of women and girls from education (Giustozzi, 2010). Schools throughout Afghanistan used the jihadist textbooks, which included the images of Kalashnikovs and tanks instead of apples and oranges to teach the alphabet and numbers to children.⁸ These textbooks were funded by USAID and Saudi Arabia during the mid- to late 1980s in Peshawar and were distributed to schoolchildren in Afghanistan from the mid-1980s until the mid-2000s (El Edroos, 2011; Burde, 2014, p. 56). Between 1996 and 2001, the jihadist textbooks served as a key ideological tool of the Taliban, encouraging violence against Afghan Muslims deemed insufficiently observant and fostering broader public support for militancy and violence (ibid, p. 59).

Interviewees described education under the first Taliban rule (1996–2001) as highly hierarchical and authoritarian, affecting both girls and boys. Schools were structured to enforce top-down control, in which teachers exercised absolute authority, and students were not allowed to think critically. Instead, students were expected to memorise and follow instructions without question. They described this as a profound form of structural and cultural violence, where the very process of learning was constrained and intellectual development suppressed. One respondent noted:

It was a dictatorship, where education lost its true purpose, which is to encourage thinking, critical analysis, and creativity. Under the dictatorship, ideology was prioritized, the ruler imposed rules, and there was no freedom of speech, critical thinking, or sharing of ideas.⁹

⁸ Read more about the jihadist textbooks in Craig Davis’s article, “‘A’ Is for Allah, ‘J’ Is for Jihad,” *World Policy Journal*, 19(1), Spring 2002, pp. 90–94. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40209794>

⁹ Interview with respondent, May 12, 2025

A female expert, who was banned from attending school as a child, shared her experience:

Education under the first Taliban regime was bleak and oppressive. Girls like me were completely forbidden from attending school, while boys were limited to religious instruction. Many schools were closed, and the education system was in complete disarray. Literacy rates plummeted, and an entire generation of children was denied the opportunity to learn and grow. I remember feeling hopeless and frustrated, watching my brother and neighbors continue their studies. At the same time, I was left behind, dreaming of a future where I could learn and contribute to my country. The policies of that time robbed us of our childhoods and our futures.¹⁰

One parent (a father), who attended school as a child during the first Taliban rule, recalled his experience and mentioned;

I started first grade during the first Taliban regime. We had only three books: the Qur'an, Dari, and Pashto. Most of our lessons focused on weapons and jihad. Our teacher had a frightening appearance, with long hair and a long black beard. Every morning, we lined up, sang, recited the Qur'an, and then went to class. The teacher forced us to sit facing the corner near the stove, and we were not allowed to speak or ask questions. Our necks hurt, but we dared not move. One day, I spoke to my classmate. The teacher overheard us and beat us severely with a leather stick until his turban fell off and his hair and beard were soaked with sweat.¹¹

Another parent (a father) shared his early school experience during the first Taliban rule and stated:

I remember my early school days during the first Taliban rule. Instead of receiving a proper education, we spent much of our time playing football and volleyball. There were many problems. Our classroom windows had no glass, and there was no furniture; we brought small mats from home and sat on them. There was little real education, and both the curriculum and the teachers were extremely rigid and ideological. Violence and humiliation were common. It was a very difficult time.¹²

In summary, during the Taliban's first rule (1996–2001), the education system in Afghanistan was very much focused on strict religious and ideological indoctrination. Gender segregation was institutionalised, and women and girls were systematically excluded from education. The Taliban administration used Jihadist textbooks as key ideological tools, promoting militarised imagery and narratives that encouraged violence and reinforced extremist interpretations of religion.

Interviewees described the education system of that era as authoritarian, hierarchical, and suppressive. Schools operated under strict top-down control, in which critical thinking, creativity, and freedom of

¹⁰ Interview with respondent, May 12, 2025

¹¹ Interview with respondent, May 22, 2025

¹² Interview with respondent, September 22, 2025

expression were discouraged. Students were expected to memorise and obey without question, and corporal punishment, fear, and humiliation were common. Girls were entirely denied access to schooling, while boys' education was largely limited to religious instruction. Participants characterised this period as one marked by structural and cultural violence, resulting in declining literacy rates, widespread school closures, and the loss of educational opportunities for an entire generation.

2.3. The Taliban control and violence in education during 2001–2021

Following the Taliban's fall in 2001, the Republic government, with international support, sought to rebuild the education system and reintroduce education for all children (Giustozzi & Franco, 2011). However, deep mistrust between local communities and the government persisted. In an effort to appease conservative groups, the Ministry of Education reinforced teaching of Islamic subjects within the national curriculum, commissioning new religious textbooks and employing mullahs as teachers (Giustozzi, 2010). Despite these efforts, education remained a contested terrain caught between modernisation and religious conservatism. According to reports by the Long War Journal, the balance of power between the Republic government and the Taliban fluctuated significantly over the period from 2001 to 2021. The Republic government of Afghanistan continuously struggled to hold territory and defend population centres, while the Taliban continued to contest districts (Roggio 2000–2021). The Taliban exploited this tension, using attacks on schools, teachers, and students as part of their broader insurgency strategy (Royall, 2013).

The Taliban used various forms of violence and coercion to exert control over education during the transitional and Republic periods from 2001 to 2022. Their actions included attacking students and schools, bombing and burning educational facilities, and, particularly in areas under their influence, closing schools, prohibiting girls from attending classes, and restricting subjects such as Afghan constitutional and civic education, while prioritising religious instruction in line with their ideological agenda. One respondent described this policy in detail:

The Taliban's policy during the Republic period had two phases. Until 2010, they opposed modern education altogether, for both girls and boys. After 2010 and until 2020, their approach shifted slightly regarding boys' education, but they required schools under their influence to promote their ideology. They restricted subjects such as the Afghan constitution and civic education, while increasing religious instruction aligned with their views. In some areas, they actively promoted their narratives in classrooms. Between 2010 and 2021, in

approximately 70 districts under Taliban control, social studies were eliminated, and religious education, according to their interpretation, was expanded.¹³

Interviewees reported that during 2001–2021, the Taliban attacked students and bombed and burned schools in the urban areas. However, in the rural areas where they had greater control, they closed schools in some districts and did not allow students, especially girls, to attend. In other districts, they determined what should be taught in schools. One expert who worked with community-based education in Nangarhar mentioned:

The Taliban did not have control in Jalalabad city; however, in some districts, where we didn't have access, the education method and teaching subjects were totally different. According to a survey that we conducted, Jihadist textbooks and curricula were implemented in 16 districts, including Shinwari, Achin, Hask Mina, and Laghar Koh. For example, one of the books they used was on Jihad (holy war), another was a Pashto language textbook that was used during the first Taliban rule. These books shaped children's mindsets toward violence and reinforced negative and militant perspectives.¹⁴

