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The rise, removal, and return of women: gender representations in primary-level textbooks in Afghanistan, 1980–2010

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ABSTRACT

Nearly four decades of instability and fragility have led to many changes in the status of women and girls in Afghanistan. Yet, little research focuses on these changes within the education system. To understand the country's stance toward gender issues in formal practice, we examine gender representations in Afghan primary-level Dari language arts textbooks. Using a qualitative content analysis and longitudinal data, we examine how ideologies about gender have been politicised in Afghanistan and are reflected in school textbooks from 1980 to 2010. Findings suggest that tumultuous political events and power struggles in the recent history of Afghanistan have led to many changes in how the daily social and working lives of Afghan women and girls have been portrayed in textbooks. As seen in the textbooks, it appears that efforts are being made within the current regime to balance competing gender norms. We conclude with suggestions for policy-makers.

Introduction

Nearly four decades of instability and fragility have led to many changes in women's status in Afghanistan. Within its borders are competing local ideologies, including liberal, moderate, and radical Islam, and a diverse population, including rural, under-educated Afghans (who make up three-quarters of the population) and an educated, bourgeois population in urban areas (World Bank 2015). Indeed, the continuous conflicts in Afghanistan have been blamed on the central state's inability to find equilibrium to address the demands of these various groups (Barfield 2010). The contrast between these beliefs appeared strongest when the Taliban[1] were in control from 1996 to 2001. Under this regime, women's rights deteriorated at the same time that norms regarding gender rights expanded around the world (Goodson 2001; Wotipka and Ramirez 2008). Growing up during Taliban rule has been found to be detrimental to women's educational achievement and labour force participation, among other indicators (Noury and Speciale 2016). Presently, girls in Taliban-controlled rural areas are far less likely to be enrolled in schools.

To understand the country's stance toward gender issues in formal practice, one may examine its school textbooks. Textbooks play vital roles in efforts to deliver high-quality education, particularly with growing emphasis on learning outcomes and skill development in countries around the world (Benavot 2011). Textbook content introduces students to 'legitimate knowledge': textbooks reflect the power relations, struggles, and compromises among different classes, races, genders, and religious groups (Apple 1992, 2004). As vital parts of the official curriculum, they also promote a hidden curriculum. Textbooks can be used as highly politicised means of indoctrinating children with specific notions of nationhood and what it means to be a citizen of a particular country at different points in time. As such, textbooks play important roles in giving governments the legitimacy they need from their citizens (Williams 2014) and maintaining the state's dominant narrative (Brehm 2014). Gender identities, too, are constructed through textbooks (Durrani 2008). Granted, children bring in their own perspectives and values when reading texts and viewing illustrations in school textbooks, but this is less the case in teacher-centred classrooms dependent on textbook materials and for more malleable younger students.

The purpose of this study is to examine gender representations in Afghan textbooks from 1980 to 2010. During this period of Afghan contemporary history, political power was in the hands of four distinct regimes: The Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, the Islamic State of Afghanistan, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (see Figure 1). Every change in government resulted in a new ideology requiring the state to garner legitimacy among its citizens. At the same time, the country experienced shifts in its position within the international community (Crews 2015). These shifts resulted in changes in the conception of gender equality in the country's constitution, policies, and practices (Emadi 2002, 2010; Jones 2009). In addition, each new government showed interest in the education system and gave particular attention to textbooks in order to advance its own agenda, including gender. In some instances, existing textbooks were abolished and new versions were published. The particular concern governments have for textbooks strengthens the notion that textbooks serve purposes beyond fulfilling classroom objectives (Baiza 2013).

