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Girls Access to Education in Afghanistan

Girls study in a tent held up by a tree in a government school in Kabul, Afghanistan. Forty-one percent of all schools in Afghanistan do not have buildings and even when they do, they are often overcrowded, with some children forced to study outside. 2017 Paula Bronstein for Human Rights Watch

Sixteen years after the US-led military intervention that ousted the Taliban government, an estimated two-thirds of Afghan girls do not go to school. And as security in the country has worsened, the progress that had been made toward the goal of getting all girls into school may be heading in reverse decline in girls education in Afghanistan.

Forty-one percent of all schools in Afghanistan do not have buildings. Many children live too far from the nearest school to be able to attend, which particularly affects girls. Girls are often kept at home due to harmful gender norms that do not value or permit their education.

The 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, though a direct response to the September 11 attacks on the United States, was partly framed as bringing assistance to the countrys women. Senior officials from troop-contributing nations in the early years of the war spoke out about the suffering of women under the Taliban.

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Among the Talibans most systematic and destructive abuses against women was the denial of education. Before the Taliban came to power in 1996, Afghanistans education system had already been severely damaged during the countrys armed conflicts in the 1980s and 1990s. During their five-year rule, the Taliban prohibited almost all education for girls and women. So when Taliban rule collapsed in late 2001, the new government and the countries that had joined the US-led coalition faced two critical challenges: how to re-establish an education system for half the school-age population in a desperately poor country, and how to help girls and women who had been kept from getting an education during Taliban rule catch up on what they had been deprived.

The new Afghan government under then-President Hamid Karzai and its international donors approached these tasks with energy and resources. The government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), with donor support, built schools, hired and trained teachers, and reached out to girls and their families to encourage them to attend school. The actual number of girls who, over time, went to school is disputed, but there is broad agreement that since 2001 millions of girls who would not have received any education under the Taliban now have had some schooling.

But this achievement is partial and fragile. Even according to the most optimistic figures regarding girls participation in education, there are millions of girls who never went to school, and many more who went to school only briefly. The impressive progress the government and its donors have made in getting girls to attend school was a good beginning, not a completed task.

This report examines the major barriers that remain in the quest to get all girls into school, and keep them there through secondary school. These include: discriminatory attitudes toward girls by both government officials and community members; child marriage; insecurity and violence stemming from both the escalating conflict and from general lawlessness, including attacks on education, military use of schools, abduction and kidnapping, acid attacks, and sexual harassment; poverty and child labor; a lack of schools in many areas; poor infrastructure and lack of supplies in schools; poor quality of instruction in schools; costs associated with education; lack of teachers, especially female teachers; administrative barriers including requirements for identification and transfer letters, and restrictions on when children can enroll; a failure to institutionalize and make sustainable community-based education; and corruption.

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Statistics on the number of children in and out of school in Afghanistan vary significantly and are contested. Statistics of all kind seven basic population data are often difficult to obtain in Afghanistan and of questionable accuracy. A 2015 Afghan government report stated that more than 8 million children were in school, 39 percent of whom were girls. In December 2016, the minister of education announced that the real number of children in school was 6 million. In April 2017, a Ministry of Education official told Human Rights Watch that there are 9.3 million children in school, 39 percent of whom are girls. All of these figures are inflated by the governments practice of counting a child as attending school until she or he has not attended for up to three years.

According to even the most optimistic statistics, the proportion of Afghan girls who are in school has never gone much above 50 percent. In January 2016 the United Nations Childrens Fund (UNICEF) estimated that 40 percent of all school-age children in Afghanistan do not attend school. Relying on Afghan government data from 2010-2011, UNICEF said that 66 percent of Afghan girls of lower secondary school age 12 to 15 years old are out of school, compared to 40 percent of boys that age. In 2016, the US special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction wrote: The MoE [Afghan Ministry of Education] acknowledged a large number of children are out of school, but is unaware of how many, who or where they are, or their backgrounds. Donors eager to claim the success of their efforts may not be as skeptical about education statistics as they should be.

An accurate accounting of the number of girls in school matters, in part because high but inaccurate figures have given the impression that there is a continued positive trajectory when in fact deterioration is happening in at least some parts of the country. According to government statistics, while the number of children in school continued to increase through 2015, the increase has leveled off and become minimal since 2011, with only a 1 percent increase in 2015 over 2014. The World Bank reported that from 2011-12 to 2013-2014, attendance rates in lower primary school fell from 56 to 54 percent, with girls in rural areas most likely to be out of school. Government statistics indicate that in some provinces, the percentage of students who are girls is as low as 15 percent.

Analysis by the World Bank shows wide variation from province to province in the ratio of girls versus boys attending school, with the proportion of students who are girls falling in some provinces, such as Kandahar and Paktia. These disparities are mirrored in literacy statistics. In Afghanistan, only 37 percent of adolescent girls are literate, compared to 66 percent of adolescent boys. Among adult women, 19 percent are literate compared to 49 percent of adult men. Currently, as the overall security situation in the country worsens, schools close, and donors disengage, there are indications that access to education for girls in some parts of Afghanistan is in decline.

Despite the overall progress, Afghanistans provision of education still discriminates against women by providing fewer schools accessible to girls, and by failing to take adequate measures to remedy the disparity in educational participation between girls and boys.

The Afghan government has not taken meaningful steps toward implementing national legislation that makes education compulsory. Although by law all children are required to complete class nine, the government has neither the capacity to provide this level of education to all children nor a system to ensure that all children attend school. In practice, many children do not have any access to education, or, if they do have access to education, it does not extend through class nine.

Even when education is accessible, it is entirely up to parents to decide whether to send their children to school or not. The government has failed to make clear to families that school is important for all of their children and to ensure that the education system accommodates all students. The governments failure to ensure that education is compulsory violates Afghanistans obligations under international law and is contrary to its international development commitments under the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Afghanistans primary and secondary education system consists of four main types of schools. Government schools are operated and staffed by the government, often with assistance from donors, much of which flows through the Ministry of Education. Community-based education (CBE) is a model that has been used to successfully reach many Afghan girls who would otherwise be denied education; it remains entirely outside the government education system and is wholly dependent on donor funding. *Madrasas*, schools devoted primarily to religious instruction, teach many children but often exclude core subjects in the governments curriculum. Private schools exist as well, providing an option for some families that can afford fees, believe they will offer a higher quality of instruction, or are in a location where there is no government school.

Harmful gender norms mean that, in many families, boys education is prioritized over girls, or girls education is seen as wholly undesirable or acceptable only for a few years before puberty. In a country where a third of girls marry before age 18, child marriage forces many girls out of education. Under Afghan law, the minimum age of marriage for girls is 16, or 15 with the permission of the girls father or a judge. In practice, the law is rarely enforced, so even earlier marriages occur. The consequences of child marriage are deeply harmful, and they include girls dropping out or being excluded from education. Other harms from child marriage include serious health risks including death to girls and their babies due to early pregnancy. Girls who marry as children are also more likely to be victims of domestic violence than women who marry later.

Poverty drives many children into paid or informal labor before they are even old enough to go to school. At least a quarter of Afghan children between ages 5 and 14 work for a living or to help their families, including 27 percent of 5 to 11-year-olds. Girls are most likely to work in carpet weaving or tailoring, but a significant number also engage in street work such as begging or selling small items on the street. Many more do house work in their families home. Many children, including girls, are employed in jobs that can result in illness, injury, or even death due to hazardous working conditions and poor enforcement of safety and health standards. Children in Afghanistan generally work long hours for little or sometimes no pay. Work forces children to combine the burdens of a job with education or forces them out of school altogether. Only half of Afghanistans child laborers attend school.

These challenges have been compounded by a security situation that has grown steadily worse in recent years. Armed conflict is escalating, with the Taliban now controlling or contesting over 40 percent of the countrys districts. The conflict affects every aspect of the lives of civilians, particularly those living in embattled areas. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has documented the rising impact of the war on civilians, including thousands of children who have been killed or injured.

For every child killed or injured in the conflict, there are many more deprived of education. Rising insecurity discourages families from letting their children leave home and families usually have less tolerance for sending girls to school in insecure conditions than boys. The school that might previously have been seen as within walking distance becomes off-limits when parents fear that going there has become more dangerous.

The Taliban and other armed groups sometimes target girls schools, female students and their teachers for attack. Attacks on schools destroy precious school infrastructure. Interviewees told Human Rights Watch about bombings of schools, acid attacks against female students, and threats toward teachers and a single attack can frighten hundreds of girls parents out of sending them for years to come. Both government security forces and Taliban fighters sometimes occupy schools, driving students away and making the school a military target.

Beyond the war, there is lawlessness, which means that on their way to school girls may also face unchecked crime and abuse including kidnapping and sexual harassment. There are increased reports of kidnapping including of children by criminal gangs. Like acid attacks, kidnappings have a broad impact, with a single kidnapping prompting many families in a community to keep children especially girls home.

Sexual harassment also presents a serious barrier to school attendance, as it is unchecked, difficult to prevent, and because of harmful gender norms can have damaging consequences for a girls reputation. Even when the distance to school is short, sexual harassment by boys and men along the way may force girls out of school. Families that were unsure about whether girls should study or not are easily swayed by rising insecurity into deciding it is better for girls to stay home and, often, to work instead of study.

A lack of schools and teachers, especially female teachers, means many girls simply do not have access to a school. Boys also face a lack of schools, but fewer schools accepting girls and greater restrictions on girls freedom of movement mean that girls are more deeply affected. Community-based education has allowed many girls who could not reach a school to have access to education, but without government support, this system is patchy and unsustainable.

Although government schools do not charge tuition, there are still costs for sending a child to school. Families of students at government schools are expected to provide supplies, which can include pens, pencils, notebooks, uniforms, and school bags. Many children also have to pay for at least some government textbooks. The government is responsible for supplying textbooks, but often books do not arrive on time, or there are shortages, perhaps in some cases due to theft or corruption. In these cases, children need to buy the books from a bookstore to keep up with their studies. These indirect costs are enough to keep many children from poor families out of school, especially girls, as families that can afford to send only some of their children often give preference to boys.

Overcrowding, lack of infrastructure and supplies, and weak oversight mean that children who do go to school may study in a tent with no textbook for only three hours a day. Even when schools have buildings, they are often overcrowded, with some children forced to study outside. Conditions are often poor, with buildings damaged and decrepit, and lacking furniture and supplies. Overcrowding compounded by the demand for gender segregation means that schools divide their days into two or three shifts, resulting in a school day too short to cover the full curriculum.

Thirty percent of Afghan government schools lack safe drinking water, and 60 percent do not have toilets. Girls who have commenced menstruation are particularly affected by poor toilet facilities. Without private gender-segregated toilets with running water, they face difficulties managing menstrual hygiene at school and are likely to stay home during menstruation, leading to gaps in their attendance that undermine academic achievement, and increase the risk of them dropping out of school entirely.

Many parents and students expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of teaching, and some students graduate with low literacy. Teachers face many challenges in delivering high quality education, including short school shifts, gaps in staffing, low salaries, and the impact that poor infrastructure, lack of supplies, and insecurity have on their own effectiveness. Teaching, which often pays under US\$100 per month, is not necessarily seen as a desirable job, and people with limited education and training are often recruited as teachers. A lack of accountability can mean that teachers are frequently absent, and absent teachers may not be replaced.

There is a shortage of teachers overall, and the difficulty of getting teachers, especially female teachers, to go to rural areas has undermined efforts to expand access to school in rural areas, especially for girls. While the number of teaching positions grew annually in the years preceding 2013, it is now frozen. Seven out of 34 provinces have less than 10 percent female teachers, and in 17 provinces, less than 20 percent of the teachers are women. The shortage of female teachers has direct consequences for many girls who are kept out of school because their families will not accept their daughters being taught by a man. There is particular resistance to older girls being taught by male teachers.

Some government policies undermine the effort to get girls in school. Government schools typically have a number of documentation requirements, including government-issued identification, and official transfer letters for children moving from one school to another. While these requirements might seem routine, for families fleeing war, or surviving from one meal to the next, they can present an insurmountable obstacle that keeps children out of school. Restrictions on when children can register can drive families away, and policies excluding children who are late starting school constitute a de facto denial of education to many children. These barriers can be particularly harmful for girls, as discriminatory gender roles may mean that girls are more likely to lack identification, and to seek to enroll late and thus be affected by age restrictions and restrictions on enrolling mid-year. When families face difficulty obtaining the documentation necessary for a child to register or transfer, they may be less likely to go to great efforts to secure these documents for girls.

Afghanistan has well over a million internally displaced people, with more people being displaced all the time. Internally displaced families often face insurmountable barriers in obtaining the documentation they need to get their children into school in their new location. Families returning from other countries often face deportation and similar challenges.

Community-based education programs (CBEs) are often an Afghan girls only chance at education. The opening of a nearby CBE can mean access to education for girls who would otherwise miss school, and research has demonstrated the effectiveness of CBEs at increasing enrollment and test scores, especially for girls. CBEs can be an effective strategy to tackle many of the systemic barriers to girls education, including the long distances to school, insecurity on the route to school, and the lack of female teachers, among others. However, to date CBEs are exclusively operated by NGOs and entirely funded by foreign donors. The absence of long-term strategic thinking by government and donors exposes CBE programs and students to unpredictable closures, which can compromise students educational future.

As Afghanistans school system struggles and often fails to meet the needs of students, there is very little extra support or access to education for children who have disabilities.

Regular government schools typically have no institutionalized capacity to provide inclusive education or assist children with disabilities. Children with disabilities who attend regular schools are unlikely to receive any special assistance. Only a few specialized schools for children with disabilities exist, and they are of limited scope. With no system to identify, assess, and meet the particular needs of children with disabilities, they often instead are kept home or simply fall out of education.

The corruption present in most Afghan institutions undermines the education sector as well, most markedly in the large bribes demanded of people seeking to become teachers. Afghanistan is ranked as one of the most corrupt countries in the world, and Afghans asked to name the three most corrupt institutions in Afghanistan listed the Ministry of Education third, out of 13 institutions. Corruption takes many forms in the education sector, including: corruption in the contracting and delivery of construction and renovation contracts; theft of supplies and equipment; theft of salaries; demand for bribes in return for teaching and other positions; demands for bribes in return for grades, registration of students, provision of documents, among other things; and ghost school and ghost teachers schools and teachers that are funded but do not actually exist.

While Afghanistan has in recent years been one of the largest recipients in the world of donor funding, only between 2 and 6 percent of overseas development assistance has gone to the education sector. Bureaucratic hurdles, low capacity, corruption, and insecurity have contributed to even these funds often going unspent by the Afghan government. The government spends less on education than certain international standards recommend, as measured against gross domestic product (GDP) and the total national budget, reflecting in part how donors have allocated their funding.

In November 2016, donors and the Afghan government convened for the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan, where donors pledged US\$15.2 billion in aid for Afghanistan over the next four years. The goal of the conference organizers was to sustain aid at or near current levels, and this figure was seen as representing an achievement of that goal.

Despite the large pledges made at the Brussels Conference, the overall outlook for aid in Afghanistan is downward. NGOs report that they are feeling the effects of reductions in funding, and this is already having an impact on the many girls studying outside the governments education system. The impact on girls education could be even greater in the future, as government fixed costs especially for security force stake up a growing proportion of a declining aid budget.

Another change in donor funding that has affected girls occurred as international troops withdrew from many provinces in 2014, taking their funding with them. Under the system previously in place through the NATO military command, specific troop-contributing countries had security responsibility for each province, through a system of Provincial Reconstruction Teams. These countries typically invested in development aid, including for education, in the same province. As the troops drew down, the aid funding typically did as well. The result was that some provinces, particularly those that had been recipients of higher levels of aid funding, have already seen a steep decline in funds.

Education is a basic right enshrined in various international treaties ratified by Afghanistan, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Afghanistan has also ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which includes an obligation to ensure women equal rights with men, including in the field of education.

Under international human rights law, everyone has a right to free, compulsory, primary education, free from discrimination. International law also provides that secondary education shall be generally available and accessible to all.

Governments should guarantee equality in access to education as well as education free from discrimination. The Afghan government has a positive obligation to remedy abuses that emanate from social and cultural practices. Human rights law also calls upon governments to address the legal and social subordination women and girls face in their families, provisions violated by Afghanistans tolerance of a disproportionate number of girls being excluded from school.

International law obligates governments to protect children from child marriage, and from performing work that is hazardous, interferes with a childs education, or is harmful to the childs health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral, or social development. Children with disabilities have a right to access to inclusive education, and to be able to access education on an equal basis with others in their communities.

In implementing their obligations on education, governments should be guided by four essential criteria: availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability. Education should be available throughout the country, including by guaranteeing adequate and quality school infrastructure, and accessible to everyone on an equal basis. Moreover, the form and substance of education should be of acceptable quality and meet minimum educational standards, and the education provided should adapt to the needs of students with diverse social and cultural settings.

Governments should ensure functioning educational institutions and programs are available in sufficient quantity within their jurisdiction. Functioning education institutions should include buildings, sanitation facilities for both sexes, safe drinking water, trained teachers receiving domestically competitive salaries, teaching materials, and, where possible, facilities such as a library, computer facilities and information technology. It is widely understood that any meaningful effort to realize the right to education should make the quality of such education a core priority.