A former female teacher in Sheberghan city, Jowzjan province, who was suspended from her position after the Taliban assumed power and complained of having no economic support and struggling to provide for her family, stated:

During 2001–2021, the Taliban controlled several districts in Jowzjan province. For example, in the Darzab district, they reportedly went to schools on teachers' paydays and extorted 1000 or 2000 Afghanis from each teacher's salary. In another district, Qarqeen, which we visited during the elections, there was a well-maintained and attractive school building, but no students. When I asked why the school was empty, residents explained that the Taliban are not allowing anyone to attend school there.¹⁵

In summary, after the Taliban's fall in 2001, the Republic government, with support from the international community, sought to rebuild and expand the education system. However, education remained a contested space between modernisation efforts and religious conservatism. Between 2001 and 2021, the Taliban continued to influence and disrupt education by attacking schools in urban areas and exerting ideological and administrative control in rural districts, where they closed schools, especially for girls, or reshaped curricula to align with their views. As a result, insecurity, coercion, and ideological interference continued to undermine the stability and quality of education.

¹³ Interview with respondent, May 19, 2025

¹⁴ Interview with respondent, October 3, 2025

¹⁵ Interview with respondent, September 1, 2025

3. Schooling under the Current Taliban Rule

In August 2021, the Taliban reassumed power in Afghanistan for the second time, significantly undermining the education system nationwide. By September 2021, they prohibited girls from attending secondary school. Thereafter, the education provided to boys in schools was re-shaped to align with the de facto authority's ideological framework, incorporating elements of indoctrination (Human Rights Watch 2023, p. 5; Nasir, 2025).

The interviews revealed a consistent concern among participants regarding the deteriorating state of education and violence in schools in Afghanistan since the Taliban's return to power. These concerns are reinforced by the Afghanistan Education Situation Report 2025,¹⁶ which reports that over 90 percent of 10-year-olds in the country are unable to read a simple text, indicating what experts describe as "schooling without learning."

3.1. Systematically Restricting Girls from Formal Education

Banning girls' education beyond sixth grade by the Taliban has raised serious concerns at both the national and international levels, as each passing day places an entire generation of Afghan girls further behind (Rahmani, 2023). The respondents also expressed extreme concerns regarding the situation of school education, especially girls' education, since the Taliban regained power. One education and human rights activist stated:

The current state of school education in Afghanistan is heartbreaking and extremely concerning. Since the Taliban regained power in August 2021, access to quality education has been almost entirely taken away from millions of children, especially girls and women. The education system is in ruins, many schools remain closed, and those that are open operate under oppressive restrictions.¹⁷

The findings reveal that the Taliban's restriction imposed on girls' formal schooling caused a significant setback compared to the progress that had been made in the past twenty years. Before the Taliban regained power, girls' access to education was gradually advancing.¹⁸ School enrolment had increased, and the state spent around \$17 per capita, more than 35 billion afghani every year, on school education. This was largely due to significant investment by the international community, which

¹⁶ UNESCO & UNICEF, Afghanistan Education Situation Report 2025.

¹⁷ Interview with respondent, May 12, 2025

¹⁸ World Bank, Education statistics (EdStats): Afghanistan.

funded over half of state education (World Bank, 2019; Ministry of Finance, 2019; Amiri & Jackson, 2021, p. 9). In 2019, for the first time, the country adopted the Girls Education Policy (GEP), aimed at enhancing women's literacy and access to education nationwide. In an effort to increase the number of female students, the Ministry of Education launched a program to hire 30,000 female teachers nationwide. This progress came to an abrupt halt when the Taliban assumed power and immediately prohibited girls from secondary education, cancelling educational policies, including the GEP. Afghanistan is currently the only country in the world where girls' education is legally restricted (Atakpal, 2019; Nasir, 2024). One respondent mentioned:

Afghanistan during the republic regime at least had a correct vision in terms of education and had achievements, but they also had some problems that cannot be ignored.... After the republic regimes collapsed, what the Taliban believed in 1996 and what they implemented during the republic regime in areas under their control, they implemented all of it, but very carefully.¹⁹

The findings show that by restricting girls' formal education, the Taliban are systematically preventing women and girls from participating in all spheres of life, and forcing them to obey the traditions in which girls and women are not allowed to go out of their houses. The UN Women (2025) report on the state of women's rights in Afghanistan notes that the Taliban restrictions are permanent, and they are nearly erasing women from the public sphere. One respondent mentioned:

In the Taliban ideology, women have a second role in terms of rights, responsibilities, and freedoms perspectives, which has implications on different aspects, one of which is education, and in this aspect, they are not allowed to get an education because they are not allowed to have any socio-economic or political participation.²⁰

The Taliban are causing irreversible damage to Afghanistan's education system, and their restrictions on formal education have a devastating impact not only on women but on the country's future and prospects for peace. One respondent stated that:

The negative impact of the Taliban's restrictive education policies affects not only girls and women but all people of Afghanistan. Overall, we can say that the current school education system is in very poor condition, and each year that our children fall behind in education cannot be reversed in ten years.²¹

¹⁹ Interview with respondent, May 19, 2025

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Interview with respondent, October 3, 2025

In summary, the Taliban's systematic restrictions on girls' formal education since September 2021 have undone decades of progress, leaving Afghanistan's school education system in crisis. As highlighted by respondents, these policies not only ban girls' and women's access to education but also erase them from public life, limit societal participation, and create long-term setbacks that threaten the country's future and prospects for peace.

3.2. The Shift from Modern to Religious Education

The findings indicate that the Taliban are converting schools into semi-madrassas by constantly replacing modern education with religious instruction in Afghanistan.²² Most respondents expressed a strong preference for children to receive modern and internationally recognised education. Nevertheless, since August 2021, there has been a significant increase in the number of madrasas, or institutions of Islamic education, providing religious education to both girls and boys. Official data shows that over the past three years, the Taliban has established 269 schools and nearly 23,000 madrasas across Afghanistan. Currently, more than 216,000 male and around 91,000 female students are enrolled in these madrassas (Afghanistan International, 2025).²³ The findings also revealed that the number of informal madrasas has increased in every neighbourhood. These institutions often provide private Quran lessons, and many children attend them as extracurricular activities, since there is high demand for children in schools to read the Quran proficiently. One respondent stated:

Since the Taliban assumed power, the number of Madrasas has increased in every neighborhood. During the Republic Government, students attended private courses to learn subjects like English language, Computer, and mathematics, but now most are turning to madrasas. These institutions charge a fee of 150 - 300 Afghani and teach children how to read the Quran fluently.²⁴

Respondents noted that the content and curriculum have shifted significantly, becoming more religious and less scientific. Subjects such as art and civic education have been removed from the curriculum, while subjects such as Emiratology and Jihad have received much greater emphasis, with religious studies taking the lead. One respondent stated:

In schools, they talk only about religious topics throughout the day, and other subjects have been forgotten. Even teachers who teach the Quran do not know the meaning of basic words. Schools use religion in a way that pushes people toward illiteracy. Students and teachers have

²² RFE/RL's Radio Azadi, "War on Education," 2022.