Using a qualitative content analysis of text and images found in Dari language arts (DLA) textbooks, we argue that changes in the depictions of gender representations reflect the context of dramatic political and social changes within the state. While
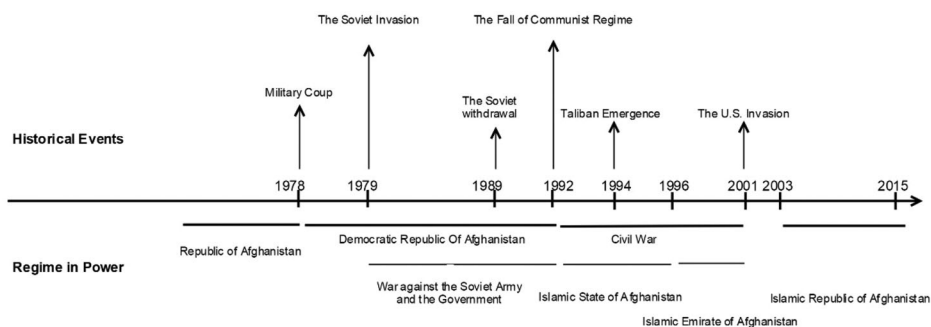

Figure 1. Changes in the political regimes in the Afghanistan government, 1978–present. Source: Authors' own elaboration from Saikal (2004); Emadi (2010); Ansari (2012); and Samady (2013).

women in many countries around the world have incrementally progressed toward equal rights (Dorius and Firebaugh 2010; Charles 2011), this has not been the case for women and girls in Afghanistan. Findings suggest that tumultuous political events and power struggles in the recent history of Afghanistan have led to many changes in how the daily social and working lives of Afghan women and girls have been portrayed in textbooks. It is only within the current regime that some balance between competing gender norms seem to be reflected in textbooks. We conclude with suggestions for policy-makers.

Persistence of gender bias in textbooks

Gender bias appears in textbooks around the world in varying degrees (Blumberg 2008). Stereotypes, patriarchy, and the presence of extremist Islamic ideology play a part in reproducing traditional gender roles in textbooks from many predominantly Muslim countries (Alrabaa 1985; Shafiq and Ross 2010; Amini and Birjandi 2012; Ullah and Skelton 2013; Bağ and Bayyurt 2015). Analyses of Iranian and Pakistani textbooks, for example, reveal fewer references to women compared to men (Durrani 2008; Ullah and Skelton 2013). When women and girls are depicted, they play minor roles (Alayan and Al-Khalidi 2010) and are seen in the domestic sphere as mothers and nurturers (Touba 1987; El-Sanabary 1994; Mehran 2003). Depictions of women in textbooks vary depending on subject. For example, in Jordan, history textbooks are found to be biased against women, while social studies textbooks are not (Al-Khalidi 2012).

The few studies that examine gender representations over time in textbooks in this part of the world expose declines in women's status when fundamentalist political regimes are in power. Higgins and Shoar-Ghaffari (1991) survey two sets of elementary-level Persian language textbooks used in 1969–1970 and 1986–1987 – eight years after the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. They find significant changes in the style of dress and in the extent of sex segregation portrayed in public settings. However, they discover no major differences in the occupations in which women were portrayed nor in the amount of attention given to family life. The authors explain these findings as demonstrating a 'clash between ideals and necessities. The established realities of social, political, and economic structures limit the implementation of the ideological aspirations of even a radically committed regime like that of the Islamic Republic' (230). The status of women in Turkish textbooks published between 1928 and 2008 also declined over time – from that of teachers of children in the Republic in the 1920s, to 'servants of their families' in the 1950s, to something 'even worse' today (Gümüşoğlu 2008; Bağ and Bayyurt 2015, 69). While the frequency of representations of women and girls in textbooks has increased generally over time (Law and Chan 2004; Schrader and Wotipka 2011; Lee 2014), the nature of how they are represented is still far from equal.

Gender ideologies and state legitimacy

To understand changes in gender representations in textbooks for the case of Afghanistan, we argue that ideologies about gender have been politicised throughout this period. Lorber (1994, 1) defines gender as

an institution that establishes patterns of expectations for individuals, orders the social processes of everyday life, is built into the major social organizations of society, such as the economy, ideology, the family, and politics, and is also an entity in and of itself.

Feminist perspectives of the state highlight not only its gendered nature but also its male-dominated ideology, institutions, and representatives (Connell 1987; Stromquist 1995).