The Afghan government also has a legal obligation to take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social, and educational measures to protect children from all forms of physical and mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, and maltreatment. Permitting the use of corporal punishment is inconsistent with this obligation.

In the past 16 years, the Afghan government and its international backers have made significant progress in getting girls into school. But serious obstacles are still keeping large numbers of girls out of school and there is a real risk that recent gains will be reversed.

It is therefore urgent that the Afghan government and international donors redouble their efforts to remove or mitigate the barriers to girls education enumerated in this report in order to guarantee girls right to primary and secondary education in Afghanistan.

In Afghanistan, there is a form of verse known as *alandayorlandai*. *Landsays* are short poems, written by women, and passed on from woman to woman orally. The authors are typically anonymous, and the oral tradition allows them to be shared regardless of whether those sharing them know how to read and write. The title of this report echoes *alanday* attributed to 15-year-old Lima Niazi:

You wont allow me to go to school.

I wont become a doctor.

Remember this:

One day you will be sick.[1]

This report is primarily based on research conducted in Afghanistan in May and July 2016. Human Rights Watch researchers carried out a total of 249 individual and group interviews, mainly in Balkh, Kabul, Kandahar, and Nangarhar provinces.

Most of the interviewees total of 134 were girls who had missed all or significant portions of their primary and secondary education. The majority of these girls were 11 to 18 years old. We also interviewed 31 boys who had missed significant portions of their education. In addition to interviewing children, we also interviewed parents, sometimes as part of an interview with a family group. The remainder of the interviews were with Afghan government officials, community leaders, donors, educators, and education experts. All research was conducted in Afghanistan except for three interviews with education experts outside the country.

Interviews with children were conducted at community-based education and vocational program sites, at schools, and in their homes. Whenever possible, interviews were conducted privately with only the interviewee, a Human Rights Watch researcher, and, where necessary, an interpreter present. Interviews were conducted in Dari, Pashtu, and, with some experts and officials, in English.

All interviewees were advised of the purpose of the research and how the information would be used. We explained the voluntary nature of the interview and that they could refuse to be interviewed, refuse to answer any question, and terminate the interview at any point. Some interviews were recorded, for later reference; all interviewees who were recorded were given the choice to refuse to have the interview recorded. Interviewees did not receive any compensation. The names of children and family members have been changed to pseudonyms to protect their privacy. The names of other interviewees have sometimes been withheld at their request.

We selected research sites in Kabul, Kandahar, Balkh, and Nangarhar with the goal of getting a sample of different experiences, including from internally displaced people, and hearing from people dealing with various levels of insecurity related to the war. Security challenges and transportation challenges also affected our choice of provinces and our ability to move within those provinces, and sometimes sharply limiting the amount of time we could spend at interview sites. Despite this, we were able to visit multiple sites in each province, including a number of rural areas outside city centers.

In this report, the terms *child* and *children* are used to refer to anyone under the age of 18, consistent with usage under international law.

At the time of the research for this report, the exchange rate was approximately 69 Afghanis=US\$1. We have used this rate for conversions in the text. Afghanis are often referred to, including in quotes, as Afs.

A guardian to eight siblings seeking an education, Mazar-i Sharif, July 2016

The 2001 invasion of Afghanistan by the United States and its allies following the September 11 attacks on the US was presented as a war in part to advance womens rights. US and other leaders repeatedly cited the dire situation of Afghan women under Taliban rule as a justification for intervention.

Since taking power in Afghanistan in 1996, the Taliban had almost entirely shut girls out of education. After the defeat of the Taliban government in late 2001, rebuilding the education system for girls became a priority for the new government and its donors. Hundreds of millions of dollars were invested in getting girls into school, and ambitious plans were put forward to help women who had missed out on education to catch up.

A great deal was accomplished toward achieving these goals. Millions of girls who would have been denied education under the Taliban began going to school.[2]

The actual number of girls in school in Afghanistan has always been a loose estimate.[3] Statistics of all kind seven basic population data are often difficult to obtain in Afghanistan and of questionable accuracy. A 2015 Afghan government report stated that more than 8 million children were in school, 39 percent of whom were girls.[4] In December 2016, the minister of education announced that the number of children in school was 6 million.[5] At times the Ministry of Education appears to have included in its count refugee children studying in Pakistan and Iran.[6] In April 2017 an education ministry official told Human Rights Watch that 9.3 million children were in school, 39 percent of whom are girls.[7] He also said that about 3.5 million children are out of school, about 85 percent of whom are girls.[8]

However, some have found the government numbers of children in school to be suspect. In January 2016, the United Nations childrens agency, UNICEF, estimated that 40 percent of children in Afghanistan do not attend school.[9] Relying on Afghan government data from 2010-2011, UNICEF also reported that 66 percent of Afghan girls of lower secondary school age 12 to 15 years old are out of school, compared to 40 percent of boys that age.[10] In 2016, the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction wrote: The MoE [Ministry of Education] acknowledged a large number of children are out of school, but is unaware of how many, who or where they are, or their backgrounds.[11]

There are good reasons to be skeptical about the governments numbers. The government does not stop counting children as being in school until they have not attended for three years because they might return to school.[12] A 2015 investigation of 50 US-funded schools in seven provinces heavily affected by the conflict found not only that over 10 percent of the schools were not functioning, but that in those that were functioning, the number of students present was far smaller than the number the Ministry of Education listed as being enrolled including a 40 percent over-counting of girls.[13] The deputy minister of general education confirmed to Human Rights Watch that children continue to be counted as being in school for several years after they have dropped out; he asserted that this reflects the need to give them the opportunity to come back but also said that the government is looking at ways to improve data to show who is not attending.[14]

Donor governments and inter-governmental organizations eager to claim the success of their support for education have not been as skeptical about government figures as they should have been, and now face significant challenges tracking how education funds were used. For example, in 2016, the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) issued a report reviewing US government spending between 2002 and 2014 on education in Afghanistan.[15] The report called for better assessments of whether US government efforts have led to improvements in education or increased stability in Afghanistan. SIGAR also called on the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to acknowledge the source and reliability of data and clearly explain whether there is a causal connection between USAID efforts and documented progress.[16]

A more accurate assessment of the number of girls in school matters, in part because overstated high numbers have helped give the impression that there is a continued positive trajectory, when in fact numbers are actually decreasing in some parts of the country. Even according to the most optimistic statistics, only slightly more than half of Afghan girls are in school. According to government statistics, while the number of children in school continued to increase through 2015, the rate of increase has leveled off and become minimal since 2011, with only a 1 percent increase in 2015 over 2014.[17] When the number of children enrolled in school increases over time, a decline in the annual rate of increase in enrollment is understandable. However, with over 3.5 million children not attending school, a 1 percent rate of increase is insufficient to ensure that children are accessing their right to education.

The World Bank reported that between 2011 and 2013, attendance rates in lower primary school fell from 56 to 54 percent, with girls in rural areas most likely to be out of school.[18] Government statistics indicate that in some provinces, the percentage of students who are girls is as low as 15 percent.[19]

Throughout Afghanistan, only 37 percent of female youths and 19 percent of adult women are literate, compared to 66 percent of male youth and 49 percent of adult men.[20] Analysis by the World Bank shows wide variation from province to province in the ratio of girls versus boys attending school, with the proportion of students who are girls falling in some provinces including Kandahar and Paktia.[21] As the overall security situation worsens, schools close, and donors disengage, there are signs that access to education for girls in at least some parts of Afghanistan is in decline.

Government expenditure on education has fluctuated significantly in recent years, and remains low. According to certain international standards, the government should spend at least 15 to 20 percent of total national budget, and 4 to 6 percent of GDP, on education.[22] As the United Nations noted, [l]east developed countries need to reach or exceed the upper end of these benchmarks if they are to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by the target date of 2030.[23] As of 2016, 13 percent of Afghanistans public expenditure, and 4 percent of GDP, was spent on education.[24]

Feroza, 14, in her second year at a community-based education program, Mazar-i Sharif, July 2016

Under Afghan law, intermediate (basic) education is compulsory, which means that students must attend until the end of class nine.[25] However, the authorities have neither the capacity to provide this level of education to all children, nor a mechanism to enforce the requirement that all children attend school. They do not tell parents that they must send their children to school. In practice, many children do not have access to education or, if they do have access, it does not extend through class nine. Even when education is available, there is no government mechanism to seek out out-of-school children and enroll them, or to do outreach to children who drop out of school and their families. There are no consequences for families that do not send their children to school.

Armed conflict and lack of resources create real obstacles for the Afghan government in providing universal access to education. Deeply rooted, harmful gender norms mean that any efforts by the government to compel parents to send girls to school would be controversial, could lead to violence, and could have an impact on the governments efforts to win support away from the Taliban. More importantly, the government has failed to send families the message that school is important for all of their children and to ensure that the education system accommodates all students.

There are four main types of school for children in Afghanistan: government schools, community-based education programs (commonly referred to as CBEs), religious schools or *madrasas*, and private schools. Families send children to different types of schools depending on the circumstances of the individual child, or the changing circumstances of the family, sometimes driven by changes in the familys location, the impact of the conflict, and restrictions on girls education.

Afghan government data states that there are 14,658 government general education schools in the country.[26] These schools use a government curriculum that is intended to be consistent across the country.

Most of Afghanistans schools, including government schools, are segregated by gender, with boys and girls studying separately, and virtually all studies from class ten on are separated by gender.[27] Even when girls and boys study separately, however, the shortage of schools often result in girls and boys attending separate shifts at the same school. Only 16 percent of schools in Afghanistan are exclusively for girls.[28]

One of the major donor initiatives to try to get more children, especially girls, into school was the creation of community-based education programs (CBEs), which are funded through and operated by NGOs, with the expectation that the government provides oversight. These programs often referred to as classes rather than schools, as they are often based in homes frequently consist of a single class of 25 or 30 students. They are designed to provide access to education in communities where there is no school nearby. They are also intended to assist children who are behind in their studies, by accepting children who are too old to be admitted to government schools. Many CBEs offer an accelerated program of study, condensing two years worth of material into a single year, with the goal of helping children catch up so that they can go to a government school after

completing a CBE.

CBE classes use the same curriculum as government schools, including the same textbooks.[29] There is variety in the number of classes covered by these programs with some going through class six, but others ending after class three, four or five. Many CBEs give priority to holding classes for girls, and these classes are typically for girls only, and taught solely by female teachers.

Madrasas, which have limited oversight by government, provide a range of programs, from brief one-hour sessions focused solely on religious teaching to centers offering a school day as long that of a government school or a CBE, and covering religion plus secular educational subjects such as reading, writing, math, and science.

According to government statistics, there are 805 *madrasas* in the country, but this likely reflects only schools registered with and recognized by the government.[30] Some educators believe the number of unregistered *madrasas* is much higher.[31]

Few Afghan schools are fully secular. Afghanistan is an Islamic republic, not a secular state, and the official government curriculum used in both government schools and CBEs includes Islamic studies. But because many *madrasas* are unregistered and operate outside the government education system, they may not use the government curriculum, and children cannot necessarily easily transfer from a *madrasa* to a government school.

Afghanistan has a wide variety of private schools, from primary to the university level. Government statistics indicate that there are 1,051 general education private schools from primary through high school levels across the country.[32] Some families who can afford it choose private schools that they believe are of better quality than government schools. Others choose private education because they live in areas where there is a private school but no government school.

The government is responsible for monitoring private schools, but this is complicated by some private schools not being formally registered.[33]

Asif, 62, father of five children, whose educations have been disrupted by being refugees, Mazar-i Sharif, July 2016

When the US-led coalition ousted the Taliban in late 2001, some families were ready to send their daughters to school the next day. Some girls desire for an education was so strong that they went to multiple schools at the same time. Others needed more convincing.

Even when the Taliban fell, people didn't want to send their girls to school, a long-time educator in Kandahar said. We started CBE classes, and girls came slowly, but after [they completed the classes] families let them go to government schools.[34]

Educators said they have seen a change in the level of demand for education over time since 2001. Fifteen years ago, no one wanted to send girls to school, but now especially in the north that has really changed, the director of an organization in Balkh said.[35]

In Kandahar, the director of a training program said: In general, the population's attitude has completely changed. They want the future to be better; they want education. They see that opportunities are available and they are interested.[36]

With increased demand has come the beginnings of stigma associated with not sending children to school. There was a time when people would say it is better for a child to carry wood than to go to school, said an Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) official. Now a man will carry wood to pay fees for his child at school.[37]

Numerous education experts and government officials described a divide between urban and rural areas, with higher demand and greater access to education in urban areas.[38] Public awareness is succeeding, one government education official said. People are interested in enrolling their children, especially boys. For girls, we still have a problem. Parents send girls in cities.[39]

This divide is exacerbated by security problems related to the conflict, which are often worse outside cities, and by a related lack of government presence in and outreach to rural areas. Provincial education departments vary in the extent to which they have a presence in rural districts, and the central ministry may be even more insular.

For many families, moving from a village to a city changes their views on girls' education. Gulpari, 14, moved from a village to Mazar-i Sharif when she was 10 years old, after her father got a job in the city. She is the oldest of six children; in the village, she did not attend school, and after the family moved to the city, her younger brothers were sent to school while she stayed home. When Gulpari was 12, however, a CBE opened nearby and her parents let her attend. Now they also pay for her to attend math classes at a private school and they support her dream of becoming a doctor. When they came to the city they realized it's good to get an education, Gulpari said. When they saw other girls going to school, they thought it was good. [In the village] there was a school at a far distance, but girls were not allowed to go; only boys were allowed. The government should make a lot of schools all around villages; people will come.[40]

Some families go to great lengths to obtain education for their children. Families interviewed for this report described moving from one neighborhood to another, from rural areas to the city, or even across several provinces, in search of access to a school.

Some families choose to separate when that is the only option to educate their children. Mujahida, 13, and her five sisters and two brothers all moved from Samangan to Mazar-i Sharif without their parents so that they could go to school, because the nearest school in Samangan was five or six villages away. They are looked after by a young cousin who is a high school student.[41]

For families displaced from their homes, if their children can access education in the location to which they have been displaced, this may be a strong reason not to go home. If the situation remains bad in our village, we will not leave Jalalabad, a woman displaced from an ISIS-controlled area said. We like it here because our girls can continue school easily.[42]

Rising insecurity and poverty may be eroding support for girls' education. A survey conducted annually since 2006 found that the percentage of Afghans who agree or strongly agree with the statement Women should have equal opportunities like men in education, has declined from 91 percent in 2006 to 81 percent in 2016.[43]

International expert who had delivered education services in Afghanistan, London, May 2016

In spite of the demand for girls' education, harmful gender norms still keep many girls out of school. Harmful gender norms also account for many of the barriers to education having a disproportionate impact on girls. For example, security concerns or distance are more likely to result in girls being kept out of school, families struggling to meet education costs may prioritize boys, it is often harder for girls to overcome administrative barriers, and lack of female teachers and infrastructure affect girls more.