²³ SATP, Taliban Built 23,000 Religious Seminaries and 269 Schools Since 2021, 2025.

²⁴ Interview with respondent, August 27, 2025

no motivation. And this is the situation in the cities, while villages mostly have madrasas where children memorize Arabic without understanding anything.²⁵

According to a report by Human Rights Watch (2023, p. 8-11), schools today increasingly resemble local mosques, as they lack professional teachers and provide little instruction in key subjects such as physics, computer science, and chemistry. The use of corporal punishment has increased, and subjects such as arts, civics, culture, and sports were replaced with additional hours of Quran and Islamic studies. One teacher stated:

Teaching hours for Islamic subjects and Pashto language have increased, for instance, the Pashto language was previously taught for two hours per week, but is now taught for four hours. Islamic studies and the Quran, which were each taught for two hours per week, have been expanded to five hours per week. In contrast, teaching time for other subjects, such as English and Dari, has been reduced to two hours per week. Additionally, some subjects, such as skills and technical training, geology, and environmental studies, have been removed, while new subjects, including jurisprudence and Islamic fundamentals, have been introduced.²⁶

Respondents reported that in some provinces, the teaching of modern subjects such as computers and the English language has been removed entirely from the curriculum because they are considered non-Islamic. One respondent explained that there is now an increased focus on religious subjects, while secular or technical subjects are being actively discouraged. According to the respondent, “girls are not allowed to use computers, and in some districts of Nangarhar province, learning English has been completely banned by the Taliban, as they claim that it is the language of infidels and should not be studied.”²⁷

In summary, the findings demonstrate that the Taliban have systematically replaced modern education with religious instruction in Afghanistan, continuing a longstanding pattern of resistance to educational reform rooted in historical and ideological dynamics. The rapid expansion of both formal and informal madrasas, the elimination or limitation of secular subjects, and the increased focus on religious subjects have reshaped schools into semi-madrasas. Despite strong public demand for modern and internationally recognised education, the Taliban’s educational policies are contributing to declining educational quality and limiting future opportunities for children in Afghanistan.

²⁵ Interview with respondent, May 22, 2025

²⁶ Interview with respondent, September 26, 2025

²⁷ Interview with respondent, October 3, 2025

3.3. Madrassas as the Only Remaining Option for Girls

The findings show that since the Taliban returned to power, madrassas (religious schools) are the only available option for girls to continue learning beyond sixth grade.²⁸ Nowrouzi (2025) reports that today, madrassas are the only option for teenage girls to pursue education. The parents explained that sending their daughters to madrassas was not a matter of preference but of necessity, as no alternative educational opportunities exist. One parent, who is also a teacher, stated:

I decided to send my daughters to a madrasa because I had no other alternative. At least they can advance their religious knowledge. They need to go outside the house and remain with the community; otherwise, being confined at home could negatively affect their mental well-being.²⁹

Although the respondents mentioned that they want their children to learn about religion, they also want them to get an education that meets global standards. They raised concerns of brainwashing and indoctrination in madrassas. As stated by Nowrouzi (2025), the education offered by madrassas is no substitute for school education and raises concerns about indoctrination. In addition, the interviews revealed that madrasa education does not meet every child's dream and educational goals. Not all children want to become a *Da'i* (Islamic missionary or preacher); some want to become doctors, while others aspire to work in other sectors, and the lack of opportunities to achieve these goals undermines children's motivation. Another parent, who previously worked as a teacher trainer but lost her job after the Taliban took over, mentioned:

I admitted my older daughter to a madrasa only because she was interested in learning Arabic. She felt very confined at home and became depressed. Every mother wants her child to learn about religion, but also about science and other subjects.³⁰

A 17-year-old female student who was studying in 9th grade when the Taliban banned her from school stated:

The Taliban's closure of girls' schools has negatively affected girls' mental well-being. It has been some time since I have been at home. I was very interested in continuing my education and becoming a doctor. Now our future is uncertain, and our mental health has been severely affected.³¹

²⁸ Mahjooba Nowrouzi, "Teenage Afghan girls were banned from school – now these classes are their only option," 2025, BBC Afghan Service, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c36wyzl3n00o>

²⁹ Interview with respondent, September 22, 2025

³⁰ Interview with respondent, September 1, 2025

³¹ Interview with respondent, September 26, 2025

In summary, since the Taliban's return to power, madrassas have become the only option for girls to continue learning beyond sixth grade in Afghanistan. Parents reported enrolling their daughters due to the lack of alternative options, expressing concerns that madrassa education does not meet global standards, does not meet children's educational goals, and raises concerns about indoctrination. Interviews also highlighted the negative impact of restricted educational opportunities on girls' motivation and mental well-being.

3.4. Online Education: An Uneven and Unsustainable Solution for Girls

Online education initiatives have emerged as an alternative for girls denied access to formal schooling beyond sixth grade by the Taliban, but access remains limited. While these initiatives are better than no education at all, they cannot replace formal schooling, as they are often unaffordable, hindered by unreliable internet access and electricity shortages, and largely ineffective in delivering quality learning outcomes. One parent mentioned:

I once enrolled my daughter in an online school, but the internet here is a problem. In addition, many people cannot afford to pay the fees. Some of these schools are free, but others charge around \$1,500 or \$2,000. I don't think online education is very effective, and many students cannot continue their studies because of the poor internet.³²

According to interviewees, some online schools have disappeared after operating for a short period, while others were run by individuals who promised educational services, including internet costs and iPads. They collected students' personal information and then disappeared. One mother stated:

My daughter was in seventh grade when the Taliban took power and banned girls' education. This was deeply worrying for both of us. She later began studying online in a school called **Omedha (Hopes)**. At first, the school did not charge any fees, but later it introduced tuition fees, while the quality of education remained poor. After two semesters, the school suddenly disappeared, and even the teachers' phone numbers were not reachable. The students were not issued any certificates.³³

Another mother mentioned:

There was an online school where I registered my daughter, and I also encouraged other girls from my relatives to register, and they did. The school collected its fathers' Tazkira (national ID) information and even promised to provide each student with money for internet access

³² Interview with respondent, September 1, 2025

³³ Interview with respondent, September 25, 2025

and an iPad, but the school later disappeared. I do not know whether it was a case of misuse of people's data for funding purposes, or if it was shut down by the Taliban.³⁴

The findings show that only children from high-income families can access online educational opportunities, as they can afford internet services and electronic devices such as laptops, iPads, or smartphones; children from low-income or poor families are largely excluded.³⁵ Interview data also revealed a lack of awareness about available online education opportunities and little or no coordination among the institutions or individuals offering such programs. Furthermore, many of these online schools are unregistered and do not provide certificates.³⁶

In summary, online education has provided a limited alternative for girls banned from school under Taliban restrictions, but it remains largely inaccessible and unsustainable. High costs, unreliable internet, poor quality, and disappearing or unregistered programs mean only wealthier students can benefit, leaving many girls without meaningful learning opportunities.