Relevant, too, is the notion that gender is 'a system of values that shapes the relationships between individuals of the same or different sexes, between individuals and society, and between individuals and power' (Stromquist 1995, 428). Moghadam (1992, 2013) contends that while all countries have gender systems, Afghanistan has patriarchal structures (e.g. patrilocal residence and patrilineal descent), a neo-patriarchal state, and social changes that combine to render women's status very low. She goes on to argue that '… the politics of gender may be particularly strong in patriarchal societies undergoing development and social change; gender becomes politicized during periods of transition and restructuring, when social groups and values clash' (Moghadam 1992, 49).

A quick overview demonstrates how gender has been politicised during the period examined in our study. Although the Marxist-oriented Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (1978–1992) promoted ideals of gender equality, the system was repressive against women and modernisation efforts were uneven (Povey 2003). When a coalition of muja-hidin[2] groups was in power from 1992 to 1996, they reversed all policies that supported gender equality in their efforts to Islamicise the country. Such efforts ranged from firing all women from government positions to using physical force and sexual violence (Emadi 2002). It was during this intense period of instability and civil wars that the Taliban rose to power. Claiming authority from Islam, the Taliban enacted several restrictive gender policies during their rule from 1996 to 2001, including forbidding girls from attending school and women from working outside the home, and requiring women to wear head-to-toe coverings and to be accompanied by close male family members in public (Goodson 2001). Under the current democratically elected administration, women have been able to enter all sectors of public life and are seen as essential to the rebuilding of the nation (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003). However, more than 600 schools, primarily in the volatile southern provinces, are closed because of ongoing security risks and attacks from the Taliban and other insurgents (Fleming 2005), including those that target girls' schools (Arnoldy 2009).

Diverting attention to women's morality and cultural identity can draw attention away from economic and political problems, thereby helping to maintain a country's legitimacy. A pillar of state building and maintenance, internal legitimacy through the purported support of the majority of constituents must be gained and maintained in order for governments to keep themselves in power (Weiler 1983). Governments also strive to gain and maintain external legitimacy: in a global society, governments rarely prosper in isolation. States often apply global norms to demonstrate their desire to be seen as legitimate members of global society (Boli, Ramirez, and Meyer 1985; Meyer et al. 1997; Meyer and Ramirez 2000).

Concerns for legitimacy are supported by results of cross-national textbook analyses. Textbooks have been found to reflect the political ideas and standards that a government creates or with which it aligns (Moon and Koo 2011). In countries with less political security and cultural legitimacy, textbooks include narratives about general human rights issues,

but references to the specific rights of individuals from diverse groups and minorities, including women, are far less evident (Bromley 2014). Influenced by a world culture that celebrates human rights discourse (Meyer, Bromley, and Ramirez 2010), these less secure countries include only certain human rights topics in their textbooks and in amounts that do not disrupt legitimacy at the local level. In addition, textbooks from conflict-affected countries have been found to be less likely to discuss rights compared with more democratic countries (Russell and Tiplic 2014). Post-conflict countries emphasise nationalism and abstract civics, avoiding rights discussions that may be seen as 'threatening to state legitimacy' (326) or that could prompt comparisons to past rights violations.

How are socio-political contexts reflected in representations of gender found in textbooks in Afghanistan? And how do these representations change when power changes hands? We explore these questions by examining gender representations in Afghan primary-level DLA textbooks published between 1980 and 2010.

Research methods and data

A qualitative content analysis allowed us to delve deeply into official textbooks in order to develop a 'thick description' of the narrative and images they contain (Geertz 2002; Creswell 2008, 2013). In addition, by conducting a longitudinal study spanning several decades, we were able to identify and assess changes over time in gender representations.