Gender discrimination is deeply entrenched in Afghanistan, and some families simply do not believe that girls should go to school. Zahra, 15, was never allowed to go to school, even though her father is a teacher in a government school for boys. The men in [this area] don't like their daughters to go to school, she said. They think women are only for home chores, so they don't let us go outside; we just stay home. She added that there is often malicious gossip directed at girls who go to school and their families. Relatives talk badly about you if you go to school, she said. They say it's shameful that they let their daughter get an education.[44]

CBE programs, which often go door-to-door recruiting students, often experience this resistance. One CBE teacher in Kabul described a family living next door to the program; the father allowed his 16 and 17-year-old daughters to attend, but only if they climbed a ladder over the wall, so that none of the neighbors would know they were studying.[45]

Some parents say, You can stay either in the house or in the grave, the manager of a CBE program in Jalalabad said.[46]

In rural areas, where schools often remain inaccessible, attitudes are less likely to have changed. An official from the AIHRC said:

While girls in rural areas face particular challenges, Human Rights Watch also interviewed dozens of girls kept home from school in major cities, including Kabul. The reasons given for this included the idea that girls should not go to school at all, or should go only until they begin to physically mature. My parents didn't get an education, so they don't want us to get it either, said Kamella, 18, who attended school for five years in Kandahar city, but was forced by her family to quit at age 12.[48]

There is often stigma attached to girls studying, and gossip contributed to many girls interviewed for this report leaving school. Fariba, 11, was the first girl in her family allowed to go to school. I was crying a lot. I was asking my father and brothers to let me go and they decided to let me go, she said. I studied to class three. I got my class four books, but then I left because my parents said [people in] houses in the street are talking and saying, Why does she go to school? I was 10, Fariba said. They took me out because our people are very bad people and they talked.[49]

My younger daughter was very smart, but our people have a backwards mentality and kept passing remarks at me about sending my daughter to school, said Asif, a 62-year-old father of five. After a while, my daughter couldn't bear to see me taunted like that, and quit school.[50]

Often a single family member has the power to decide whether girls will study. Nazira, 15, said her older sister was never allowed to go to school at all, and it was only luck that allowed her to get five years of schooling. My elder uncle was alive then and he wouldn't allow anyone to study. But he died, so I could go. She was only allowed to go to class five, when she was 12, however, before her parents made her drop out.[51]

Girls often described increasing family pressure to leave school as they grew older, due to discriminatory gender norms and greater restrictions on their movement as they approach puberty. Government statistics suggest this, with 2013 data showing that girls made up 41, 36, and 35 percent of students in lower primary, upper primary and lower secondary school, respectively.[52] In Afghanistan's universities, as of 2009, only 25 percent of students were women.[53] The higher you go, the more dropouts and the fewer girls, an education official in Nangarhar said.[54]

My father said, You are getting older; class eight is enough. You can just read letters and numbers; it's enough for you, said Mary, 10, a CBE student in class three, explaining why she will have to leave school after class eight. I want to finish class 12 and be a doctor, she said. But unfortunately, my parents won't let me continue.[55]

A government official gave several reasons for the high dropout rates in the higher classes: a shortage of girls-only schools, parents' reluctance to send girls to coed school, and a lack of female teachers.[56]

Zarifa, 17, began her studies at a CBE in Kabul at age 7. After four years, she graduated from the CBE with 30 to 35 female classmates. She said that 20 to 25 out of the group transferred together to the closest government school, which is a 20 to 25-minute walk from her home; the CBE was five minutes away. For the girls who did not transfer, she said the distance was the main factor. She and her classmates found that they were academically well prepared when they started at the government school, but they faced other challenges. Very few stayed, Zarifa said. Some married, some families didn't allow them to continue, some had security problems. She said the environment at the school was also difficult. There are too many students; it's hard to manage them. There is a lack of chairs, of teachers, of classrooms. It is too crowded; some study in tents. There is a lack of books. At one time, I had no books. Six years later, of the 20 to 25 classmates who transferred to the government school with Zarifa, only 8 to 10 remain. I didn't allow myself to be taken out, Zarifa said. I had promised to stay and finish.[57]

When girls are permitted to go to school, there is often a moment when their family decides that they are too old to continue. Gul Chehrah, 16, is a student in class four at a CBE. I am supposed to go to class five, but my father is objecting, she said. First through class four was okay, but for five he says I am too old now. I would like to continue, but my father does not accept it.[58]

For some girls, the moment when their families deem them too old for school comes early. Roya, 15, was only 8 when her brothers made her leave school after she had attended for two years. My brothers said, You are grown up; leave the school. Girls should not get education; it's not necessary for girls, Roya said.[59]

Some interviewees linked this moment when girls are forced to leave school to physical appearance or becoming a woman. Zahra, 15, whose father is a schoolteacher in a government school for boys, never went to school, but her younger sisters were allowed to attend before puberty. My father said, [w]e won't let them grow up in school, she said. When they reach the moment they become a woman, my father won't let them go. You become a woman at maybe 12 or 13. Zahra's 13-year-old sister has already been removed from school; Zahra thinks the 11-year-old has another year or two.[60]

Others drew an explicit link with the onset of menstruation. When you get your period, your family won't let them go to school, because they are afraid they could be kidnapped or do something, said Kamella, 18, who was forced to leave school at age 12.[61]

Slower physical development may buy girls a bit longer in school. Freshta, 15, the oldest daughter in her family, was forced to leave school at age 13, but her 13-year-old sister is still studying. They will let her continue even when she becomes an adult, Freshta said. They think she will not become an adult because she is not tall. I became tall and then was not allowed to continue school. Whenever one neighbor talks about us that we are grown and why is she going to school, we have to stop. Freshtas mother chimed in: I agree with this rule, because when you are an adult you should take care of the house and your siblings.[\[62\]](#)

The view that girls should leave school at a certain age is sometimes linked to fears that if they are outside the home they may engage in romantic or sexual behavior. There was a case of a girl running away with a teacher, a journalist said. As a result, a hundred girls were removed from school.[\[63\]](#)

Delara, 17, and her three older sisters were never allowed to go to school. She said her brothers fear that, [w]e may be in love with a boy, and escape with someone. Our brothers also wont allow us to use a phone, or wear *hijab* [with their face showing] instead of *burqa* [covering the whole face and body]. My brothers just think like this; we never did anything wrong. She added: Its not for me to decide about my life.[\[64\]](#)

Parents typically expect to arrange their childrens marriages, so the possibility of a romance is seen as not only an issue of morality, but also a threat to parental control. Kamella, 18, said that she knew of three or four girls in her area who had eloped, and that this is a great fear of parents, [b]ecause other people will use bad words for your family [if your daughter elopes] and in Kandahar girls are not allowed to select a husband for themselves. It is not changing still girls marry whomever parents decide.[\[65\]](#)

Some family members, facing resistance from within the family, go to extraordinary lengths to send girls to school secretly. The mother and older brother of Lailuma, 12, wanted her to study, but her shopkeeper father refused. Three years ago, when a CBE opened nearby, the mother and brother secretly enrolled Lailuma without her fathers knowledge, and since then the whole family has worked together to keep it a secret from him that she spends half her day at a CBE. Its not possible for my sisters to go to school, said Lailuma. The oldest one, who is about 17, is engaged, and the younger one, about 9, cannot be trusted not to tell father. Lailuma is now in class three, her last year at the CBE. Id like to go to class twelve, Lailuma said, But this is not possible because of my father.[\[66\]](#)

Hamida, 18, is the only girl in a family with five brothers. Her father, an auto mechanic, is so opposed to girls education that even when, at age 18, Hamida heard about a three-month sewing training program for women, she was able to attend only by hiding her participation from her father. I cannot come when he is at home only when he is working. I missed two days for that reason, she said.[\[67\]](#)

In Afghanistan, 33 percent of girls marry before the age of 18[\[68\]](#) There is no data available on the percentage of girls who marry before the age of 15. Forced marriage of adult women also occurs with some frequency in Afghanistan.[\[69\]](#) Under Afghan law, the minimum age of marriage for girls is 16, or 15 with the permission of the girls father or a judge, while boys must wait until they are 18 to marry.[\[70\]](#) The laws different treatment of males and females violates international law on child marriage. In practice the law is rarely enforced, so even earlier marriages are likely.

Yalda married one year after she began menstruating; she estimates that she was about age 13. Her husband was 75; she was his second wife. She is unsure of her current age, but has six children, the oldest an 8-year-old. She never went to school.[\[71\]](#)

The consequences of child marriage are deeply harmful, and they include girls dropping out or being excluded from education.[\[72\]](#) Other harms from child marriage include serious health risks including death to girls and their babies due to early pregnancy. Girls who marry as children are also more likely to be victims of domestic violence than women who marry later.

Zubaida, 13, has three older sisters, none of whom went to school. My sisters were very young when they got married thats why they didnt go to school, Zubaida said. The eldest sister married at 14. Zubaida is unsure what the ages of marriage were for her second and third oldest sisters, but she said her third sister was particularly young. When she was pregnant we took her to the doctor and he complained: How could parents get a girl married this young? Zubaida is in class three and says she hopes to be able to delay marriage and become a doctor. When someone comes to ask to marry me, my father says, No, I dont want to marry hershes too young. I married my other daughters early, and they faced a lot of problems during pregnancy, so I dont want to get my two remaining daughters married early.[\[73\]](#)

Being out of school puts girls at heightened risk of child marriage. Afghan government data indicates that girls who did not study are three times as likely to marry before age 18 as girls who completed secondary education or higher. And that lack of access to education is a major driver of child marriage.[\[74\]](#) Masooma said she was never allowed to go to school because of security problems instead she married young. It was unclear how old she was when she married, but when Human Rights Watch interviewed her, she said she was 22 years old and the mother of five children.[\[75\]](#)

While there is no legal prohibition on married girls attending school, in reality they are rarely able to do so.[\[76\]](#) Domestic work, pregnancy and childrearing, and restrictions on the movement of women and girls mean that few in-laws are prepared to have married girls continue studying. About 10 girls a year marry, a high school teacher told Human Rights Watch, referring to his school where there were 800 students in classes one through twelve. When they get married they are not allowed to go to school.[\[77\]](#)

Palwasha, 16, was a student in class three at a CBE program in Mazar-i Sharif when she spoke to Human Rights Watch. When I finish class four, I want to go to a government school. At least thats my plan. But I am engaged and I dont know if I will be allowed by my in-laws to go to school, she said. Her engagement was three months before Human Rights Watch interviewed her in July 2016, and she expected the wedding to be in the following month or two. My husband said he will allow me to continue my education, but Im afraid my in-laws might not allow me. They said, Nobody in our family went to school, so you shouldnt study either. I told them, No problem, I will do what you say. I told them that, but I am very interested in continuing my education. My husband supports my education, but he can never disobey his parents.[\[78\]](#)

Poverty both keeps many girls out of school and encourages child marriage. Tarana, 18, is the oldest girl in her family. She was never able to go to school, in part because her father was killed in a bombing when she was 15. After his death, the family faced financial problems, and Tarana was married to her cousin at age 15. She was pregnant when Human Rights Watch interviewed her. Her sister, however, just a year younger, started studying at age 13 or 14 and is still studying at a government school at age 17. Their 12-year-old sister also goes to government school. I had expected to go to school, Tarana said. But because of financial difficulties after my father was killed, I couldnt. Now my sisters are getting an education.[\[79\]](#)

Monira, 40, lost both her husband and her son in an accident, and she is now in the uncomfortable position of living with and being financially dependent on her dead husbands family. She said she was unable to send her two daughters, ages 13 and 15, to school because we have no money. The 15-year-old is married, and the 13-year-old is engaged. Both girls and their mother are now in a class to learn sewing skills, in hopes of finding a way to provide for themselves.[\[80\]](#)

A child marriage by one girl in a family can result in another girl having to leave school to take over the married girls work. Chehrahs sister was engaged at birth to a cousin. At age 16, the marriage took place. Chehrah, then 12, had been studying but her father made her leave school as her mother now needed her to replace her sister doing housework.[\[81\]](#)

Even when the marriage itself is deferred, an engagement is often enough to force a girl out of school. Gulnazs sisters wedding wont take place for five more years, but her sister had to leave school as soon as she was engaged at age 16.[\[82\]](#) My second oldest sister went to school until class six before she got engaged and had to stop, said Samira, 11.[\[83\]](#)

One form of arranged marriage practiced in Afghanistan, which often involves child marriage, is an exchange of brides called *badal*. Several girls told Human Rights Watch that they had sisters who had been engaged at young ages through *badal* arrangements for example, one girl was engaged at age 2, and married at age 9; another was engaged at 8 and married at 11. These early engagements may lead to girls being kept out of school even while their sisters study.[\[84\]](#)

Even the anticipation of marriage in the future is sometimes an excuse to end a girls education. Chehrah is 16 years old. Her 18-year-old brother is the person who decided that Chehrah should leave school after class four and her older sister should never go to school. Youre girls, and I am a boy, Chehrah said he told them. Tomorrow you will get married and bear children, so what are you doing with school?[\[85\]](#)

It is common and, in some families, considered desirable for relatives, including first cousins to marry. The desire to arrange such a marriage can affect the age at which girls marry. Naiema married her cousin when she was 15. My father decided to get me married to him because he was the only boy in our family, Naiema said. My father wanted me to marry in the family. He forced it on me. She was widowed at age 16, after her husband suffered what she said was a neurological problem as he journeyed to Iran to seek work. When Human Rights Watch interviewed Naiema, she was 19, and in class three at a CBE. I was very interested to study when I was very young, and after my husband died my father moved us to Mazar so I could get an education so I got my dream.[\[86\]](#)

Many of the girls interviewed for this report had moved or been displaced, sometimes leading to changes in the familys practices regarding child marriage. Nasrin grew up in rural Helmand province, but her family fled worsening security and came to Kandahar. Nasrins older sisters all married at ages 16 or 17, but at 18 Nasrin was still unmarried. Before, we were in Helmand, and now we are in Kandahar, and the situation is different, she explained. The people who live in villages do their marriage early, but now we live in the city. In Kandahar city, girls get married later. Nasrin and her older sisters never studied in Helmand, but in Kandahar one of their younger sisters is studying.[\[87\]](#)

For some girls, the possibility that a forced marriage could threaten their education is a source of anxiety. Homa was only able to begin her studies when she was 12 years old, because as the oldest daughter she had to work to pay the education costs for her younger siblings. At age 14, she is excited about her studies and dreams of going from CBE to government school, to university and becoming a doctor. But she is afraid marriage will put an end to her education. I am so interested to get an education I am struggling, she said. But I cant say anything about my father he might engage me to someone and I might get married. I am trying to reach 19, but I think my father will have me married at 18.[\[88\]](#)

Ministry of Education officials said they were concerned about child marriage, and an official in Nangarhar said that the government is trying to develop a pilot education program for girls in three districts in that province that they have identified as having both low girls education participation and high rates of child marriage.[\[89\]](#) In April 2017, the Afghan government launched a national plan to end child marriage.[\[90\]](#) But given the governments poor track record of implementing laws and policies designed to protect the rights of women and girls, there is reason for skepticism about the likely impact of these efforts.[\[91\]](#)

Poverty is a major barrier to education in Afghanistan. The World Bank reports that in Afghanistan 62 percent of non-poor children go to school, but only 48 percent of poor children do.[\[92\]](#) Between 2011-12 and 2013-14, the percentage of non-poor children attending school rose by 1.8 percent, but the percentage of poor children studying fell by 6 percent.[\[93\]](#) This is a crucial barrier, as Afghanistan remains one of the poorest countries in the world, and poverty is increasing.[\[94\]](#)

Some families told Human Rights Watch that they cannot afford even the most basic school supplies. Others keep their children out of school so that they can work, because the family is financially dependent on childrens earnings. Some children do not go to school because their families are barely surviving and they are too hungry to study.

A community leader from an informal settlement in Kabul of Kuchi people, who were formerly nomadic, explained why in his community few children go to school:

He has five or six grandchildren living in the settlement, none of whom go to school.[\[95\]](#)

Displacement can compound poverty, leaving parents in such crisis as they try to survive day-to-day that they feel unable to cope with trying to get their children to school. Ahmad and his extended family, including his six children, arrived in Mazar-i Sharif in 2013, after fleeing an area of Balkh province where he said the Taliban had killed people and there was fighting between the Taliban and government forces. His oldest children, now ages 15 and 13, went to school there, but all of the children have been out of school since they fled their home.[\[96\]](#)

Aside from meeting the essential costs of sending children to school, stigma and shame also contribute to keeping poor children out of school. Poor people face mental problems during study, because their clothes are not new and they dont have new bags and they will feel ashamed to go to school, said Fawzia, who missed school until she was 14.[\[97\]](#)

Girls are often the first to be pushed out of school by poverty. Families that struggle to scrape together enough money for only some of their children to attend school are likely to send boys, not girls. When economic circumstances require that mothers work, daughters not sons are the ones likely to be kept home to do housework.

When children are put to work for wages because of economic desperation, girls can do carpet weaving, tailoring or embroidery in the home and their education is seen as more expendable than boys. In addition to harmful gender norms, there are also economic reasons for prioritizing boys education; daughters who marry normally go to live with, and contribute to, their husbands family, while sons often remain with their parents, so sending them to school is an investment in the familys economic future in a way that educating a girl is not.

Afghanistans deep poverty results in widespread child labor. At least a quarter of Afghan children between ages 5 and 14 work for a living or to help their families, including 27 percent of 5 to 11-year-olds[\[98\]](#) Many are employed in jobs that can result in illness, injury, or even death due to hazardous working conditions and poor enforcement of safety and health standards.[\[99\]](#)

Children in Afghanistan generally work long hours for little or sometimes no pay. Paid jobs done by children include: home-based carpet-making, embroidery, or tailoring; bonded labor in brick kilns; in the metal industry as tinsmiths and welders; in mines; in agriculture; and on the streets as vendors, shoe shiners, and beggars. Other children work doing housework or work on their families' land. Work forces children to combine the burdens of a job with education or forces them out of school altogether. Only half of Afghanists child laborers attend school.[\[100\]](#)

Among 5 to 11-year-olds, similar numbers of girls and boys work (25 percent versus 29 percent)[\[101\]](#) At ages 12 to 14, this gap widens to 18 percent versus 26 percent, because girls' ability to work outside the home is often restricted as they approach puberty.[\[102\]](#) Girls are most likely to work in carpet weaving or tailoring, but a significant number also engage in street work, such as begging or selling items on the street.[\[103\]](#)

Afghanistan has laws to prevent harmful child labor but they are rarely enforced. Under Afghanistan's Labor Law, 18 is the minimum age for employment. Children between the ages of 15-17 are allowed to work only if the work is not harmful to them, requires less than 35 hours a week, and represents a form of vocational training. Children 14 and younger are not allowed to work at all.[\[104\]](#)

Some parents want to schedule school so that their kids can work, a CBE provider in Kabul said. She said that at her CBE, working children are especially common among internally displaced and returnee families, due to the desperate economic situation of many of these families. She estimated that five or six years ago, about 85 percent of the children in the school worked, but she said the local community's economic situation had improved over time, as displaced families have found their bearings, and that number was now down to about 30 to 35 percent.[\[105\]](#)

Many girls said that they began working, usually making carpets, embroidering or sewing, around age 7. I've been making carpets for six years, said Zainab, 13, who makes carpets with her three sisters. Their father initially refused to let them study because he wanted them to work full-time. He was convinced to let them study when a CBE opened near their house, but they weave carpets in the morning before school and in the evenings after they come home. We get paid 2,200 Af\$ per meter [US\$32], Zainab said.[\[106\]](#)

Some girls are the sole wage earner for their families. Wahida, 16, has four older sisters. Their father is mostly blind after being injured in a mine explosion and their mother is ill. Wahida was never sent to school. Wahida's 17-year-old sister became the fourth to marry last year, leaving a household consisting of Wahida, her parents and four younger siblings. Wahida works as a seamstress, earning 600 to 900 Afghani a month [59-13] stitching sets of traditional clothing. I am the only one earning, she said.[\[107\]](#)

Being the family's wage earner can put children under enormous pressure. Shakila, 14, fought to go to CBE, where she is in class three, but she has missed many classes. My father is sick and cannot work anymore, she said. He wants me to work. She said her father arranged for her and her 11-year-old brother to weave carpets at home.