3.5. Demotivating Learning Environment

Respondents voiced deep concerns about the deterioration of the learning environments in schools, which have become increasingly demotivating since the Taliban assumed power, particularly in the government schools. Contributing factors include poor quality education, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate infrastructure, a lack of professional teachers, the dismissal of female teachers, and the Taliban-imposed restrictions, such as strict dress codes and a ban on motivating and recreational activities. In a statement, Sahar Fetrat, Human Rights Watch's women's rights researcher, also noted that the Taliban are inflicting permanent harm on Afghanistan's education system for both girls and boys, creating a generation deprived of quality education (Ahmed, 2023). Interviewees reported that in some schools, classrooms lack basic furniture or carpets, forcing children to sit on cold, dusty floors without tables to write on or chairs to sit on. One teacher stated:

The situation in public schools is very poor. Previously, there were around 30 to 40 students in one classroom, but now there are 60 to 70 students per class. The Taliban administration is not hiring new teachers, and it is difficult for one teacher to manage all the students.

³⁴ Interview with respondent, September 25, 2025

³⁵ Laiq Zirack, "How Afghan girls are overcoming barriers through online learning," 2023, The Diplomat, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/05/how-afghan-girls-are-overcoming-barriers-through-online-learning/>

³⁶ Sana Atef, "Afghan girls who study online now have another worry: Are their diplomas valid?," 2024, Zan Times, <https://zantimes.com/2024/09/16/afghan-girls-who-study-online-now-have-another-worry-are-their-diplomas-valid/>

Classrooms lack blackboards, furniture, or carpet. Students often contribute some money to purchase a board so that we can write on it. Sometimes we ask relatives living abroad for donations. For example, I once asked my brother, who lives outside the country, and he bought 30 carpets for our school.

The respondents reported a lack of professionalism and low levels of knowledge among teachers. They emphasised that there are very few skilled teachers, and many qualified educators, especially female teachers, have been dismissed or have fled the country, leaving behind a workforce that often lacks proper training and a clear understanding of effective teaching methods. The students interviewed by the Human Rights Watch reported that the Taliban's dismissals of female teachers caused major disruptions to their education, leaving them under the supervision of teachers who lack professionalism (Human Rights Watch 2023). One respondent, speaking as both a mother and a former teacher trainer, mentioned:

The situation is especially dire in public schools, where teachers display poor pedagogical skills and unprofessional behavior toward students. She noted that, unlike in the past, when educational issues could be quickly addressed, current complaints often go unresolved.³⁷

The findings show that increased corporal punishment, poor quality of education, and the Taliban's restrictions, including gender segregation, strict dress codes, and limitations on motivational and fun activities, have further contributed to a discouraging school environment. Respondents largely voiced unhappiness with the Taliban's strict dress codes imposed on teachers and students. They reported that before the Taliban's rule, both teachers and students were expected to wear a decent, neat school uniform. However, female teachers and students are now required to wear black hijabs and face masks, while male teachers and students must wear traditional Afghan clothing (*perahan tunban*) and turban (*lungi*).

Schools previously offered a range of creative and motivating activities, including music and art. Children sang the national anthem and read poems and essays during morning assemblies, and special occasions such as Teachers' Day and Mother's Day were celebrated. These activities and celebrations have now been banned by the Taliban. One teacher said,

In the past, we had very beautiful programs in school. We played music, students sang the national anthem, and we celebrated Teachers' Day and Mother's Day. Now there is no music,

³⁷ Interview with respondent, September 1, 2025

and no special occasions are celebrated. Instead, there is only Quran recitation and Islamic programs.³⁸

The findings reveal that a demotivating learning environment in schools, along with other factors such as poverty and unemployment, has contributed to low attendance and increased dropout rates.³⁹ Teachers reported that many boys drop out of school or attend irregularly because they are required to work and support their families, particularly in female-headed households. In the first months after the Taliban's return, millions fell into poverty, and acute hunger affected 55 percent of the population (Smith, 2024). According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2025), the poverty rate in Afghanistan has risen dramatically, with 69 percent of the population facing unemployment or lacking a source of income, alongside a rise in child labour in sectors such as handicrafts and scavenging.

In summary, the findings indicate that school learning environments have become highly demotivating since the Taliban assumed power. Classrooms are overcrowded, schools lack adequate infrastructure, and there is a shortage of qualified teachers, with female educators no longer permitted to teach boys. The increased use of corporal punishment, along with Taliban-imposed restrictions such as strict dress codes and the banning of creative and motivating activities, has further contributed to a discouraging environment for students. This demotivating atmosphere, combined with factors such as poverty and unemployment, has led to higher dropout rates and lower student attendance.

3.6. The Socio-Economic Divide in School Education

The findings indicate a strong relationship between socio-economic status and the quality of the learning environment and education opportunity across Afghanistan. School education is provided through both public and private schools. Public schools offer free education but are characterised by poor quality and demotivating learning environments. In contrast, private schools offer better learning environments and teaching standards, but access to these schools depends on a family's ability to pay tuition fees. As a result, education quality has become closely linked to economic status, meaning that the more a family can afford to pay, the better the education their child is likely to receive. The majority of public school teachers interviewed reported that their own children attend private schools, as they

³⁸ Interview with respondent, September 29, 2025

³⁹ Human Rights Watch, "Schools are failing boys too": The Taliban's impact on boys' education in Afghanistan," 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/12/06/schools-are-failing-boys-too/talibans-impact-boys-education-afghanistan>

want them to study in a better and more supportive learning environment. A parent who is also employed as a teacher at a public school was asked about his school-age children's schooling and where they were enrolled. He responded:

I have one son who is studying in the fourth grade at a private school because the learning environment is better than in public schools. I have decided to eat half a loaf of bread instead of a full one so that I can pay for my son to attend a private school for a better future.⁴⁰

The findings also show that even among private schools, the quality of education and learning environment varies significantly.⁴¹ There are well-established, well-equipped private schools that provide high-quality education; however, only wealthy families can afford to enrol their children, as tuition fees can be very high. At the same time, many private schools lack basic standards, with some operating out of converted apartments. In these schools, tuition fees range from 250 to 1,500 Afghanis, reflecting wide disparities in quality.