Our analysis purposely focused on Dari language arts (DLA) textbooks at the primary level. Dari is one of two national languages and the language of instruction in Afghanistan, except in majority Pashtun provinces where Pashtu is often spoken within classrooms.[3] In a country with 40 minority languages and 200 dialects (Haarmann 2002), language arts textbooks in primary school play a critical role in the Afghanistan education system: they equip students with a common language in which to communicate. The education systems of all political regimes in our study allotted the greatest proportion of class time to language arts subjects (Samady 2001). Furthermore, the textbooks in our sample were used in first and second grades. The lessons' objectives in these grades were to teach students the Dari alphabet and basic literacy. They did not focus on specific narratives in history or works of literature, unlike textbooks used at higher grade levels. Instead, authors could create their own stories with characters of any gender and with characteristics idealised for that point in time.[4]

We analysed six state-approved DLA textbooks for first and second grades, two from each distinct political regime in Afghanistan from 1980 to 2010 (see Table 1). We used a critical sampling approach to examine certain years from the time period of interest.

Table 1. Textbooks used in the analysis of gender representations in Dari language arts textbooks in Afghanistan.

Government	Period in power	Grade and textbook title
Democratic Republic of Afghanistan	1978–1992	First grade, Dari Language Arts
		Second grade, Dari Language Arts
Islamic State of Afghanistan	1992–1996	First grade, Dari Language Arts
Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan	1996–2001	Second grade, Dari Language Arts
Islamic Republic of Afghanistan	2001–present	First grade, Dari Language Arts
		Second grade, Dari Language Arts

The first set of textbooks analysed in this study was published in 1980 in Afghanistan by the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (1978–1992). The second set was used by both the Islamic State of Afghanistan (1992–1996) and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (1996–2001). As we describe in more detail later on, to support the counter-communist shadow government and educate millions of refugees who had settled in Pakistan, these books were published in 1987 with funding in part provided by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The most recent textbooks in our sample were published in 2010 under the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2001–present). The textbooks analysed in this study ranged in length from 72 to 143 pages. The coding scheme was developed from our conceptual framework and during the process of data analysis (Charmaz 1990). Textbooks were coded by hand and cross-checked by the authors. Translations were conducted by the first author.

As we present our findings for each regime, we also provide the political and educational context for that time period and discuss the results. Findings from textbooks used under the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan deliberately receive more attention because women and girls are much more present in these textbooks than in subsequent textbooks. Before presenting the findings, we provide a short background on the educational system in place under the Afghan Monarchy[5] and during the lead-up to the first regime included in our study.

Education and girls' schooling under the Afghan Monarchy (before 1978)

Before the nineteenth century and the emergence of Afghanistan as a modern state, education was limited to general religious studies for both girls and boys, and was not encouraged for girls in rural areas (Samady 2001). The first modern school in Afghanistan, Habibia, was established in 1903 to educate elite boys (Baiza 2013). Amanullah Khan and Queen Soraya established the Ministry of Education and included educational law (articles 14 and 68) in the 1923 Constitution of Afghanistan (Baiza 2013). By declaring elementary education free and compulsory for all citizens and advancing girls' education, an increased level of educational programmes reached a greater proportion of the Afghan population during this time.

Efforts to expand access to education experienced resistance, however, from the country's religious establishment and the majority conservative population residing in rural areas. These groups viewed the push toward modernisation as an orchestrated plot to change the established social order (Ghobar 2004; Saikal 2004; Baiza 2013). They organised social movements to resist reforms such as public education and particularly girls' education (Barfield 2010). When Amanullah Khan was overthrown in 1929, educational reforms were dramatically reduced and, in some cases, even reversed.

After a short recession, the educational system resumed its expansion during King Mohammed Zahir's reign between 1933 and 1973. Primary and secondary enrolment rates for girls increased from less than 1–13.1% (Jones 2009), and the number of government-run teacher training centres increased from only one in Kabul to 12 in each of the country's main cities (Samady 2013). In 1964, women were guaranteed the suffrage and were entitled to run for public offices. Shortly thereafter, the first woman Minister and three women senators were elected to the all-male cabinet and parliament. The Democratic Organization of Afghan Women (DOAW) – later referred to as the first feminist

movement – was established at this time to promote literacy among women, eliminate forced and early marriages, and abolish bride price (Moghadam 1999; Ahmed-Ghosh 2003).