Many children combine work and school, often resulting in a grueling schedule. Bibi Gul, 16, cleans three kilograms of peas for a shopkeeper for three hours every morning before she goes to school at a CBE. She and her younger brother and sister came to live with their older brother and his two wives and one child after their parents died. I help with the economy, Bibi Gul said. I do it to help my younger sister buy pens, and so on, for school. She is the eighth child out of 10 and the first to go to school.[\[109\]](#)

Occasionally the greater ability of boys to work outside the home leads to a girl having more opportunity than their brothers to study. Farzana, 11, is one of seven children, and the only one to go to school. Her oldest brother has a paid job and the younger ones, ages 10 and up, look after the family's sheep. I am the youngest girl, so I am allowed to go to school, Farzana said.[\[110\]](#)

Often the oldest daughter in the family bears the brunt of domestic work, frequently missing education as a result. I'm the oldest girl, that's why I didn't go to school, said Wazhma, 13. She has five brothers and two sisters, all younger except one brother. There was no one at home, Wazhma said. I had to prepare the food and clothes. All my siblings went to school except me. My family said they will go to school and you have to stay home to do cleaning and other chores.[\[111\]](#)

Girls are sometimes kept home to help their mothers because the family is so large that housework requires more than one person. Other girls are kept home because their mothers are ill or have a disability. My siblings started studying in Dast-i Barchi, said Arzo, 16, referring to a neighborhood in Kabul where the family lived for four years after moving from Maidan Wardak province, where none of the six children had attended school. I'm the oldest. I'm the only one who didn't go to school. My mother was sick and she said I should do the house chores, Arzo said. At age 14, Arzo finally had a chance to go to school, after a CBE opened in the family's neighborhood and the staff visited their house and convinced Arzo's parents to send her.[\[112\]](#)

Lina's mother has a physical disability from stepping on a mine as a child that limits her mobility. Lina said her mother is impaired by grieving for her oldest son, who fell from the roof and died as the family was building their current home. She receives little help from Lina's father, who uses drugs. Lina, 12, and her older sister began studying in 2015, but after a year the housework became too much for their mother. Lina was allowed to continue studying but her sister left school to do the housework.[\[113\]](#)

In some families where the mother works outside the home, the eldest girl is expected to take her place doing the housework, at the cost of the daughters' education. Safia's father worked pushing a cart, but did not earn enough to support his five children, so Safia's mother found work as a cook. Safia, then 7, became responsible for caring for her brothers, ages one year and three months at the time. Our income was weak, Safia, now 15, said. If my father had worked, my mother wouldn't have gone to work. I wouldn't have had to look after my brothers, and I could have gone to school. Safia's younger sister went to school and graduated, and her younger brothers are studying. Her older brother married and with his wife helping with the housework Safia, at 13, was given a chance to study when a CBE opened nearby.[\[114\]](#)

Paimanah, 12, who studied at a CBE hidden in a family home near her house, Kandahar, July 2016

Insecurity has dramatically undermined access to education for girls. UNAMA, the UN mission in Afghanistan, began tracking civilian casualties in 2009; every year since then the number of casualties documented has topped the previous year. In 2016, the figure was 11,418 civilian casualties (3,498 deaths and 7,920 injured), a 3 percent increase in total civilian casualties compared to 2015. In total, since 2009, the UN has documented 24,841 civilian deaths and 45,347 civilians injured.[\[115\]](#)

Children make up large numbers of civilian casualties; in 2016, for example, 923 deaths and 2,589 injuries were of children, a 24 percent increase from 2015.[\[116\]](#) For every child killed or injured in the conflict, many others are deprived of education. Escalating insecurity encourages families to keep their children at home and families usually have less tolerance for sending girls to school in insecure conditions than boys. The school that previously might have been seen as within walking distance becomes off-limits when parents fear that the journey is becoming more dangerous. Alongside the war, there is a lack of rule of law stemming from the conflict, which means that girls on the way to school may also face unchecked crime and abuse including kidnapping and sexual harassment.

Now families are very inclined to send girls to school, but there are a lot of security problems, a CBE staff member in Kandahar said. Even girls here [at a CBE] get threats. She continued, Peoples attitudes [to education] have brightened up, but the security environment doesn't always allow it.[\[117\]](#)

We studied until the war started and then school stopped, said Raihana, age 14 or 15, whose family, including her five siblings, fled to Kabul from Maidan Wardak. She said her family's home and land were burned by the Taliban. For the first two years after they fled, all the children were out of school, because there were no schools near the informal settlement for internally displaced people where the family lived.[\[118\]](#)

Despite the insecurity, many children and families are still demanding education, and make efforts to negotiate with combatants to secure that. A Ministry of Education official explained: [t]he political situation the fighting, the insurgency affects all of life, but people need to be supported. For example, in Wardak there is fighting, but kids go to school. The community tells the insurgents, You can have whatever problems with the government, but our children need to continue their education regardless.[\[119\]](#) The government and donors need strategies to maximize the extent to which children, including girls, can keep studying even amid war.

When security worsens, one of the first consequences is often girls losing access to education. Families often clamp down first on girls going to school, even while boys continue to attend. In Samangan, there was fighting in our area, said Shakila, 14. So although boys were allowed to go to school, my father didn't allow me to go.[\[120\]](#)

Mahfoozah is a 19-year-old from Kandahar. Her brothers went to school; she and her sisters did not. My family was worried about security. Mahfoozah said, [b]ut they also think only boys need school. If security was not an issue, they might have let me go to school. From when I was small I wanted to go to school. I tried so many times to convince them.[\[121\]](#)

When there is security everything is well and families are happy to send girls to school, the director of an education program in Kandahar said. But without security it's not possible. In the last two years, students are leaving schools because of security problems. She pointed out the links between insecurity and economic hardship, both of which drive girls out of school. Things are getting worse now. There are no jobs for people, there is insecurity in many places, the cost of materials is getting higher but most important is no jobs. We used to work in four districts [in Kandahar] now we don't feel secure even in the center of the capital.[\[122\]](#)

The arrival of Taliban forces in an area drives many girls out of school. The Taliban came to our area, said Amina, 16, whose family fled to Mazar-i Sharif from Baghlan province. We fled when the fighting started and the Taliban took over our area, looted our house, and took away our cows and livestock. Even before the Taliban takeover, [our area] was insecure, so we didn't go to school. If girls were on the way to school, Taliban would shoot at them from afar. This happened for the last three years we were there, so I stayed home and wove carpets. Nobody, boys or girls, could move about freely in our area.[\[123\]](#)

Some families said that they had been able to educate their children, with difficulty, under Taliban control. When government forces sought to expel the Taliban, however, fighting erupted, driving children out of school and eventually causing families to flee. Security was bad during the Taliban, but it was worse after the Taliban, a mother from Kunar said. She described repeated drone strikes in their area, as well as bombs and shooting, as the government fought the Taliban. For over two years, she said, she kept her children at home. The family finally fled to Jalalabad when lack of work left them without food. There their children, girls and boys, resumed schooling.[\[124\]](#)

For some, the insecurity that came with the Taliban made girls' education impossible. Even if the Taliban allows girls to study to class four, we didn't want to send them because of bad security, one of a group of mothers who had fled from a Taliban-occupied area of Nangarhar said. They described multiple incidents of family members being kidnapped and murdered or arrested on suspicion of Taliban activity.[\[125\]](#)

The presence of the Taliban may lead teachers to flee, leaving children with a school that is just an empty shell. Sitara, 13, from the province of Kapisa said that fighting often kept teachers away from the school. Some kids did go to school, but there were no lessons and no teacher, she said. Kids just went and made noise and played and after a while families stopped them going. Teachers didn't go because of the Taliban.[\[126\]](#)

Other families faced danger from ISIS-affiliated armed groups. A doctor from an ISIS-controlled area of Nangarhar province described moving his family to a different neighbor's house every night for weeks on end, after the family narrowly escaped a bomb planted outside their home. It was hard for them in the morning to go to school if they are moving from house to house and staying up much of the night to keep checking on the gate like they are the police guarding the house. So we decided to move. The family fled to Jalalabad, where he was able to enroll his children in school without difficulty. I don't know why they targeted us, he said. Maybe because they want educated people out.[\[127\]](#)

Some displaced families were so traumatized and overwhelmed that education was no longer a priority. Homa was one of 22 family members who fled their home in Baghlan province in May 2016 and sought safety in Mazar-i Sharif. The fighting started in the evening and we all ran with no shoes on our feet and no veils on our heads, running from this place, she said. Because of insecurity, none of the family's girls had attended school in Baghlan. In the last year even the boys had been driven out of school. Rockets flew over our heads, one boy said. For this year, we barely went [to school] two weeks. When asked whether the children would attend school in Mazar-i Sharif, one of the women said: No, no, no. We can't even find food to eat, why would we go to school?[\[128\]](#)

In 2016, UNAMA documented 94 incidents in which education was specifically targeted or affected, which resulted in 91 civilian casualties (24 deaths and 67 injuries). This included 13 incidents of targeted killing, and 12 incidents of abduction involving 55 students and education-related personnel. There were also 10 incidents of intentional damage to education property, and five incidents of improvised explosive devices targeting education. Among the dead was a teacher from a girls' school who was shot, and the headmaster of a girls' school who was abducted.[\[129\]](#)

Both the Taliban and ISIS have opposed girls' access to education, and have been responsible for many attacks on education, particularly girls' education.[\[130\]](#)

The Taliban didn't let girls study, said Maliha, 14, who fled with her family from Wardak to Kabul. They closed the girls' schools, and then there were no girls' schools.[\[131\]](#)

Women and girls living in areas controlled by groups affiliated with ISIS described restrictions so severe that they could not leave their homes, let alone go to school. ISIS made women sit in the home if you go out they will kidnap you, said a woman who fled an area of Nangarhar infiltrated by such groups, adding that many women in her community had been kidnapped by ISIS.[\[132\]](#)

Government and nongovernmental education providers as well as communities have negotiated with insurgent groups to try to protect education for girls. Najia is a mother of 10 children and is from an area of Nangarhar where the Taliban was displaced by groups affiliated with ISIS. When the Taliban were in control, she said the community was able to negotiate. She said that when the Taliban first came to the area in 2010 or 2011 they

posted letters demanding that the girls school be closed completely, but the people of the village argued that education of girls through class eight should be permitted, and the Taliban agreed to this and honored that agreement.[\[133\]](#)

In another district of the same province, however, a group of mothers said that the Taliban had agreed to girls attending school only through class four, a restriction they enforced by sending warning letters to the homes of girls in school.[\[134\]](#)

In some cases, schools are directly attacked. The Taliban didn't allow girls to go to school, said Shakila, 14, talking about her home village in Samangan province:

Insurgents sometimes directly explain that their attacks are in opposition to girls education. There were two bombs in the school, said 16-year-old Malalai, describing an attack in January 2016, against the girls school near her home in Nangarhar province. She said there was a letter from the Taliban left in the yard of the school at the time of the bombing: They said they put the bomb because you have to stop sending your girls to school. The windows of the school were blown out and there was some other minor damage, but the school reopened after 12 days. None of the girls from Malalais family had ever been allowed to go to that school, however. My father loves education, and he wants girls to study, but he says with this security situation it's not possible, Malalai said. She said that her cousins who attend the targeted school told her that the principal has also received several threatening night letters.[\[136\]](#)

Some schools face violence because of their proximity to other civilian structures frequently targeted, such as government offices. One day we were at school and studying and there was a bomb blast in front of the school, because it was near a government office, said Kamella, 18. All the girls and all the parents were very scared. Kamellas family forced her to quit school after the blast.[\[137\]](#)

Insurgents often use threats to force schools to close. Najia, a mother of 10 who fled her home in Kot district in Nangarhar province, described the situation in Kot: ISIS put letters in the mosque and inside the school at night they said, We are stopping the school not even small boys can go, she said. They also put letters to the teachers saying give your salary to us. They said, Don't go to school and do teaching. If we hear you're going for teaching we will kill you. She said the local *madrasa* was also closed, and that villagers found a bomb near the school and called the police, but before the police arrived it exploded. Najia and others from her village said that groups affiliated with ISIS had also threatened teachers, ordering them not to go to school to teach, and had demanded that teachers hand over their salaries to them. Before these groups arrived in the area, it was under Taliban influence; Najia said that the Taliban permitted girls to attend school only until class eight.[\[138\]](#)

Teachers are sometimes the target of attacks. Daesh [ISIS] abducted the teachers in our village school, so students got too scared and left school, said Abdul Hakim, 52, a farmer who fled with his five children to Jalalabad from an area of Nangarhar province controlled by groups affiliated with ISIS. Daesh told the teachers to give them each alternate months salary. The teachers said they're too poor to do that. Daesh told them, You either give your salary to us or you will stop teaching. They freed the teachers after each of them paid ISIS 10,000 Afghani [US\$145]. Abdul Hakim said that the ISIS-affiliated groups did not specifically prohibit girls education, but they announced on their FM radio, What would girls do with education?[\[139\]](#)

When teachers are targeted, it often means the de facto closure of a school. Wahid, 29, described why his extended family fled rural Nangarhar to Jalalabad: Daesh took money from teachers, schools stopped working, and we became IDPs [internally displaced persons]. Wahid said the family had previously been targeted by the Taliban for being affiliated with the government, but they stayed on until ISIS-affiliated groups replaced the Taliban. The ISIS-affiliated groups abducted and beheaded people, and it became impossible for the children to go to school. In Jalalabad, the children have all re-enrolled in school.[\[140\]](#)

Some girls and boys are forced out of school because insurgents regard their families as being aligned with the government. There are a lot of threats in this area, a community-based education worker responsible for encouraging families to send their daughters to school in Kandahar told Human Rights Watch. Especially daughters of police or security officials face a lot of problems. They fear that if they come to [school], they could be lost, kidnapped.[\[141\]](#)

Insurgent groups also sometimes operate their own schools, which may be targeted by the government. A government official in Balkh province said that the government had shut down a Taliban *madrasa*, and in retaliation the Taliban had closed two government schools.[\[142\]](#) Insurgents often exert control over schools that continue to function in areas that have fallen under their control or influence, dictating what can be taught and controlling other aspects of the schools operation.[\[143\]](#)

Female students have at times been the target of acid attacks.[\[144\]](#) Bina, a 35-year-old mother of 10 children, explained why her family fled to Jalalabad in 2011. We left Bati Kot because the Taliban put acid on girls, she said. Seven or eight girls were injured on their way to school in the morning. She said that the girls were teenagers, and that the attacker was on a motorcycle and had his face covered. After the attack, she said the attackers left a letter in the mosque addressed to the families of the injured girls: They said they should not go to school, because they are too old. After the attack, Bina said that about two-thirds of the schools 150 girls had stopped attending.[\[145\]](#)

It can be difficult to determine whether acid attacks are related to the insurgency or not. Boys stand in front of the school and say this is acid and I will throw it, said Chehrah, 16. She was in primary school when students at the high school next door were the target of an acid attack by men on motorcycles with their faces covered. She said that five students were hit with the acid. I think there are two reasons this happens, Chehrah said. First these boys don't like girls going to school. And second, they want a [romantic] connection with these girls, but the girls don't want that.[\[146\]](#)

Acid attacks strike great fear among girls and their parents, and lead to large numbers of girls being taken out of school. Maliha, 17, was in class five at a government school in Kandahar when her classmates were the target of an acid attack in 2008. I was at school that day, she said. After a few minutes, a student whose sister was burned came in crying. It happened on the road right in front of the school. Maliha said that 15 students were injured, four seriously: Some students lost their eyes their faces were burned. Maliha said that after the attack, [a]ll the family decided no girls in our family will go to school. But for years I fought them and continued. Maliha managed to stay in school until she was 16, and in class 11, but then she decided to quit because her father was struggling to support his nine children, and as the oldest child Maliha felt she should help. When Human Rights Watch interviewed her, she was about to start training to become a polio vaccinator.[\[147\]](#)

Afghan government and pro-government security forces have increasingly been using schools the only concrete-reinforced buildings in some villages as military bases during offensive operations against Taliban-held areas. Even if the buildings remain unscathed, military occupation interrupts childrens education. But all too often, the schools become battlegrounds as the Taliban counterattack government positions, leaving the buildings damaged or in ruins.[\[148\]](#)

Insurgent groups have also used schools. Any presence in schools of fighters from either side of the conflict is likely to drive away students, especially girls, immediately and indefinitely.