In summary, the findings reveal a deep socio-economic divide in school education in Afghanistan, where access to quality learning environments is closely tied to family income. Public schools offer free education but are widely regarded as low quality and demotivating, leading even public school teachers to enrol their own children in private schools. Although private schools generally provide better educational standards, access is limited by high costs, and quality varies considerably across institutions. Similarly, online education opportunities, particularly for girls, remain uneven and largely dependent on families' economic capacity and internet access.

3.7. The Struggle of Teachers and Quality of Education

The research findings reveal a significant link between teachers' socio-economic hardships and the quality of education. The interviewees, especially teachers, reported that the Taliban's return to power has had a severe impact on teachers overall, and on female teachers in particular, in Afghanistan. After the Taliban took power, teachers went without salaries for four months. Later, overall teacher salaries were reduced by 15%, while the salaries of female teachers instructing above the sixth grade were reduced by roughly 50%. When teachers are struggling economically, they are less able to prepare adequately and focus effectively on their lectures. Teachers in Afghanistan were already receiving very

⁴⁰ Interview with respondent, October 7, 2025

⁴¹ Elina Qalam, "Private schooling: Rising extra costs put families under financial strain," 2025, 8am Media, <https://8am.media/eng/private-schooling-rising-extra-costs-put-families-under-financial-strain/>

low pay, and with the Taliban's return to power, their salaries were further reduced. This decline in income has directly affected teachers' motivation and dedication to their work, leading to lower overall performance, reduced classroom engagement, and a noticeable decline in the quality of education. Afghanistan's education system was already vulnerable due to its heavy reliance on donor funding, primarily channelled through a multi-donor trust fund administered by the World Bank. The World Bank's decision to halt support for projects in Afghanistan after August 2021 has severely impacted the education system (Rayburn & Cowley, 2021). One male teacher explained the impact of economic hardship on teaching quality, stating:

Teachers cannot fully focus on teaching because they are constantly worried about the economic situation of their families. The Taliban has reduced teachers' salaries, e.g., if a teacher previously earned 10,000 Afghani, it has now been reduced to 8,500 Afghani, and those who earned 8,500 Afghani now receive only 6,500 Afghani. This salary is no longer sufficient to cover household expenses such as rent and groceries. A teacher cannot prepare lessons with peace of mind under such economic pressure, and mental peace is essential for effective teaching. I can guarantee that if teachers received better salaries and no longer had to worry about financial constraints, the quality of education in schools would significantly improve.⁴²

Interviewees added that the Taliban's strict regulations, such as the mandatory dress code (hijab), compulsory seminars on religious topics, examinations of religious knowledge, and the prevailing climate of fear, have contributed to stressful and demotivating conditions for teachers, which directly impact the quality of teaching. One female teacher, who was deeply frustrated with attending the seminars, shared her experience and stated:

We are required to attend weekly seminars on various religious topics at a location 10 to 12 kilometers away from our school. We are not given a lunch break and must leave immediately after our classes. The transportation costs are also expensive for us. I am very tired of attending these compulsory seminars, as I spend nearly half of my salary on transportation just to participate. I have not received my salary for the past two months, and neither has my husband, who is also a teacher. We are constantly worried about how to provide food for our children. Under such conditions, how can we be expected to focus on teaching?⁴³

Another female teacher stated:

Currently, both teachers and students are struggling with poverty, stress, and fear under the Taliban. Our freedoms are restricted; women and girls are confined to their homes, and the Taliban imprison those who do not follow the dress code. Although I strictly adhere to the

⁴² Interview with respondent, September 22, 2025

⁴³ Interview with respondent, September 22, 2025

dress code imposed by the Taliban, I still fear that they may stop and question me. In such a demotivating environment, it is difficult to prepare for lectures.⁴⁴

In summary, the findings indicate a close link between teachers' socio-economic hardships and the decline in the quality of education in Afghanistan. Following the Taliban's return to power, teachers overall, female teachers in particular, experienced delayed salaries, considerable pay deductions, and increased financial insecurity. These economic pressures, combined with the Taliban's strict regulations, compulsory religious seminars and examinations, and a fearful environment, have reduced teacher motivation, classroom engagement, and overall educational quality, highlighting how political and economic instability directly undermines effective teaching and learning.

3.8. Violence by Teachers in Schools

According to interview participants, violence has long been a persistent issue in Afghanistan's schools. During the Republic era, the government introduced certain measures and regulations to prevent corporal punishment and protect the children's rights in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Human Rights Watch (2023, p. 4). The government also enacted an education law in 2008 which prohibits any form of physical or psychological punishment of students under Article 39 of Chapter 11.⁴⁵

Teachers were also provided with two hours of rest time per week, which helped reduce stress and improve classroom management. However, since the Taliban's return to power, respondents reported that violence by teachers in schools has significantly increased. One teacher explained:

Violence by teachers has always existed, but now it has become worse. Currently, there are between 60 and 70 students in a single classroom, and teachers receive no rest time. During the Republic, each teacher had two hours of rest time a week. As a result, they become exhausted and resort to violence as a means of controlling the classroom. The situation is particularly difficult in schools located outside the city, like the one where I teach, although I hear that conditions are terrible across the country.⁴⁶

The interviews revealed notable differences in the severity and nature of violence used by male and female teachers. Male teachers were reported to employ harsher forms of punishment compared to

⁴⁴ Interview with respondent, September 29, 2025

⁴⁵ Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Education Law (2008), Art. 39.

⁴⁶ Interview with respondent, August 22, 2025

their female counterparts, and male students were often subjected to more severe disciplinary measures. One female teacher explained:

Although the government has stated that teachers should not use violence against children, it still happens. Female teachers usually bring a wooden stick or a plastic cable to hit students as a form of punishment, while male teachers use kicks and punches. Sometimes, they even boast in teachers' gatherings, saying things like, "Today I had a free fight with a student."⁴⁷

The majority of respondents reported that forms of violence in schools vary significantly by gender, with male students experiencing more physical punishment and female students being subjected to psychological and emotional abuse. One parent explained:

There is physical violence by teachers in boys' schools, but not much in girls' schools. However, teachers in girls' schools often use psychological violence such as humiliation and bad words, which is even worse than physical violence because it damages the mental state of children.⁴⁸

The interviews revealed another type of severe punishment in the western part of Afghanistan, such as Herat city, called Falak,⁴⁹ which is described as a severe form of physical punishment where the victim is tied by the feet to a pole and beaten on the soles with sticks, while two people hold the pole steady and others supply fresh sticks when the old ones broke.