In 2016, Human Rights Watch documented the occupation or other use for military purposes of 12 schools in a single area of Baghlan province in northeastern Afghanistan. In 2016, UNAMA found that, [t]he occupation or use of educational facilities for military purposes occurred throughout Afghanistan, including in Helmand, Kunduz, Logar, Maidan Wardak, Takhar, Farah, Badakhshan, Ghor, Jawzjan and Paktya provinces 10 out of the countrys 34 provinces.[\[149\]](#)

One government official described a situation in Kandahar province where a newly opened school was occupied by the Taliban. Government security forces attacked the Taliban forces deployed in the school, causing major damage to the structure, damage that was compounded when the Taliban blasted the building as they withdrew. The students are now studying in a tent, the official said.[\[150\]](#)

In areas that had fallen under ISIS control, one government education official described the damage to government schools: ISIS looted and took everything, and what they couldn't take they burned. He continued: We went to one area and not even a single nail had survived ISIS took everything.[\[151\]](#)

A high school teacher said the conflict had led to increased ethnic tensions in his classes of boys, as students from one ethnic group, from class ten up, participated in the fighting on the side of the Taliban. They carried their AK-47s, he said. Other students were from families loyal to the government. Teachers were confused about how to deal with the ethnic conflict in the school, he said. Eventually the school closed, as the fighting intensified, and the teacher and his family fled.[\[152\]](#)

Hakim, 13, class 3 student at a CBE, Kandahar, July 2016

The tolerance of families for distance to school is linked to their perceptions of the security situation and dangers along the way.[\[153\]](#) Sadias older sister walked one hour each way to school, and continued until she graduated from class 12 in 2011 in Nangarhar province. By the time Sadia, 11, was school age, there was a closer school, a 20-minute walk away, but Sadia was not allowed to go. At that time the situation was good, so she [her sister] could go, and now it's not good that's why I couldn't go, she said.[\[154\]](#)

Families and girls discussed kidnapping and sexual harassment, but also worried about road safety. Marzia grew up in Kabul, but did not attend school: In Allalaudin [a Kabul neighborhood] the school was too far away, so I didn't join. [Children] were crossing four roads to get there.[\[155\]](#)

In 2016, the United Nations reported 10 incidents of abduction of children by parties to the conflict, with a total of 15 children taken.[\[156\]](#) There were also increasing reports of kidnapping, including of children, by criminal gangs.[\[157\]](#) The husband of my aunt is a police officer, said Zubaida, 13. He told my parents, Don't let your children go outside the kidnappers will take them and kill them. So my parents heard his advice and did not let us go to school.[\[158\]](#)

This fear is easily contagious. In one area, if one girl is kidnapped then all the families in the area keep their girls home, said Kamella, 18, who cited fear of kidnapping as one of the reasons she was forced to quit school at age 12.[\[159\]](#)

Basir, 12, said, We were not allowed by my parents to go to a government school because the school was too far and the way was too unsafe. There was nobody to take us to school. He and his brother said that the 9-year-old daughter of their neighbors was kidnapped for ransom on her way to school, and held for two months, but later recovered by police.[\[160\]](#)

Schools must be built because most schools are too far away, said Zainab, 13, who began school only when a CBE opened near her house when she was 11. Many girls are lost or kidnapped because schools are far away. One neighbors daughter who was 12-years-old was lost on the way to school from [this neighborhood]. They never found her again. That was two months ago. She was going to the government school.[\[161\]](#)

The fear of kidnapping is intense even in communities where there have been no incidents of kidnapping, and is not limited to particularly insecure areas. When I was in Helmand, schools were open and some girls went, said Tarana, 18. But because my family was afraid about the security situation people were saying, If you send your daughter she might be kidnapped I never went to school.[\[162\]](#)

In Mazar-i Sharif, one of Afghanistans safer major cities, Qasima, 13, was kept home because the school is an hour-and-a-half walk away and her parents feared that she might be kidnapped.[\[163\]](#)

Even when the distance to school is short, sexual harassment by boys and men along the way may force girls out of school. There is a lot of harassment from boys in this area, a CBE worker in Kandahar said. Families can't do much about it, and the government hasn't paid much attention. Nothing has been done. Even white beards [respected elders] won't be able to [help] because they're afraid. We've organized several discussions on womens rights, but they say they can't come because it can be a security problem for them if they come.[\[164\]](#)

Chehrah lived only 100 meters from school, but said that the journey there was fraught with difficulty.

Chehrah said that the harassment led to her asking her father if she could go to another nearby school in an area she believes is safer, but instead he removed her from school permanently, at age 12.[\[165\]](#)

As girls get older, the harassment and girls families fear of harassment worsen. Sabira, 16, said going to government school became impossible for her. People on the street create problems, asking me where I am going, she said.[\[166\]](#) Even just girls being seen by men can be unacceptable to some families. My father, brothers, and uncles don't allow us to go to school because there are boys in the road looking at us, said Nabila, 12.[\[167\]](#)

In Afghanistan, victims of sexual harassment and assault can be at risk of abuse and even violence from their own families, due to perceptions that their victimization is their fault and has brought shame on the family. Our family doesn't like to let us go to school, Chehrah said. They said, If something happens to you, how can I show my face?[\[168\]](#)

Some expressed security concerns appear little more than a cover for denying girls an education. Karima, 17, lives in Kandahar and has five sisters and four brothers. All of the children studied, but only until class three, except one brother who stayed until class five. Our father said school is not good for girls, plus it is too insecure on the streets. So even if security was better, he would say, You are girls you don't need to go to school. Karima said she can still read and tries to practice, to keep herself literate.[\[169\]](#)

Qasima, 13, CBE student, Mazar-i Sharif, July 2016

Many of the reasons girls gave for not being able to go to school related to gaps and barriers within the school system, most of which affect both girls and boys, but have a disproportionate impact on girls. The most fundamental of these is distance, but other barriers include administrative requirements, the cost of school supplies, lack of female teachers, perceptions and realities about the quality of the instruction being provided, poor infrastructure, and lack of services for children grappling with disability and trauma.

Najiba, 15, explaining why she and her eight siblings did not go to school in their home province of Daikundi, Mazar-i Sharif, July 2016

Although there have been large donor and government investments in the education sector, the needs were so great in 2001 that huge gaps remain. In many places, there are simply no schools. This is a problem especially in rural areas, but even in urban areas students stay home because the walk to school is too far.

As demand for education rises, the education system is straining to meet it. On the one hand, the supply of schools never reached an adequate number, and expansion of the government school system has largely stopped; on the other, a growing number of schools are closing due to insecurity, threats and violence.

A large number of schools were created or reopened post-2001, bringing the number, according to the Ministry of Education, from 1,600 schools in 2001 to 17,500 schools in 2016.^[170] But considerably more needs to be done, more teachers hired, more schools built, before every child in Afghanistan will live within reasonable distance of a school. This effort is enormously complicated, and at times rendered impossible, by the ongoing armed conflict in Afghanistan, and the fact that significant and increasing parts of the country are not under government control. Afghan children, however, need access to education regardless of the political situation, and the government and donors need to find new ways to overcome these problems.

A lack of education facilities for older girls and young women is also a factor pushing girls out of school. Approximately 200 out of Afghanistan's 398 districts have no higher secondary school open to girls.^[171]

Construction of new schools is also slowing due to lack of funds.^[172]

The problems are on the supply side, said a Ministry of Education official. We shouldn't blame families for not sending their children when we have supply side problems.^[173] A provincial education official said that he thought that the ministry's target for increasing the number of students was less than half as high as it should be, given the country's population.^[174]

In the most insecure areas of the country, schools are closing at an alarming rate due to insecurity. This is not a new development; schools were closing due to insecurity as early as 2005, but as the fighting has escalated and spread to previously secure areas, more schools have closed.^[175] In January 2017, the acting education minister told the parliament that 1,000 schools were closed due to insecurity, out of the total of 16,000 schools.^[176] This figure seems to be on the conservative side, however, given that in April 2016 the ministry said 615 schools had closed in 2015 in the 11 most volatile provinces alone, and that that figure was in addition to 600 schools in those provinces that were closed as of 2014 and have remained closed since then.^[177]

Some areas of the country are harder hit by school closures than others. One government official said that as of July 2016, 130 schools were closed in Kandahar province, out of 435 total schools in the province, a closure rate of almost one-third.^[178]

Statistics on the number of school closures are estimates, as the government officials producing the numbers have limited information. We have systemic problems, an official in Kandahar said. At some schools, we have no access ourselves are not sure whether students go to [that] school or not. Ministry of Education statistics are not based on proof. He cautioned that not all school closures are due to insecurity, citing other reasons: Lack of community support, security, corruption. We can't access the areas it means corruption is the key problem for why schools don't exist.^[179]

CBEs and other non-government schools are also being forced to close due to threats. A CBE provider told Human Rights Watch that his NGO had recently been forced to close 97 classes in one district alone due to Taliban threats and extortion, and had also been forced to close dozens of other classes elsewhere. Two of their students and one of their teachers had been killed during the fighting.^[180]

Khatara, 15, raised in rural Samangan province, Mazar-i Sharif, July 2016

The consequence of the shortage of schools combined with escalating school closures is that for many children the nearest school is very far away a problem likely worsening due to closures outstripping the number of new schools opening. Many children described distances of several hours walking to the nearest school. My sister finished the first year at school, said Sabina, 12, who grew up in rural Balkh province. She walked four hours each way every day. She got tired and decided to leave.^[181]

For some students, school is impossibly far and they are never able to study. For others, distance is at least a serious barrier to attendance, especially for the large proportion of families too poor to own a car or motorcycle. Schools do not provide any transportation for students.

Because of the shortage of girls schools in many places, girls and their families said that distance to a girls school is greater than to a boys school. Girls school is much farther than boys, said Torpekai, 13. She takes her 6-year-old brother to school in the mornings, a 15-minute journey, but said she was prevented from going to school until a CBE opened nearby, because of distance.^[182]

There were schools, but they were far away and there were Taliban and our family were afraid, said Rahela, 14, explaining why she did not attend school in her home province of Logar. The boys school was closer and in a secure place. The boys went in a car or bus. Rahela said that the girls school was open, but her family had no car, and the road to the girls school was damaged. All boys went to schools in Logar, she said. No girls went.^[183]

Sometimes whether a child goes to school or not is determined simply by whether there is a sibling to walk with them. Farah's 15-year-old sister went to school, even though the school was a one-hour walk away, because she was able to walk to school with her older brother who attended the same school. When it came time for Farah to go to school, however, there were no siblings to accompany her. I was alone, she said. No neighbors going, and government school was very far. Farah was kept home until a CBE opened in the neighborhood when she was 9 years old.^[184]

Distance to schools is one of the major reasons that there is a demand for CBEs. Human Rights Watch interviewed many girls who had been kept out of school because their families felt that the government schools were too far from their homes, but who were allowed to attend a CBE when one opened closer to their home. Nilofar, 15, was not permitted to attend a government school a half-hour walk away in Kabul, but when a CBE opened in her neighborhood when she was 13, her parents agreed to send her and her younger sister. It is close to our house someone could not disturb us on the way, Nilofar said.^[185]

A CBE administrator said that when they are deciding whether to establish a CBE in a particular neighborhood they ask the fathers of out-of-school children in the community if they are interested in sending their children to a school. Most say yes, but say that the problem is distance, he said. Ninety percent want school; 10 percent want their children to work instead.^[186]

The greater restrictions girls often face on being permitted to walk to school, combined with a particular shortage of girls schools in some areas, mean that even when the distance is the same, the lack of schools has a disproportionate impact on girls. The government says that it is working to remedy this imbalance through prioritizing girls schools when allocating funds for new construction.^[187]

Sabas father is a teacher in a government boys school. The family lives in Nangarhar province, in a village where the nearest schools for both boys and girls are about a 30-minute walk away. Sabas father sent all five of his sons to school, and kept them in school through class 12 and sometimes beyond. But he kept his six daughters home because he felt it was too far for them to walk. When a CBE opened near the family home, Saba, 12, and her two sisters closest in age to her were allowed to attend. But Saba said that because of distance they will not be able to continue studying beyond CBE.^[188]

The availability of a nearby school may help to delay a girl being pulled out of education due to her age and physical maturity. Maryam, 14, was attending a government high school about a 15-minute walk from her home. She also attended afternoon supplemental English and computer classes at a CBE near her home. When she was 14, her father said she could no longer attend the government school, but allowed her to continue the CBE classes because it is very close to the family's home. If people saw me going to the government school, it would be a shame for the family, because now I am too old, Maryam said. Before being forced to drop out she dreamed of becoming a pilot.^[189]

A number of girls said that their brothers were able to travel to schools that were relatively far away on bicycles or on foot, but that as girls, they were forbidden this option.^[190] Gulpari, 14, has two brothers who ride their bicycles to school, but Gulpari was kept home until a CBE opened nearby because it was a two-hour walk to the school. I know how to ride a bike, said Gulpari. But I'm not allowed to ride at all. My brother taught me in secret.^[191]

Qasima, 13, was not allowed to go to a government school an hour-and-a-half walk from her home, but her brothers attend a school even further away a two-hour walk. My parents say, They are boys and are able to defend themselves, and you are a girl and cannot defend yourself, she said.^[192]

A common response of fathers explaining why their daughters don't go to school, according to a CBE staff member

Although education is tuition-free in Afghanistan up to higher secondary education, there are still significant costs to families sending a child to government schools. These indirect costs are enough to keep many children from poor families out of school, especially girls, as families that can afford to send only some of their children often give preference to boys.

There was some variety in what students and their families are expected to pay for, but interviewees indicated that government schools always come with costs. At one school, students said stationery and books are provided, but they must pay 150 to 300 Afghani for a uniform [US\$2.17-4.35]. At other schools, students usually said that they had to pay for notebooks, pens and a school bag as well as uniforms. An official from the Ministry of Education said that with assistance from donors, the ministry has been able to provide student kits, consisting of a pencil, eraser, and notebook, to a limited number of children.^[193]

Many children also have to pay for at least some government textbooks. The government is responsible for supplying textbooks, but often books do not arrive on time, or there are shortages, perhaps in some cases due to theft or corruption. In these cases, children need to buy the books from a bookstore to keep up with their studies.^[194]

Even minimal costs can be enough to drive poor children out of school. Laila, 15, attended school once in Kabul for eight months, when her family lived there briefly after leaving Parwan and before moving to Kandahar. But Laila said that her father lost his job as a security guard for an international organization when its office closed down, and after this the family could no longer afford the supplies Laila needed to be able to attend government school.^[195]

Some families manage to cover the extra costs for some but not all children. We have to pay for stationery, school clothes, and lunch and snacks, and my father was not able to pay, said Gulnaz, 13, one of seven children. She was kept home while her brothers and older sister studied. Her father works as a day laborer, but is elderly and often unable to work. Her mother works in a vaccination program.^[196]

Family attitudes about gender often play a role in decisions about how scarce resources are used to meet education costs. Sadiqa, 12, has five brothers and two sisters. Her brothers were able to go to school; an uncle helped out with the cost of their pens, pencils and books. Sadiqa, however, was told that she could not go to school because of costs. When a CBE program opened near her home, providing supplies for free, her family allowed her to attend, but her 16-year-old sister was kept home to do housework.^[197]

Sometimes one sibling works to buy supplies for the others. My father pushed a cart, my mother was a cleaner at some houses, said Homa, 14, the oldest of eight children. My sister was in school, but they couldn't afford even expenses for her, so I couldn't go to school. The younger girls went to school, but I was sewing and making money to pay for study expenses for my younger sisters. We need to buy uniforms, notebooks, pens, pencils, bags, erasers. We get some books from the government but not all we have to buy some from the bazaar. Homa said she started doing embroidery when she was 5 years old. Her oldest sister, 12, is in class seven and has the highest grade in her class, but is expected to pay for big sheets of paper for presentations, which the family cannot afford. So she can't make the presentation, Homa said. Classmates laugh at her and say you're so poor you can't pay for that paper.^[198]

When one child works to pay for school supplies for others, it is often the oldest sister. I sew for two hours a day, said Khadija, 14, who also attends class three at a CBE. I save some of this money for me to go to a private course in the future, and I spend some on stationery for my sister. Khadija's sister is 12, and attends a government school that is almost an hour walk away. Khadija hopes to become an engineer.^[199]

Many interviewees said that one attraction of CBEs is that they do not require parents to pay for extras such as stationery and pens, as well as sometimes providing bags and hygiene kits.

Madrasas also were often described as being free for families to attend, with no expectation that parents will pay for books or stationery.

Expert on education in Afghanistan, April 2016

Many parents and children who spoke to Human Rights Watch complained about the quality of government schools. Specific complaints included poor infrastructure, lack of female teachers for girl students, poor quality instruction, and corporal punishment. My mother said one didn't learn anything in government school, said Dunia, 13, explaining why her family took her out of government school after third grade.[\[200\]](#)

Government officials acknowledged that they face difficulty providing good quality education, but said there are many challenges undermining their efforts. These include: corruption, insecurity, lack of community support, lack of buildings and poor infrastructure, lack of teachers—especially female teachers, lack of funds and bureaucratic delays in the availability of annual funds.