In summary, violence in schools has increased since the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan. Overcrowded classrooms, exhausted teachers, and lack of rest have led to increased corporal punishment. Male teachers typically use harsher physical punishments on boys, while female teachers often rely on psychological and emotional abuse against girls. Extreme forms of punishment, such as Falak, continue in some regions, highlighting how both physical and mental violence remain pervasive challenges in the education system.

4. Violations of the Right to Education Under Taliban Rule

The Taliban are violating the right to education, as well as the freedoms of opinion and thought, which are important for education. According to Article 26(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "everyone has the right to education" (United Nations, 1948). The Taliban have banned women's

⁴⁷ Interview with respondent, August 22, 2025

⁴⁸ Interview with respondent, September 1, 2025

⁴⁹ Omidshar, M. (1999, December 15). Falaka. Encyclopaedia Iranica. Retrieved November 10, 2025, from <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/falaka/>

education. Article 20(1) emphasises that “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression” (ibid). Human beings should be able to freely use information, express their ideas and thoughts, and reject ideas, a process that helps human beings progress. Children should be able to enter school without fear, freely discuss topics and ideas with their teachers and classmates, and have access to a variety of educational resources. The right to freedom of opinion and thinking, which is important for education, is violated. The Taliban have investigated the libraries in schools and removed the books that are against their ideology, and introduced books that are relevant to their ideology (interview with an expert).

In addition, international conventions, declarations, and agreements, particularly under Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4),⁵⁰ place strong emphasis on education. They demonstrate not only the importance of ensuring access to education for all but also the need to maintain high-quality learning standards. The Taliban are violating the quality of education as well.

Furthermore, Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) highlights education as a fundamental human right and places legally binding obligations on states to ensure that education is available, accessible, acceptable, and adaptable to all without discrimination (United Nations, 1966). According to the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (CESCR) in General Comment No. 13 (1999), this right must be respected, protected, and fulfilled by states through deliberate, concrete, and targeted actions. Education must not only be free and compulsory at the primary level but also directed toward “the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity” (CESCR, 1999).

In this legal framework, the state is the primary duty-bearer, and its failure to uphold these standards constitutes a violation of international law. However, as this study’s findings demonstrate, the Taliban’s education policies since their return to power in 2021 have systematically violated each element of the 4A framework, resulting in widespread human rights violations in school education that align with Galtung’s (1969) model of direct, structural, and cultural violence.

⁵⁰ United Nations. (n.d.). Sustainable Development Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. United Nations. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4>

4.1 Availability: Systematic Denial of Education

Under General Comment No. 13, states are obligated to ensure sufficient functioning educational institutions and programs available for all (para. 6(a)). However, in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, this obligation is completely undermined. Since the 2021 takeover, the Taliban have closed girls' schools, banned education beyond sixth grade, and replaced secular subjects with religious instruction. According to the Afghanistan Education Situation Report 2025, the ban on girls' secondary education has now persisted for four years, effectively excluding 2.2 million adolescent girls from classrooms. This has left Afghanistan as the only country in the world that systematically denies girls and women access to secondary and higher education. As Nasir (2025) and UNESCO (2023) report, 1.4 million girls have been denied education, and 1.1 million fewer children, both boys and girls, are enrolled in school. The Taliban have also increased religious seminaries (madrasas) ninefold, prioritising ideology over learning.

Although education is available for boys, it is heavily regulated, limiting both the acceptability and adaptability of schooling. Respondents reported that boys are required to follow strict dress codes, including traditional attire such as Perahan Tunban and Langota, reflecting broader ideological controls within the education system. Although boys are technically able to attend school, these compulsory regulations demonstrate the extent to which personal freedoms are curtailed, ultimately affecting the quality and inclusivity of education. Notably, the Afghanistan Education Situation Report 2025 also indicates that boys' enrolment in higher education has declined by approximately 40% since 2019, suggesting that these restrictions may be contributing to a broader educational crisis.

Overall, the evidence points to a dual challenge: the systematic exclusion of girls from education and the increasing ideological constraints on boys, both of which have significant implications for Afghanistan's human capital development and long-term social progress.

This deliberate destruction of educational infrastructure and opportunities constitutes structural violence, as defined by Galtung (1969), a system that prevents individuals from achieving their full potential. It is also a direct violation of the right to availability of education, as the state has failed to maintain an operational and inclusive education system for all.

4.1.2 Accessibility: Discrimination and Unequal Opportunity

Accessibility requires that education be physically and economically accessible to all, without discrimination (CESCR, 1999, para. 6(b)). The findings reveal that Taliban education policies directly discriminate on the basis of gender, geography, and socioeconomic status. Girls beyond the age of 12 lack access to formal education, while boys face rigid ideological restrictions. Rural children have even less access due to insecurity, lack of infrastructure, and the replacement of schools with madrasas.

Poverty and economic problems further contribute to inequality. Government schools offer free education, but they are criticised for overcrowded classrooms, poor infrastructure, and unqualified teachers. Meanwhile, private schools offer higher-quality education, but not all families can afford them. Teachers themselves often send their children to private schools, acknowledging the poor quality of public education.

These patterns constitute both structural and cultural violence: structural, because unequal access is built into the system; cultural, because religious and gender norms are used to legitimise exclusion. Such practices violate not only the 4A framework but also the ICESCR's prohibition of discrimination on any ground, including gender or social origin.

4. 1.3 Acceptability: Indoctrination, Corporal Punishment, and Fear

The acceptability aspect demands that the form and content of education, including curricula and teaching methods, be relevant, of good quality, and consistent with human dignity (CESCR, 1999, para. 6(c)). Under the Taliban, education has become an instrument of indoctrination rather than enlightenment. As Human Rights Watch (2023) documents, the Taliban have replaced subjects such as civic education, arts, and sports with extended religious studies and introduced new subjects like Emiratology and Jihad. They have banned depictions of living beings, denounced democracy and human rights, and glorified jihad.

This transformation of education into a vehicle for ideological control reflects cultural violence, where harmful beliefs and narratives legitimise coercive power. The use of corporal punishment, such as *falaka*—beating students on the soles of their feet—alongside verbal humiliation and psychological abuse, represents direct violence, both physical and emotional. These practices destroy the educational environment's acceptability and contradict the covenant's requirement that education “strengthen respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms” (ICESCR, Art. 13.1).

4.1.4 Adaptability: Rejection of Modern Learning and Critical Thinking

The adaptability element requires education to be flexible, evolving to meet the needs of students and changing societies (CESCR, 1999, para. 6(d)). The Taliban's education system rigidly resists adaptability. The banning of modern subjects such as English, computer studies, art, and civic education, especially in provinces like Nangarhar, has eliminated opportunities for technological and intellectual development. Teachers are pressured to focus on religious instruction, leaving little room for critical inquiry or creativity. This rejection of adaptability constitutes structural violence, as it systematically denies learners the means to engage with modern society, and cultural violence, as it normalises ignorance and obedience as educational virtues.

Under international law, such a system violates the obligation to make education “adaptable to the needs of changing societies and communities” (CESCR, 1999, para. 6(d)), depriving Afghan children of their right to develop the knowledge and skills necessary for meaningful participation in social, economic, and cultural life.

4.2. Weaponisation of the Afghan School Education System

The findings reveal a strong interconnection between violence in education, the denial of the right to education, and the prospects for sustainable peace in Afghanistan. Education is universally recognized as a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of peace, stability, and socio-economic development (Balkhi, 2019). As noted by UNICEF (2011), education contributes to peacebuilding not only through sectoral reform but also by supporting broader political, economic, and social transformation in post-conflict societies. Peace begins in the minds of children, and education plays a decisive role in shaping attitudes, values, and social norms (Where Peace Begins, 2008).

The content and structure of an education system profoundly influence how children perceive the world. Early learning materials, such as associating the letter “G” with “Grape” rather than “Gun”, symbolise how curricula can either normalise violence or cultivate peaceful values. Education holds a dual potential: it can foster critical thinking, social cohesion, and gender equality, or it can reinforce exclusion, bias, and conflict. As Dana Burde (2014) argues, schooling can serve both as a force for peace and as an instrument of oppression. Curricula that glorify war, promote hatred, or entrench rigid group identities risk exacerbating social divisions, particularly in societies marked by ethnic and

political conflict. Conversely, inclusive and civic-oriented education can play a transformative role in post-conflict reconstruction (Novelli & Lopes Cardozo, 2008).

Within this broader framework, violence in the Afghan school education system must be understood in its direct, structural, and cultural forms. The Taliban employed various acts of violence in education as the administration in power (1996–2001), as anti-government elements (2001–2021), and as the de facto authorities (2021–present). These actions have contributed to the conflict’s continuation and carry serious implications for long-term peace.

Drawing on Johan Galtung’s “violence triangle,” violence can be categorised as direct, structural, and cultural. Direct violence refers to physical acts of aggression resulting in injury, death, or destruction. Structural violence is embedded in social systems and institutions, producing inequality and injustice. Cultural violence legitimises and normalises both direct and structural violence through ideology, religion, tradition, or social norms (Cremin et al., 2012; Cremin & Guilherme, 2015).

In Afghanistan, all three forms of violence are evident within the education sector. According to the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA, 2024), thousands of incidents of direct violence against education were recorded between 2015 and 2019, including school burnings, suicide bombings, remotely detonated explosives, killings, threats against school staff, and abductions carried out by the Taliban and other armed groups. Between 2022 and 2023, 140 additional acts of violence against schools, students, and education personnel were documented, with the Taliban reportedly responsible for several attacks and for the military use of school facilities.

Beyond physical attacks, the reintroduction of corporal punishment such as beating, slapping, foot whipping, and falaka constitutes direct violence because it intentionally inflicts physical harm. Simultaneously, as these practices become normalised within the education system, they represent structural violence embedded in institutional policy. The systematic denial of girls’ access to secondary and higher education, economic barriers to schooling, deteriorating infrastructure, and the prioritisation of narrow religious instruction over comprehensive education further exemplify structural violence. By framing gender inequality, obedience, and the suppression of dissent as religiously or culturally justified, these policies also constitute cultural violence that legitimises and sustains both direct and structural harm.

Respondents emphasised that such policies have undermined both the right to education and the foundations for long-term peace. Participants reported declining student motivation, loss of hope, rising dropout rates, and increased child labour. The exclusion of girls from education was described as particularly damaging. Combined with restrictions on women’s employment, these measures have

contributed to rising instances of early and forced marriages, as families perceive limited alternatives for their daughters. Denying girls access to education restricts individual development and economic participation while deepening social inequality and societal fragility.

Educational inequality and school-based violence are rooted in broader political and social structures (Cremin & Guilherme, 2016). In Afghanistan, systematic restrictions on educational access demonstrate that violations of the right to education extend beyond classrooms, affecting societal stability. Peace is centred on people rather than infrastructure; it requires positive behavioural and attitudinal transformation. Education, when inclusive and rights-based, encourages critical reflection, civic responsibility, and social cohesion. When manipulated, restricted, or weaponised, it entrenches grievances and perpetuates cycles of violence.

These interconnected forms of violence reinforce one another, transforming the school education system into a mechanism for sustaining authoritarian control rather than promoting human development and peace. Protecting the right to education in Afghanistan is therefore not only a developmental priority but also a human rights imperative directly linked to dignity, equality, justice, and the long-term prospects for sustainable peace.

5. How to Approach Systemic Violation of the Right to Education under the Taliban in Afghanistan?

This research investigated how the Taliban's violation of the right to education and the broader prospects for peace and stability in Afghanistan. Employing Tomasevski's 4A framework and Galtung's theory of violence, the study shows that the Taliban's education policies significantly undermine the core dimensions of the right to education: availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability. The findings indicate that the exclusion of girls from secondary and higher education, limitations on curriculum content, and increasing ideological control over schools create barriers that prevent education from functioning as a tool for empowerment and social development.

Through the lens of Galtung's violence triangle, the Taliban's educational policies contribute to multiple forms of violence. Structural violence is reflected in institutional barriers that systematically deny girls access to education. Cultural violence is reinforced through ideological narratives that justify gender discrimination and restrict freedom of thought within educational institutions. In some cases, these conditions may also contribute to forms of direct violence through intimidation, fear, and restrictions placed on students and teachers.

These dynamics demonstrate that education systems in conflict or authoritarian contexts can play a dual role. While education has the potential to promote peace, equality, and social cohesion, it can also be used to reinforce inequality, exclusion, and ideological control. In Afghanistan, the current educational environment risks deepening existing social divisions and weakening the role of education as a foundation for sustainable peace.

5.1. Implications for theory, policy, and practice

The findings of this study have significant implications for theory, policy, and practice. By combining Tomasevski's 4A framework and Galtung's violence triangle, this study illustrates that the violation of the right to education in Afghanistan extends beyond legal or institutional limitations and reveals broader patterns of direct, cultural, and structural violence integrated into the school education system. The study, therefore, contributes to the theoretical discussion of schooling under repression by illustrating how schooling can be used as a tool for exclusion, ideological control, and religious indoctrination.