Provincial education official, Jalalabad, July 2016

According to the Ministry of Education, 41 percent of government schools in Afghanistan have no buildings.[\[201\]](#) In practice, this means that while students attend school every day in the same location, they have no building in which to study, and instead their classes are held under a tent or simply outside. Even when schools have a building, overcrowding often means that some classes are held outside the building, in tents or in the open air. Classes are also held in hallways and on stairways in overcrowded schools.

The government should provide girls with educational opportunities so they don't have to study under the sky, said Zarifa, 17, who was soon graduating from a government high school in Kabul. I studied in a tent. A tent is not suitable. One day it is raining and one day there is wind outside, not very good.[\[202\]](#)

Class one through five are outside, one mother said, describing her children's school in southeastern Nangarhar province. She said that there is a building, and older students are inside, but younger students study in the yard under a tree: There is no tent. They don't go when it is raining outside.[\[203\]](#)

Overcrowding means that most schools have at least two shifts—and sometimes three—of students each day, limiting each school day to three to four hours, too short to teach the full curriculum well.[\[204\]](#) Some schools teach both girls and boys, but separate them into different shifts.

According to the Ministry of Education, 40 percent of schools also lack boundary walls, a gap that often plays a key role in girls' families refusing to send them to school, due to concerns about gender segregation, modesty, and security for girls.[\[205\]](#)

Construction of schools has been plagued with difficulties, due not only to corruption but also procurement rules that require accepting the lowest bid even when that amount may not be sufficient to complete a building of adequate quality. As a result, 1,400 school buildings have been started but never completed.[\[206\]](#)

Where school buildings exist, many are damaged. We didn't have a good environment, said Mirzai, a high school science teacher who taught in Baghlan province. The school was damaged—there were no doors, no windows. It was hard for the teachers and the students.[\[207\]](#)

Much of Afghanistan has extremely hot summers, freezing cold winters, or both. There is no budget for schools to have heating, so schools in colder parts of the country are forced to close for the winter. Schools in hotter parts of the country often close for the summer. There are fans in the classes, but none in the tents, said Hamid, 12, who is in class five. All of class six is in the tent.[\[208\]](#) According to the Ministry of Education, 88 percent of government schools have no electricity.[\[209\]](#)

One challenge for education officials is delays in disbursement of government funds. Whatever is promised in the national budget, we receive, a senior provincial government official said. The problem is that the money is sent very late. It comes so late it's almost impossible to use.[\[210\]](#)

Thirty percent of Afghan government schools lack safe drinking water, and 60 percent do not have toilets.[\[211\]](#) Even new schools do not necessarily have safe water. At a newly built government school in Mazar-i Sharif for girls and boys that Human Rights Watch visited, the water from the school well tasted strongly of salt, suggesting that despite being an improved source it may be exposed to surface water intrusion or other contamination that made it unsafe to drink. You get a stomachache if you drink it, a student at the school said. But we have to drink it.[\[212\]](#)

Not having a washroom is not a problem for boys, but girls can't go to school without one, a Ministry of Education official told Human Rights Watch. These are the basic preconditions [for girls' attendance].[\[213\]](#)

An expert on education in Afghanistan said that the design of many newly built schools was not properly planned in regard to water and sanitation facilities. He said that, for example, some international donors have built schools with no boundary wall and no toilets, both of which he said are essential for encouraging girls' attendance.[\[214\]](#)

When you need the toilet, you go home, said one mother in Nangarhar, describing the school in the village her family fled. She said the school had a water pump but no toilet.[\[215\]](#)

Girls who have started menstruation are particularly affected by poor toilet facilities. Without private gender-segregated toilets with running water, they face difficulties managing menstrual hygiene at school and are likely to stay home during menstruation, leading to gaps in their attendance that undermine academic achievement, and increase the risk of them dropping out of school entirely.

Even when toilets are present they may be inadequate to provide dignity and privacy. At one newly built school that Human Rights Watch visited in Mazar-i Sharif, where both girls and boys study, in separate shifts, with both female and male teachers on both shifts, the sole toilet facility was a small one-room building behind the school. It contained three drop latrines with chest-high walls between them and no doors. There was no water in the building; a water point was outside, several meters away. Due to stigma and taboos around menstrual blood, the water point was too far to make washing menstrual cloths or otherwise managing menstruation feasible for girls or female teachers.

Many parents and students expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of teaching in government schools.

A university professor told Human Rights Watch that he sees some high school graduates arriving at university with low literacy.[\[216\]](#) A civil society activist pointed out that large variations between the quality of instruction in different parts of the country privilege urban students and disadvantage those from rural or insecure areas when it comes to securing university places; this in turn breeds resentment and even extremism among those who feel excluded.[\[217\]](#)

Teachers face many challenges in delivering high quality education, including short school shifts, gaps in staffing, low salaries, poor infrastructure, lack of supplies, and insecurity.

School shifts are short in Afghanistan. According to the government, 31 percent of schools are running in multiple shifts and therefore have reduced school hours for students (but long teaching days for teachers).[\[218\]](#) Students often study only three or four hours a day. In this short window, teachers struggle to teach the full curriculum, and students said that by the end of the year, they often have not finished the material in the textbook assigned for that grade level.

Teaching is not necessarily seen as a desirable job. The problem is that no one wants to be a teacher, the head of a civil society organization in Balkh said.

Teachers struggle to support their families on low salaries. They pay 6,000 Afghanis a month (US\$87) for every teacher, a high school teacher told Human Rights Watch. They are not able to cover their problems with 6,000 Afghanis. Afghanists teachers are only alive—they don't live. They are only trying to stay alive.[\[220\]](#)

A government provincial education official confirmed that salaries for teachers are 6,000 to 7,000 Afghanis (\$87-101) for teachers who have completed teachers training, and 8,000 Afghanis (\$116) a month for those with a BA degree. This year we filled 1,025 posts, the official said. People took these posts because they were absolutely destitute.[\[221\]](#)

Teachers struggle with the same insecurity that disrupts the lives of their students. There were a lot of mental problems in families because of security problems, said Mirzai, a high school science teacher with 12 years of teaching experience, describing his experience teaching in an increasingly insecure area of Baghlan province. I was not feeling free. It was hard for me to teach. Teachers couldn't connect well with students.[\[222\]](#)

Not all the teachers are present every day—some are present, some are not, said Rokhshana, whose two grandsons are at a government school. They are supposed to study five subjects a day, but there are usually only two or three teachers, so they can't study all the subjects.

Some teachers have limited skills or education. The minimum educational requirement for teachers in government schools is that they should have completed class 14, meaning vocational training beyond the 12th grade level. The government has established teacher training colleges to provide this specialized training.[\[223\]](#) As of 2015, however, only 43 percent of teachers met the requirement, the remaining 57% who have not completed the criteria of professional teachers are recruited as contract teachers in remote areas due to the lack of teachers.[\[224\]](#) This is a problem not only in government schools, but also in CBEs, where the government's policy permits teachers to have completed as little as class six.[\[225\]](#) Most [CBE] teachers are students in high school, or teach in the government school, a CBE provider in Kandahar said.[\[226\]](#)

A number of children said that they had left school, or been removed by their parents, because of the use of corporal punishment by teachers. Razia, 14, left government school when she was in class four because of corporal punishment. One of the teachers beat me, therefore I left, she said. Sometimes I didn't do my homework. A male teacher beat my hands with a stick—a tree branch. Razia said the beatings were happening every day when she decided to quit.[\[227\]](#)

In the years after the end of Taliban rule, the government developed a new, nationwide curriculum that all schools, government and private, are required to use.[\[228\]](#) While a detailed look at the quality of the curriculum is beyond the scope of this report, a number of experts interviewed raised concerns about problems with the curriculum, including the need for greater gender sensitivity, failure to use phonics as a teaching method, the need to incorporate content aimed at reducing conflicts in Afghan society, and lack of content regarding sexual and reproductive health. The Ministry of Education has committed to revising the curriculum in the coming years.[\[229\]](#)

The difficulty of getting teachers, especially female teachers, to go to rural areas has undermined efforts to expand access to school in rural areas, especially for girls. While the number of teaching positions grew annually in the years preceding 2013, it is now frozen. Since 2013 we haven't had one new position, a Ministry of Education official said. [Ministry of Finance] said government revenue is going down and we can't afford it. There are fewer taxes, less donor money, and no improvements in the economy. We need 27,500 new teachers per year for five years and then we should have the right number of teachers.[\[230\]](#)

Provincial director of education, July 2016

Government officials acknowledged that female teachers are a key ingredient in encouraging families to send girls to school, but there has been a real shortage.

The percentage of teachers who are women varies dramatically from province to province, from a low of just 1 percent in Paktika province to 67 percent in Kabul province.[\[231\]](#) Seven out of 34 provinces have less than 10 percent female teachers, and in 17 provinces, less than 20 percent of the teachers are women.[\[232\]](#) In only five out of the 34 provinces do women constitute 40 percent or more of teachers.[\[233\]](#) The director of academic affairs for the Ministry of Education said, We still need more female teachers—we need them everywhere. He continued: Only big cities have enough. The remaining provinces, especially the insecure ones, need more.[\[234\]](#)

Many parents are strongly opposed to their daughters studying with a male teacher, especially as girls grow older. The situation is different in every district, a government education official in Kandahar explained.

Jameela, 16, was not allowed to go to school in her home province of Samangan. We were supposed to study with boys and girls in the same class, she said. Because of this, my parents would not let me go. Jameela said that the school also had a mix of male and female teachers, and the female teachers were not always present, which was also a factor in her parents' decision.[\[236\]](#)

The fact that CBEs typically have all-female teachers for girls can sometimes help overcome families favoring sons' education over daughters. Tamasan, 18-year-old brother, who has been head of the family since their father was killed in an airstrike nearly eight years ago, forced Tamasan's two older sisters to leave the government school three years ago, when they were 14 and 12. Tamana went to a CBE instead, though, which may allow her to continue a bit longer. It's a Pashtun tradition for girls not to go to school, she said. But [CBE] schools are very near, and the teachers are all female.[\[237\]](#)

Rural areas, where there is likely to be greater resistance to men teaching girls, also experience the greatest shortage of female teachers. In [the city] there are not many problems. The main problem is in the districts girls cant go to school after class nine, they need a female teacher, a senior government provincial education official told Human Rights Watch. Last year 4,200 teachers went through the entrance exam, but very few [women] are willing to go to the districts. Maybe if we pay for a *maharam* [male chaperone] it is possible.[\[238\]](#)

According to an expert on education in Afghanistan, teachers, especially in districts, face demands for bribes and threats if they do not pay from district officials. There are enough female university graduates, but recruitment is a problem. The system is corrupt. You need bribes to get the job. The need to pay substantial bribes to secure a teaching position disadvantages women, who are less likely to have the funds necessary, or the ability to gather funds from their family, to secure a teaching position through bribery.[\[239\]](#)

An official from a private school echoed this concern. Women cant engage in position-buying, she said, saying that she had seen situations in which qualified female teachers were rejected by government education offices because they could not pay bribes to secure the position, in favor of men who could pay.[\[240\]](#)

Some children, particularly children who are internally displaced persons or returnees, face significant administrative barriers to accessing education. These barriers can be particularly harmful for girls, as discriminatory gender roles may mean that girls are more likely to lack identification, and to seek to enroll late and thus be affected by age restrictions and restrictions on enrolling mid-year. Families may also be less likely to secure documents for girls.

Government schools typically require government-issued identification, and official transfer letters for children moving from one school to another. While these requirements might seem routine, for families fleeing war, or surviving from one meal to the next, they can present an insurmountable obstacle that keeps children out of school. Restrictions on when children can register can drive families away, and policies excluding children who are late starting school constitute a de facto denial of education.

Practices seemed to vary significantly from one area to the next, with some provincial education departments being flexible in allowing children, especially those internally displaced, into school even if they did not have the correct paperwork. In other places, however, the rules were strictly enforced, with the result that families fleeing in fear of their lives found that there was no educational future for their children. Overcrowding in schools creates an incentive for education officials to reduce the pressure by strictly applying rules that keep children out of school.

One of the greatest administrative barriers for girls is restrictions on the age at which children are permitted to register for school. Afghan law requires that children be enrolled from age 6.[\[241\]](#) But this rule seems to be applied arbitrarily. Local government education officials gave Human Rights Watch conflicting information about restrictions on ages of enrollment in primary and secondary school, and a number of interviewees said that their families had faced difficulty trying to enroll children in school.

Many schools make it impossible in practice for older children who are starting late to study, by requiring that they begin in advanced grades even if they have no prior education. Mary, who moved from Badakhshan to Kabul when she was 7 years old, and had only attended nursery school, said: [My parents] were looking for a school for me and got admission to a government school. But they said I was older and I could come for fourth grade, not first. I studied for four and a half months in fourth grade, and then failed, so my parents took me out of school.[\[242\]](#) Marzia, 11, described registering for government school: They said you can start in fourth grade, not first grade. I was 9 years old then. My mother said no and took me to [a CBE].[\[243\]](#)

According to the director of an education program in Kandahar, students 13 and older have to go to class six or higher.[\[244\]](#) But some older children are not even offered that option. When I came to Mazar, they accepted my brothers in grades one and three, but not me because I was too old, said Najiba, 15, who was 12 when her family moved from a remote area of Daikundi.[\[245\]](#)

Children are also sometimes turned away because they are perceived to be too young, even when they are at ages that should be appropriate for enrollment. The government says she is too small, Orzala, 12, said, about why her 7-year-old sister is not in school. She has ID but physically she is small they say, She will go next year.[\[246\]](#) Dina, 13, told Human Rights Watch: We tried to [enroll] my 8-year-old sister at a government school two years ago, but they said she was too young.[\[247\]](#)

When I tried enrolling for grade one, I was too young, said Farukh, 13. The school made a lot of excuses to stop me from enrolling. They said come back next year. I went back next year and they said I was too old.[\[248\]](#)

About 1.3 million Afghans are internally displaced persons (IDPs).[\[249\]](#) Many returning refugees and migrants, from Pakistan and Iran, but also increasingly through deportations from Europe, join the ranks of the IDPs. IDPs and returnees often struggle to get their children into school as they try to settle in to a new location, often having endured trauma and lost their possessions and livelihood through flight or deportation. Some returnees face the challenge of finding their way in a country that they have never lived in before. These difficulties are often compounded by repeated movement. All of the other obstacles girls face are exacerbated by displacement.

The governments 2013 IDP policy states: No IDP student will be denied access to a school on the grounds that they have no school records (children can be tested to find their appropriate grade) or no *tazkira* [ID card].[\[250\]](#)

But research for this report indicated that at least some schools and provincial education departments are not complying with this policy. Human Rights Watch found that many children are blocked from registering for a government school because they lack an ID card. I wasnt allowed to enroll at a government school because we didnt have a *tazkira*, said Sayeda, 13. We tried a lot, but it didnt work.[\[251\]](#)

To obtain an ID card in Afghanistan, people must usually return to the location where they were born and request the ID card from the local government office there. Feroza, 14, was born in Mazar-i Sharif after her parents fled from an area facing Taliban attacks. At first I didnt have an ID card, so I couldnt go to school, Feroza said. Eventually, when Feroza was 12 years old, her father returned to their home area to get ID cards, but by then Feroza was too old to be admitted to a government school. She was sent to a *madrasa* instead, where there was no ID requirement, but she studied for only two hours a day and learned only the Quran, the Arabic alphabet, and Islamic studies.[\[252\]](#)

The requirement to return to your place of birth to obtain identification presents a major obstacle to people who struggle to make the journey due to poverty, illness, or disability, or who are fleeing conflict. I couldnt go to the government school because all my documents were burned back in our village, said Hashmat, 12. His family fled from Badakhshan province to Kabul after fighting erupted in their area, including the Taliban burning down the local school. Hashmats sister still had her documents, and was able to enroll in class one at a government school in Kabul.[\[253\]](#)

The families of children transferring from one government school to another consistently said that they were expected to provide official documentation of the transfer. You have to go to the local department of education, said Rokhshana, 45, who is an IDP in Mazar-i Sharif with two school-age grandchildren.

While this requirement might seem reasonable, in a context without an ongoing conflict and widespread displacement, for families fleeing war it can be impossible to comply with. Some children cannot provide documentation from their old school because it is closed. None of us go to school now, said Ahmad, 18, of himself and his three younger school-age siblings. The family fled from Baghlan to Mazar-i Sharif in the face of Taliban abuses and escalating fighting. The children had already missed a year of school before arriving in Mazar-i Sharif. Our school in Baghlan is closed, so we cant bring our transfer documents to Mazar, Ahmad said. We dont know what we will do now.[\[255\]](#)

When families flee in great haste, they have no chance to collect paperwork first. Rokhshana, her husband, her daughter-in-law, three of her sons, and her nephew fled from Baghlan province to Mazar-i Sharif in May 2016. The Taliban fired on our house, she said. A bomb attack lit our house on fire and we left everything in the house. Her nephew has not been able to go to school. We went to register to a Mazar school, but they said you have to bring a registration paper from the school in Baghlan, but we cant go to Baghlan. We told them [about the situation in Baghlan] but they didnt care. We want him to go to school. We are waiting for the situation in Baghlan to become a little calm and then we will move his registration.[\[256\]](#)

Even when officials showed some flexibility, the requirement to provide transfer documents can still be a significant barrier for IDPs. A group of women in Nangarhar province who had fled areas controlled by ISIS-affiliated groups told Human Rights Watch that their husbands had had to return to their home area to get documentation before their children could enroll, and this delayed the children attending school for several months. The school was closed, but the principal or teacher signed papers they just wrote on a simple paper, not the official form, one woman said. But the department of education accepted the note because they know our situation, and they know the principal.[\[257\]](#)

In addition to the challenge of obtaining identification and transfer documents, IDP and returnee children face a host of other challenges, including barriers to refugee children studying, discrimination, and security threats specific to their status as occupants of IDP settlements.

Some children are behind on their education because their families were refugees in countries where Afghans face difficulty getting their children into school. We returned from Pakistan four years ago and came to Mazar, said Tooba, 16. I never went to school in Pakistan because they never admitted me because I was a refugee.[\[258\]](#) The majority of Afghan refugees are in Pakistan and Iran, and Afghan children face significant barriers to education in both countries.[\[259\]](#)

Even when displaced children or returning refugees are able to enroll in school, they may face discrimination and harassment, as Afghanistans ethnic tensions play themselves out in the schoolyard. Asadullah, a community leader at an informal IDP settlement in Kabul occupied by families from the southern provinces of Helmand, Uruzgan and Kandahar, told Human Rights Watch that some children from the community attended a nearby government high school, but they had all quit. At that school, there are a lot of Panjshiri kids [from a northern province] who got in fights with our kids, he said.

The contested nature of many informal IDP and returnee settlements may also be a barrier to children attending school. Some settlements face resistance from the owners of land on which they have settled or from the government, which may block children from accessing school, or leave their families in permanent instability that undermines the ability of children to study. One leader of an IDP community in Kabul said that a year earlier, in 2015, gunmen he believes were sent by the land owner attacked the community, killing two community members.[\[260\]](#) The leader of another informal IDP settlement in Kabul said that the police have tried to force his community out, including by blocking the paths in and out of the settlement.

Some NGOs have established schools specifically designed to meet the needs of IDP communities, but a huge unmet need remains. Asadullah, the IDP settlement community leader in Kabul told Human Rights Watch that an NGO had set up several schools for the community, each accepting 50 children but there are nowhere near enough spaces. I have seven or eight children, he said. Only one is in school. There are too many kids and too few classrooms. Within a family, we sit and consult and talk and choose which child will be able to go to school.[\[261\]](#)

Manija, 17, class-three student at a CBE program, Kandahar, July 2016.

Community-based education programs (CBEs) are often an Afghan girls only chance at education. The opening of a nearby CBE can mean access to education for girls who would otherwise miss school for a variety of reasons outlined in this report. Research has shown the effectiveness of CBEs at increasing enrollment and test scores, especially for girls. For example, one study in Ghor province found that CBEs had succeeded in eliminating the gender gap in enrollment and dramatically reducing the gender gap in test scores.[\[262\]](#)

CBEs have provided a temporary solution to tackle systemic barriers to girls education, including the long distances to school, insecurity on the route to school, and the lack of female teachers, among others. They have also been able to provide no-cost education to a significant number of girls who would otherwise have missed out because their families could not afford the expenses associated with government school, and they have provided education of a type approved by family and community members in some situations where concerns about the quality and safety of schools, or gender discrimination and social pressures would have otherwise kept girls home.

However, to date CBEs are exclusively operated by NGOs and entirely funded by foreign donors. The absence of long-term strategic thinking by government and donors exposes CBE programs and studentsto unpredictable closures, which can compromise students educational future.

A class springs up when funds are available, teaches students as long as the funding lasts sometimes only one group of students and then if the funding ends the CBE closes. In August, all of our schools [in this province] will close, said a CBE provider who operates several hundred classes for girls in one province.[\[263\]](#)

Najiba, 15, enrolled in a CBE for the first time at age 14: I am in class three now. They promised to teach us until class five, but now they are telling us school will end after class three, which makes us sad because all 20 to 25 girls only educational opportunity will go with the gusts of the wind.[\[264\]](#)

Government officials generally saw value in CBEs, but felt the priority should be expanding government schools, and directing funds to that effort. Education in any form is good, adult, child, government, CBE we need to use all of these approaches, one provincial government official said. But the pressure on the MoE is for regular schools. We need CBEs too, but the priority is regular schools. [265]

There is also skepticism among government officials about whether the government could or would further integrate CBEs into the public education system. Ministry of Education gets money from Ministry of Finance, the deputy minister of general education said. There is not enough for the existing formal schools we can't add more. We need to be honest. [266] A provincial education official was even more blunt: There is no government plan to fund CBEs. The foreigners pay for them. [267]

However, some government officials see CBEs as the only way to expand an education system they believe will otherwise be forced to turn away students due to overcrowding in the coming years. We should not refuse [turn away] students from government schools, but it could happen, one government provincial education official said.

One CBE provider told Human Rights Watch: There needs to be a long-term model for CBE. Communities are asking for these types of schools. CBE makes it easy for parents to send kids to school. It is very near; it is very easy for them to control their children. They want their children's education to be in their community. [269]

CBEs also need a stronger partnership with government to increase the number of students who transition successfully to government school and continue studying after CBE. [270] But even when students are able to complete the full primary school curriculum at a CBE, the transition to a government school is far from smooth, and it was clear from Human Rights Watch's research that many students do not make it.

Many older girls in CBEs said that they planned to transfer from a CBE to a government school. Under the government's CBE policy, connection with a government hub school is part of the process of establishing a CBE, and that hub school should accept all children who studied at the CBE. [271]

In reality, however, children may find that even if they have successfully completed primary school grades in a CBE, they will still be turned away from government schools for being too old to enroll. Several government provincial education officials said that there is a maximum age of 13 or 14 for children to enroll in class six. After this age, one official said, the only options are vocational training programs and specialized schools for adult students which are few and far between. [272] An official in another province said that if a child graduates from a CBE after the age of 13 or 14, they would be allowed to enroll in government school, but this seemed to be an ad hoc decision, not a national policy. [273]

Some girls were aware that age restrictions would prevent them from continuing to study after CBE. Gulpari is 14 years old and in class three at a CBE. Our teachers said that this school goes to class four or five, she said. But I expect them to have more classes, because we are too old for government school, so we need these classes to continue. [274]

One CBE provider said that in their province they had been able to link each CBE with the closest government school and sign an agreement with the school through which the school agreed to accept students who completed the CBE program, regardless of their age at the time. [275]

In many cases the same barriers that kept girls out of government school prior to their attending a CBE prevent girls from transitioning from CBE to a government school. Distance continues to be a challenge for many girls.

Security challenges also limit the number of girls who will be able to transfer from CBE to a government school. If the situation becomes good, I will continue in government school, said Malalai, 16, who studies in a CBE in Nangarhar. But if it continues like this, I will not continue [my studies]. [276]

Because transitioning from CBE to government school is often impossible for girls, many pleaded for CBE programs to be extended, ideally all the way to class 12. I want the government to help [CBE] to continue up to class 12, said Jameela, 16, who is in class three at a CBE and dreams of a career in law or as a midwife. It is not possible for us to be a midwife or a lawyer after just six grades. I want the government to help. [277]

As Afghanistan's school system struggles and often fails to meet the needs of students, there is very little extra support or access to education for children who have disabilities. The government estimates that 2 to 3 percent of Afghans have severe disabilities, a total of 596,000 to 894,000 people. [278] One government education official said that disability is one of the major causes of children not attending school. [279]

Regular government schools typically have no institutionalized capacity to provide inclusive education or assist children with disabilities. Children with disabilities who attend regular schools are unlikely to receive any special assistance; for example, Human Rights Watch interviewed a girl with what appeared to be a serious hearing impairment who was a student in a government school, where she was receiving no special assistance.

Only a few specialized schools for children with disabilities exist, and they are of limited scope. A government education official in Nangarhar told Human Rights Watch that the province has 902 schools, one of which is for children with disabilities and it serves only children who are deaf or have speech disabilities. [280] In Kabul, there is a single high school for children with visual impairment. [281]

Children with disabilities are often kept out of school. With no system to identify, assess, and meet the particular needs of children with disabilities, they often instead simply fall out of education.

Nooria has a 5-year-old daughter with cerebral palsy. Educated, with a university degree in business administration, Nooria managed to find the funds to take her daughter to India for treatment. But all you can do is physical therapy, she said. There is none available in Mazar-i Sharif. There is no special school for children with disabilities. [282]

Adults with disabilities also struggle with near total lack of support in the community, a factor that sometimes leads them to be dependent on their children, who sometimes leave school as a result. Sabina, 12, said that her family moved from a village into Mazar-i Sharif when she was age 10 so that she and her three younger brothers could study, as there was no school in their village. Sabina has managed to study, but the family struggles financially, as Sabina's father became blind after being thrown from a building by the Taliban. Sabina's 10-year-old brother left school after two years to be a guide for their father. [283]

A large proportion of the children and adults interviewed for this report described traumatic experiences they had survived, often related to the war in Afghanistan. Many alluded to having experienced stress, loss, grief, and displacement, and having witnessed or been the victim of violence. Afghanistan's schools, and its health system, have little capacity to support the mental health needs of a population deeply scarred by 35 years of war.

Our house was hit by a rocket and damaged when I was 3 years old, said Homa, 14. This affected my whole life. After our house was damaged, we didn't have any money and I was not well mentally. When I think about the war I cannot think about my sewing or studies or anything. [284]

Head of a private school, Kandahar, July 2016

Corruption has long been a major problem in Afghanistan. In 2016, Afghanistan was ranked 169 out of 176 countries on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, a ranking that was actually an improvement on previous years. [285] An NGO monitoring corruption found that when they asked Afghans to name the three most corrupt institutions in Afghanistan, the Ministry of Education came third, out of 13 institutions, surpassed only by the courts, and by judges and prosecutors. [286]

Corruption takes many forms in the education sector, including: corruption in the contracting and delivery of construction and renovation contracts; theft of supplies and equipment; theft of salaries; demand for bribes in return for teaching and other positions; demands for bribes in return for grades, registration of students, provision of documents, among other things; and ghost school and ghost teachers, schools and teachers that are funded but do not actually exist. Education officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, acknowledged that corruption is a serious challenge. [287]

Parents sometimes face demands for bribes from department of education officials. There is no official payment [to transfer schools] but you have to pay the department of education official to do their job, said Abdul, a father of a family displaced from Baghlan to Mazar-i Sharif. You pay as much as they agree. [If you don't pay] they will do it but you will suffer a lot. There will be delays if you don't pay. My wife tried to move [our children's] registration from Baghlan; she had no money so she couldn't do it. [288]

One of the most pervasive forms of corruption is the sale of positions. Across all provinces where Human Rights Watch conducted research for this report, interviewees said it was standard practice for people to have to purchase teaching positions by paying a large bribe.

When you want a job as a teacher, you have to pay 18,000 Afghani [US\$261] to the government and then you can be a teacher, a high school teacher told Human Rights Watch. The money goes to all the government colleagues; every signature has a cost. Whenever they sign they want money. He said that when he first joined the Ministry of Education in 2004, the bribe was not necessary, but he left teaching temporarily and when he tried to return he could not without paying. Unable to pay, he found temporary work as a contract teacher instead, for which a bribe was not required, but he lost that work when his family was displaced by fighting. There is a high school near here, he said. But I can't pay to have a government teaching job. [289]

Others reported that the cost of a teaching position, in bribes, was 30,000 Afghani (\$435), or even up to 100,000 Afghani (\$1,449). [290] Teachers who have paid these large bribes to secure what are relatively low-paying positions are likely to feel a need to recoup their investment through continuing corruption. Teachers may demand bribes from parents. In Afghanistan, everyone who works for the government wants money, including teachers in schools, a government high school teacher told Human Rights Watch. [291]

Nepotism is a problem in teacher recruitment. Seventy-five percent of the positions are under control of members of parliament, a civil society activist working with the government's anti-corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee said.

A government provincial education official confirmed this: One main challenge we have is Wolesi Jirga [national parliament] and local government representatives who put pressure on our recruitment and want their people put in place. Our director resists, but we have this pressure. [293]

Donors to Afghanistan have invested significantly in education, often with a specific emphasis on girls. Donor support to the education sector has focused primarily on funding the costs the government has incurred as it has worked to reform and build the government education system, but many donors have also funded a parallel system of community-based education (CBE) programs. Some donors have also supported not-for-profit schools and scholarship programs. International aid has been essential to the progress that has been achieved in expanding access to education since 2001.

However, while Afghanistan has in recent years been one of the largest recipients in the world of donor funding, only between 2 and 6 percent of overseas development assistance has gone to the education sector. [294] Bureaucratic hurdles, low capacity, corruption, and insecurity have contributed to even these funds often going unused by the Afghan government. [295] The government maintains separate operating and development budgets, the latter of which is entirely funded by donors, although donors also contribute to the operating budget. [296] In the government's 2016 budget for education, the development budget was about 28 percent of the total allocation of US\$841 million. [297] The operating budget funds salaries and running costs and is usually fully utilized, but the development budget, earmarked for costs such as school construction, teacher training, and textbook development and printing, is severely underutilized. For example, in 2012 the Ministry of Education spent only 32 percent of its development budget. [298]

Many donors have funded education through contributions to a World Bank administered program, the Education Quality Improvement Program, that supports the government in delivering education services. The second phase of the program had a budget of \$408 million, and it is largely funded by donor contributions to the World Bank's Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF). [299] As of March 2017, the named ARTF donors for the most recent Afghan fiscal year, in order of pledge size, were: the US, European Community/European Union, Germany, United Kingdom, Sweden, Denmark, Australia, Norway, Japan, Finland, and Canada. [300]

The Global Partnership for Education, another funding platform supported by multiple donors, has worked in Afghanistan since 2011, with leadership from Denmark and Canada. [301] The Global Partnership's efforts include funding CBE programs, teacher training, and providing textbooks. [302] The European Commission has funded emergency education through its humanitarian assistance programming, including for children whose families are being forced back from Pakistan after living there as refugees. [303]

As of 2014-2015, Afghanistan's largest bilateral donors, in order, were: the US, Germany, UK, and Japan, all of whom have invested heavily in education. [304] Between 2002 and 2014 the US government spent a total of \$759 million on education in Afghanistan. [305] The German government has supported efforts including training of teachers through five training colleges, with an emphasis on training female teachers. [306] The UK has made girls' education one of its key funding priorities in Afghanistan, including through a program called the Girls Education Challenge Fund that supports CBE. [307] The Japanese government reported that its support to Afghanistan had included construction or restoration of schools, training teachers, and development of training materials. [308]

Many donors have also supported education outside of or in addition to multi-donor and multilateral funds, often in the provinces where the donor had troops stationed. Others supported the ARTF in earlier years. Additional donors who have supported education include: Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Greece, India, Ireland, Italy, Korea, Lithuania, Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain,

Switzerland, and United Arab Emirates.^[309]

In November 2016, donors and the Afghan government convened for the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan, where donors pledged \$15.2 billion in aid for Afghanistan over the next four years. The goal of the conference organizers was to sustain aid at or near current levels, and this figure was seen as representing an achievement of that goal.^[310]

Despite the large pledges made at the Brussels Conference, the overall outlook for aid in Afghanistan is downward. Nongovernmental organizations report that they are feeling the effects of reductions in funding, and this is already having an impact on the many girls studying outside the governments education system. Programs run by organizations specifically designed to reach girls who otherwise would not be able to attend school, are entirely dependent on funding from Afghanistans donors.^[311]

The impact on girls education will likely be greater in the future, as government fixed costs will eat up a growing proportion of a declining aid budget.^[312] The cost of the [Afghan security forces] and the civil service is the total amount that has to be on-budget, the deputy country director for a major aid organization told Human Rights Watch. On-budget donor funds will get cut in the next few years so money will be diverted to that and will bleed out all other programs. On-budget support is squeezing out NGOs.^[313]

The head of an Afghan education said that the declining funds for NGOs, as the security forces took larger proportions of aid, would lead to more opportunities for the MoE to control these [NGO] programs and make them do what they want. She also expressed concern that aid funds for organizations that provide oversight of the government were likely to dry up, leaving even less accountability.^[314]

A lot of donors are having less oversight [of projects] because of security that's pushing a move toward pooled funding, an international official told Human Rights Watch, recognizing that this was putting NGOs under pressure.^[315]

Another change in donor funding that has affected girls occurred as international troops withdrew from many provinces in 2014, taking their funding with them.^[316] Under the system previously in place through the NATO military command, specific troop-contributing countries had security responsibility for each province, through a system of Provincial Reconstruction Teams. These countries typically invested in development aid, including for education, in the same province. This created a patchwork, where some provinces were much better funded than others, and sometimes created resentment based on the perception that more secure areas of the country were neglected.^[317] But as the troops drew down, the aid funding typically did as well, or even when the troop-contributing country continued providing similar levels of aid, it was no longer tied to that province.