In addition, the findings show that the Taliban's education policies are violating the right to education, including availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability. Systematically excluding girls from secondary education, replacing modern education with religious instruction, a lack of critical thinking, and restrictions on freedom of thought show how school education can be reshaped to reinforce political and ideological conformity. These practices call for attention to international policy mechanisms to protect the right to education, particularly in contexts such as Afghanistan, where the administrative authorities themselves are responsible for human rights violations.

Policy-wise, the findings demonstrate that ensuring access to schooling is inadequate when the quality and content of education reinforce discrimination, fear, and indoctrination. Thus, education policies must address both access and quality, including curriculum development, teacher training, safe and motivating learning environments, and the protection of students from violence. The findings also show the results of the discontinuation of international support for Afghanistan's education sector after 2021, which has contributed to deteriorating school infrastructure, reduced teacher salaries, and declining educational quality. Lasting commitment by international actors remains crucial to support alternative educational opportunities, protect vulnerable learners, and maintain international pressure for the restoration of inclusive education.

In practice, the findings highlight the pressing need to support teachers, students, and communities who continue to struggle within Afghanistan's deteriorating education system. Teachers face severe

economic hardship, professional restrictions, and increasing pressure to conform to ideological requirements, which undermines both motivation and teaching quality. Addressing teachers' working conditions and providing professional and financial support are therefore important steps toward improving educational outcomes. In addition, while alternative learning initiatives such as online education and community-based programs have emerged to address the exclusion of girls, these initiatives remain uneven, unreliable, and largely inaccessible to students from low-income families. Practitioners must therefore design education programs that are inclusive, affordable, and sustainable. From a wider perspective, the study demonstrates the fundamental role of education in constructing long-term prospects for peace and stability. Education systems that promote critical thinking, equality, and social inclusion can help rebuild trust and strengthen social cohesion in conflict-affected societies. In contrast, education systems characterised by discrimination, ideological indoctrination, and violence risk perpetuating social divisions and cycles of conflict. Protecting the right to education in Afghanistan is therefore not only a human rights obligation but also an important foundation for the country's future peace, stability, and development.

5.2. Suggestions for Future Research

Although this study sheds light on human rights violations in school education under Taliban rule and their implications for peace in Afghanistan, various areas need further investigation.

First, this study relies primarily on qualitative analysis and secondary sources. Future research could incorporate primary empirical data, including interviews, surveys, and field-based observations with teachers, students, parents, and education practitioners. Such data would provide a deeper understanding of how educational restrictions shape everyday learning experiences, students' aspirations, and the consequences of educational exclusion.

Second, future studies could further apply and develop Tomasevski's 4A framework (availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability) to examine how each dimension of the right to education is affected in fragile and authoritarian contexts. Comparative analyses across different regions of Afghanistan or other conflict-affected countries could help identify patterns in how education systems fail to meet these core human rights standards.

Third, additional research could build on Galtung's theory of direct, structural, and cultural violence to explore how education policies reinforce or challenge different forms of violence within society. Future studies may investigate how structural barriers, ideological curricula, and gender-based restrictions contribute to long-term social divisions and hinder prospects for peace and reconciliation.

Fourth, more research is needed on the long-term social and economic consequences of educational restrictions, particularly for girls who have been excluded from secondary and higher education. Longitudinal studies could examine how prolonged educational deprivation affects employment opportunities, gender equality, civic participation, and broader social development processes.

Finally, future research could explore the effectiveness of alternative education initiatives, including community-based schools, informal learning spaces, and digital education programmes that aim to provide learning opportunities despite official restrictions. Evaluating the accessibility, sustainability, and impact of these initiatives could provide valuable insights for policymakers and international organizations seeking to support education in restrictive environments.

By addressing these research gaps, future scholarship can deepen theoretical understanding of the relationship between education, human rights, and violence, while also contributing practical knowledge to support the protection and promotion of the right to education in Afghanistan and other conflict-affected contexts.

5.3. Conclusion

This research has investigated the Taliban's human rights violations in school education, violence in schools, and their long-term impact on peace in Afghanistan. The findings reveal that the Taliban have systemically excluded girls from formal education, limited schooling primarily to religious instructions, restricted freedom of thought and opinion, reintroduced corporal punishment, and use school education as a tool for ideological indoctrination. From a legal perspective, these practices constitute clear violations of international human rights law, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the interpretative guidance provided by General Comment No. 13 on the right to education.

Education is not merely a social service but a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of sustainable development, as reaffirmed under Sustainable Development Goal 4. The systematic

exclusion of women and girls from education undermines equality, weakens social cohesion, and limits the country's long-term economic and political stability. By restricting access to quality education and suppressing intellectual freedom, the Taliban not only violate binding international obligations but also hinder the prospects for peace and development in Afghanistan.

Ultimately, protecting the right to education is essential for rebuilding trust, promoting inclusive governance, and fostering a stable and peaceful society. The international community, alongside national actors, must continue to emphasise accountability and support initiatives that safeguard equal access to quality education for all.

5.4. Recommendations

The findings of this study revealed that most Afghans believe there is little point in making recommendations to the Taliban, with the majority of suggestions instead directed toward the international community. In general, the following recommendations are proposed to promote the protection of human rights in education and to address violence in schools under the Taliban regime.

5.4.1. Recognition of the Right to Education

The Taliban should recognise and uphold the universal right to education for all, ensuring equality and non-discrimination. Education must reflect its true purpose, promoting critical thinking and human development, rather than serving as a tool for indoctrination or ideological control. One respondent noted: "The Taliban should learn from Afghanistan's history that imposing extremist ideology on children is neither effective nor sustainable."⁵¹

5.4.2. Engagement of the International Community

The international community should play a proactive role in addressing the educational crisis in Afghanistan and remain actively involved in supporting education. This includes:

- Applying sustained pressure on the Taliban to respect women's rights and to guarantee the right to education for all children. To achieve this, international support and persistent

⁵¹ Interview with respondent, May 19, 2025

pressure are crucial to encourage the Taliban to reopen schools for girls and to develop curricula that promote critical thinking, human rights, and peace.

- Continuing to contribute wherever possible, whether by providing online learning opportunities or offering in-person education when circumstances allow. Ongoing participation can help ensure that more people gain access to quality learning experiences.
- Investing in teacher training, school infrastructure, and community engagement to rebuild trust and ensure the delivery of quality education. Most importantly, education must be recognized as a fundamental human right for all and something that no regime can take away. As one respondent expressed: “I dream of a future where girls like me can attend school without fear, where knowledge becomes a tool for empowerment and change.”⁵²

⁵² Interview with respondent, May 12, 2025

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