The result was that some provinces, particularly those that had been recipients of higher levels of aid funding, have already seen a steep decline in funds. For example, one NGO manager told Human Rights Watch that most programs have closed in Helmand, a particularly insecure province where before 2014, nearly 10,000 UK troops had been deployed. The UK left. They were funding programs and they stopped, the manager said. There are very few programs in Helmand now, and they are mostly ending.^[318]

There are also threats to funding specific to the education sector. Relations between the ministry and donors are really bad these days, an expert who formerly worked in the Ministry of Education said. Donors are fatigued, and the ministry has mishandled the situation. Donors are cutting funds to education because they see the ministry's capacity is low, so they divert funds to other ministries.^[319]

The deputy minister of general education acknowledged that donors have concerns. Donors are still very interested in girls education, he said, but added that they want the Ministry of Education to be more active. They want more transparency, more planning, etcetera.^[320]

Out in the provinces, local education officials just see themselves under greater pressure. Donors were funding the Ministry of Education, but we are getting less now than we were in the past, a provincial education official said.^[321]

Those involved in education programs also expressed frustration with how the donors worked. Several raised concerns about lack of coordination among donors, with multiple donors funding similar but separate services in the same province or district, confusing the local population and leading to over-saturation in some areas, while gaps persist in other often less secure areas.^[322] Others pointed to slow delivery in some programs, including the large World Bank EQUIP education initiatives, the second of which the World Bank itself rated as having moderately unsatisfactory overall implementation progress.^[323] Concerns about coordination were echoed by a 2010 report assessing aid effectiveness in Afghanistan. The report found: Afghanistan is the playing field of approximately 40 to 50 donors. A large number of donors, not coordinating with each other nor consulting with the government and addressing their own priorities in terms of sectoral and/or geographic preferences can only produce fragmented results.^[324]

The rights to non-discrimination and equality between men and women are enshrined in numerous human rights treaties and Afghan domestic law. Non-discrimination is essential for ensuring that all children, and girls in particular, have full access to education.

Education is a basic right enshrined in various international treaties ratified by Afghanistan, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).^[325]

Afghanistan has also ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which includes an obligation to ensure women's equal rights with men, including in the field of education.^[326]

The right to education entails state obligations of both an immediate and progressive kind. According to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the expert body that interprets the ICESCR and provides guidance to states in their efforts to implement it, steps towards the ICESCR's goals should be deliberate, concrete and targeted as clearly as possible towards meeting the obligations. The committee has also stressed that the ICESCR imposes an obligation to move as expeditiously and effectively as possible towards that goal.^[327]

Under international human rights law, everyone has a right to free, compulsory, primary education, free from discrimination.^[328] The Committee on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights has stated that the right to fundamental education extends to all those who have not yet satisfied their basic learning needs.^[329]

International law also provides that secondary education shall be generally available and accessible to all. The right to secondary education includes the completion of basic education and consolidation of the foundations for life-long learning and human development.^[330] It also includes the right to vocational and technical training.^[331]

Human Rights Watch believes governments should take immediate measures to ensure that secondary education is available and accessible to all free of charge. They should also encourage and intensify fundamental education for those persons who have not received or completed the whole period of primary (or basic) education.^[332]

In implementing their obligations on education, governments should be guided by four essential criteria: availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability. Education should be available throughout the country, including by guaranteeing adequate and quality school infrastructure, and accessible to everyone on an equal basis. Moreover, the form and substance of education should be of acceptable quality and meet minimum educational standards, and the education provided should adapt to the needs of students with diverse social and cultural settings.^[333]

Governments should act to ensure that functioning educational institutions and programs are sufficiently available within their jurisdiction. Functioning education institutions should include buildings, sanitation facilities for both sexes, safe drinking water, trained teachers receiving domestically competitive salaries, teaching materials, and, where possible, facilities such as a library, computer facilities and information technology.^[334]

Governments should guarantee equality in access to education as well as education free from discrimination. According to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, discrimination constitutes any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference or other differential treatment that is directly or indirectly based on the prohibited grounds of discrimination and which has the intention or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise [of rights] on an equal footing.^[335]

In addition to removing any forms of direct discrimination against students, governments should also ensure indirect discrimination does not occur as a result of laws, policies, or practices that may have the effect of disproportionately impacting on the right to education of children who require further accommodation, or whose circumstances may not be the same as those of the majority school population.^[336]

CEDAW addresses the right to non-discrimination in all spheres. Article 1 of CEDAW defines "discrimination against women" as any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women.^[337]

Governments also have a positive obligation to remedy abuses that emanate from social and cultural practices. CEDAW requires that states take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to modify or abolish existing laws, regulations, customs, and practices which constitute discrimination against women.^[338] It obligates states to refrain from engaging in any act or practice of discrimination against women and to ensure that public authorities and institutions shall act in conformity with this obligation, and to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women by any person, organization or enterprise. CEDAW requires governments:

International human rights law also calls upon governments address the legal and social subordination women and girls face in their families, provisions violated by Afghanistans tolerance of a disproportionate number of girls being excluded from school.

The UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education accepted by Afghanistan in 2010 also articulates obligations on governments to eliminate any form of discrimination, whether in law, policy, or practice, that could affect the realization of the right to education. Under the UNESCO Convention, governments are obligated to develop policies that tend to promote equality of opportunity and of treatment in the matter of education and in particular [t]o ensure that the standards of education are equivalent in all public educational institutions of the same level, and that the conditions relating to the quality of the education provided are also equivalent.^[340]

It is widely acknowledged that any meaningful effort to realize the right to education should make the quality of such education a core priority. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has maintained that beyond their access obligations, governments need to ensure that the form and substance of education, including curricula and teaching methods, are acceptable to students. The committee stated that acceptability hinges on a range of different factors, including the notion that education should be of good quality.^[341] The aim is to ensure that no child leaves school without being equipped to face the challenges that he or she can expect to be confronted with in life.^[342] According to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, an education of good quality requires a focus on the quality of the learning environment, of teaching and learning processes and materials, and of learning outputs.^[343]

Under the Convention Against Discrimination in Education, governments are obligated to ensure that the standards of education are equivalent in all public educational institutions of the same level, and that the conditions relating to the quality of the education provided are also equivalent.^[344]

Child marriage is recognized under international law as a human rights violation. Since the vast majority of those subjected to child marriage are girls, it is considered a form of gender-based discrimination, and it violates other human rights principles. The CRC does not explicitly address child marriage. However, child marriage is viewed as incompatible with a number of the articles in the convention. CEDAW states explicitly that the marriage or betrothal of a child should have no legal effect.^[345]

There is an evolving consensus in international law that 18 should be the minimum age for marriage. The committees that interpret the CRC and CEDAW have each recommended that 18 be the minimum age for marriage for boys and girls, regardless of parental consent.^[346] The Committee on the Rights of the Child has taken a clear position on 18 as the minimum age for marriage, regardless of parental consent, and repeatedly addressed the need for countries to establish a definition of a child in all domestic legislation that is consistent with the provisions of the CRC.^[347] These committees have pointed to the importance of delaying marriage to protect young girls from the negative health implications of early marriage such as early pregnancy and childbirth and to ensure that girls complete their education.^[348]

Underage marriage has serious health consequences for girls and contributes to Afghanistans extremely high maternal mortality and infant mortality rates. The CEDAW committee has noted the link between high rates of maternal mortality and child marriage in numerous countries.^[349] The Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2003 urged governments to take preventive, promotive and remedial action to safeguard women from harmful traditional practices, including child marriage, that deprive girls and women their right to adequate reproductive or sexual health.^[350] The CEDAW committee has noted that child marriage and early pregnancy impede girls rights to education, and are a primary cause of school drop-out for girls.^[351]

Under Afghan law, the minimum age of marriage for girls is 16, or 15 with the permission of the girls father or a judge.^[352] Afghanistans law also violates international legal prohibitions against gender discrimination, by

setting a different minimum age of marriage for men versus women.^[353]

The CRC also obligates governments to protect children from economic exploitation, and from performing work that is hazardous, interferes with a child's education, or is harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral, or social development.^[354] The International Labour Organizations (ILO) Minimum Age Convention and the Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention describe what types of work amount to child labor, depending on the child's age, the type and hours of work performed, the impact on education, and other factors.^[355]

Under Afghanistans Labor Law, 18 is the minimum age for employment. Children between the ages of 15 and 17 are allowed to work only if the work is not harmful to them, requires less than 35 hours a week, and represents a form of vocational training. Children 14 and younger are not allowed to work.[\[356\]](#)

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), to which Afghanistan is a party, promotes the goal of full inclusion in all levels of education, and obligates governments to ensure children with disabilities have access to inclusive education, and that they are able to access education on an equal basis with others in their communities.^[357] Children with disabilities should be provided with the level of support and effective individualized measures required to facilitate their effective education.^[358]

Under the CRPD, the Afghan government is obliged to ensure that schools are accessible to students with disabilities.^[359] This entails both an obligation to ensure that facilities are physically accessible to students, and an obligation to ensure that the education schools offer is itself accessible as well. This includes, for example, the need to ensure that schools have teaching materials and methods accessible to students who are blind or have hearing disabilities.^[360] The government is also obliged both to develop accessibility standards to guide the design of new facilities, products, and services and to take gradual measures to make existing facilities accessible.^[361]

Under international law, governments should take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social, and educational measures to protect children from all forms of physical and mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, and maltreatment.^[362] The CRC obligates governments to take all appropriate measures to ensure that school discipline is administered in a manner consistent with the child's human dignity.^[363] The Committee on the Rights of the Child has defined corporal or physical punishment as any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light.^[364]

The UN special rapporteur on torture, and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, has warned states that corporal punishment is inconsistent with governments obligations to protect individuals from cruel, inhuman, or degrading punishment or even torture.^[365] The international prohibition of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, relates not only to acts that cause physical pain but also to acts that cause mental suffering to the victim.^[366] Children and pupils in teaching institutions should be protected from corporal punishment, including excessive chastisement ordered as an educative or disciplinary measure.^[367]

This report was written by Heather Barr, senior researcher on womens rights, based on research conducted by her, Ahmad Shuja, assistant researcher on Afghanistan, Patricia Gossman, senior researcher on Afghanistan, and Elin Martinez, childrens rights researcher. It was edited by Liesl Gernholtz, director of womens rights, and reviewed by Elin Martinez, Patricia Gossman; Kriti Sharma, disability rights researcher; Amanda Klasing, senior researcher on womens rights; and Brian Root, quantitative analyst. James Ross, legal and policy director, and Tom Porteous, deputy program director, provided legal and program review, respectively.

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- [331] Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted December 10, 1948, G.A. Res. 217A(III), U.N. Doc. A/810 at 71 (1948), art. 26; ICESCR, art. 13(2)(b); CRC, art. 28. Technical and vocational education and training refers to all forms and levels of the educational process involving, in addition to general knowledge, the study of technologies and related sciences and the acquisition of practical skills, know-how, attitudes and understanding relating to occupations in the various sectors of economic and social life. Convention on Technical and Vocational Education 1989, adopted November 10, 1989, No. 28352, art. 1(a). For further information, see also Convention on Technical and Vocational Education, November 10, 1989, art. 3.
- [332] ICESCR, art. 13(d). According to the 1990 World Declaration on Education for All, sound basic education is fundamental to the strengthening of higher levels of education and of scientific and technological literacy and capacity and thus to self-reliant development. Basic education should be provided to all children, youth and adults [and] should be expanded and consistent measures must be taken to reduce disparities. World Conference on Education for All, World Declaration on Education For All and Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs, Jomtien, Thailand, March 1990, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001275/127583e.pdf> (accessed August 8, 2017), art. 3(1)-(2).
- [333] UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 13, The Right to Education (Art. 13), E/C.12/1999/10 (1999), [http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Education/Training/Compilation/Pages/d\)GeneralCommentNo13Therighttoeducation\(article13\)\(1999\).aspx](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Education/Training/Compilation/Pages/d)GeneralCommentNo13Therighttoeducation(article13)(1999).aspx) (accessed August 8, 2017), para. 6 (a)(d).
- [334] Ibid.
- [335] UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 20, Non-discrimination in economic, social and cultural rights (art. 2, para. 2, of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights), E/C.12/GC/20 (2009), <http://www.refworld.org/docid/4a60961f2.html> (accessed August 10, 2017), para. 10 (b).
- [336] Ibid.
- [337] CEDAW, art. 1.
- [338] CEDAW, art. 2.
- [339] CEDAW, art. 5(a).
- [340] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Convention against Discrimination in Education adopted December 14, 1960, entered into force May 22, 1962, art. 4. Afghanistan accepted the UNESCO Convention on January 25, 2010.
- [341] UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 13, The Right to Education (Art. 13), para. 6(c).
- [342] UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 1, The Aims of Education (article 29), CRC/GC/2001/1 (2001), http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/GC1_en.doc (accessed August 10, 2017).
- [343] Ibid., para. 22.
- [344] UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education, art. 4(b).

[345] CEDAW, art.16 (2).

[346] CEDAW Committee, General Recommendation No. 21, Equality in Marriage and Family Relations, (Thirteenth Session, 1994), para. 36; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 4, Adolescent Health and Development in the Context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, (Thirty-third session, 2003), para. 20.

[347] Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 4, Adolescent Health and Development in the Context of the Convention on the Rights of Child, CRC/GC/2003/4, (2003), <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/WRGS/Health/GC4.pdf> (accessed August 10, 2017), paras. 16, 20, and 35 (g).

[348] CEDAW Committee, General Recommendation No. 21, Equality in Marriage and Family Relations, (Thirteenth Session, 1994), para. 36; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 4, Adolescent Health and Development in the Context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, (Thirty-third session, 2003), para. 20.

[349] See, for example, CEDAW Committee, Concluding Observations of the Committee to End All Forms of Discrimination against Women, Nigeria, July 8, 2008, <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/co/CEDAW-C-NGA-CO-6.pdf> (accessed July 24, 2017), para. 336. The Committee is especially concerned at the very high maternal mortality rate, the second highest in the world.... The Committee notes the various contributing factors such as ... early and child marriages, early pregnancies, high fertility rates and inadequate family planning services, the low rates of contraceptive usage, leading to unwanted and unplanned pregnancies, and the lack of sex education, especially in rural areas. The Committee expresses concern about the lack of access by women and girls to adequate health-care services, including prenatal and postnatal care, obstetric services and family planning information, particularly in rural areas.

[350] CRC, General Comment No. 4, para. 21.

[351] See, for example, CEDAW Committee, Concluding Observations of the Committee to End All Forms of Discrimination against Women, Uganda, October 22, 2010, para.31, <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/co/CEDAW-C-UGA-CO-7.pdf> (accessed August 10, 2017).

[352] Civil Law of the Republic of Afghanistan (Civil Code), *Official Gazette*, No. 353, January 5, 1977, arts. 70-71.

[353] *Ibid.*

[354] CRC, art. 32.

[355] International Labour Organization, ILO Conventions and Recommendations on child labour, undated, <http://www.ilo.org/ipec/facts/ILOconventionsonchildlabour/lang--en/index.htm> (accessed August 10, 2017).

[356] Labor Law of Afghanistan, No. 790, November 11, 1999, http://moj.gov.af/content/files/OfficialGazette/0901/OG_0966.pdf (accessed July 24, 2017), arts. 13 and 120.

[357] Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), adopted December 13, 2006, G.A. Res 61/106, U.N. Doc A/RES/61/106, entered into force May 3, 2008, acceded art. 24. Afghanistan ratified the CRPD on September 18, 2012.

[358] CRPD, art. 24(2)(d), (e).

[359] *Ibid.*, art. 9.

[360] UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, General Comment No. 4 (2016) Article 24: Right to inclusive education, CRPD/C/GC/4 (2016), http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRPD/C/GC/4&Lang=en (accessed August 10, 2017), paras. 13-26.

[361] *Ibid.*, para. 24.

[362] CRC, art. 19(1). See also: Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children and Save The Children, Towards non-violent schools: prohibiting all corporal punishment, Global report 2015, May 2015, <http://www.endcorporalpunishment.org/assets/pdfs/reports-thematic/Schools%20Report%202015-EN.pdf> (accessed August 10, 2017), pp. 45.

[363] CRC, art. 28(2).

[364] UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 8(2006): The right of the child to protection from corporal punishment and other cruel or degrading forms of punishment (arts.19; 28, para. 2; and 37, inter alia), CRC/C/GC/8 (2007), http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2fC%2fGC%2f8&Lang=en (accessed August 10, 2017), para. 11.

[365] UN Commission on Human Rights, Report of the Special Rapporteur, Mr. Nigel S. Rodley, submitted pursuant to Commission on Human Rights resolution 1995/37 B, E/CN.4/1997/7, January 10, 1997 http://repository.un.org/bitstream/handle/11176/216289/E_CN.4_1997_7-EN.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y (accessed July 24, 2017), para. 6.

[366] UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 20: Article 7 (Prohibition of torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment), A/44/40, (1992), http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=INT%2fCCPR%2fGEC%2f6621&Lang=en (accessed August 10, 2017), para. 5.

[367] *Ibid.*, para. 5.

[368] Mujib Mashal, Taimoor Shah, Young Symbol of Afghan Resilience Joins List of Lost Leaders, *New York Times*, January 11, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/11/world/asia/uae-afghanistan-attack-kandahar.html?_r=0 (accessed March 1, 2017).

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