After taking power in a non-violent coup, President Mohammad Daoud presided over an increase in women's contribution to the economy and an expansion of women's political participation. He declared veiling to be voluntary to comply with the conservative proportion of the population while encouraging women to increase their participation in the workforce. During this time, women enrolled in Kabul University and became doctors, nurses, and teachers. Fearing for their survival, members of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) overthrew and killed Daoud in 1978 and established the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan.

Findings for the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (1978–1992)

The communist PDPA promoted a Marxist-oriented political system aligned with the Soviet Union's policies. After seeing resistance from the majority of conservative and rural populations, in 1979, Soviet tanks entered Afghanistan to support the PDPA government.

In terms of educational changes, the Soviets revised the primary and secondary school curriculum to introduce socialist and secular ideas and to coincide with the curriculum used in the Soviet Union (Burde 2014). Russian replaced English as the official foreign language in high schools, and academic exchanges were established with Eastern Bloc countries. Education in this era included curricula that reflected a merging of Afghan progressive ideals with Russian textbooks. Changes emphasising the 'liberation of women', 'labor equality', and 'collective ownership' (Jones 2009) caused backlash among the majority of the nation's rural and conservative urban populations. Along with incorporating socialist ideals into educational curricula, the PDPA, with the Soviet Union as its ally, strived to implement a Marxist-oriented government where men and women equally fulfilled the demands of a socialist market. UNICEF statistics show that the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, to some extent, achieved its objective by increasing girls' gross enrolments in school from 152,750 in 1978 to 214,560 in 1990. Women also accounted for close to one in five government staff members (Baiza 2013).

The oldest textbooks in our analysis represented gender relatively equally and slightly in favour of women, both in frequency and in their centrality in the text and visuals. The frequency of references to women was considerably high, and an equal number of lessons had women as the main characters as they did men. The following themes exemplify the gender roles attributed to women in these textbooks.

Ubiquitous presence of women

In these textbooks, women, men, girls, and boys are represented interchangeably throughout. When women are represented in the text, men are represented in the visuals, and vice versa. For example, in one lesson in the first-grade DLA textbook, the picture shows a man working with a machine in a factory while the corresponding text below the picture narrates a story of a woman working in a factory. The story continues and introduces the woman's daughter who wishes to work in a factory one day (First-grade Democratic

Republic of Afghanistan DLA, 38). Conversely, in another picture in the same textbook, a girl is shown holding an umbrella and a schoolbag as she walks in the rain, while the text below the picture narrates a story of a boy who, on his way back home from school, uses his umbrella to avoid becoming wet and catching a cold (First-grade Democratic Republic of Afghanistan DLA, 56). These examples demonstrate the equal representation of boys and girls in the texts and pictures of the textbooks published during the Soviet-influenced Democratic Republic of Afghanistan.

Women's agency and playing of key roles

Women's independence and agency is a notable theme in this set of textbooks. Their agency is neither limited nor complementary and women's roles extend beyond supporting men. In the 1980s textbooks, women initiate activities and accomplish them individually. They work, think, sing, play, and dance. Their positions are not attributed to verbs such as 'to like', 'to feel', 'to help'.

There are many parallel stories where girls and boys do similar things. An excerpt from the second-grade DLA textbook, for example, includes a story about a sister and her brother who both like gardening. The girl likes growing flowers, whereas the boy likes to plant trees. Both the girl and the boy individually bring water from a spring to water their flowers and trees, respectively. One might argue that this excerpt instead attributes a gender stereotypical role to the girl – to grow flowers. Yet having a distinct hobby, and doing that independently, is portrayed similarly for the girl as it is for her brother in the story.

Women and girls were also found to play central and non-stereotypical roles in over half of the images. These include pictures of a woman who helps her daughter put on her shoes, a girl who plays with a rope, a girl who talks to her parents, a girl who feeds a goat, a girl who grows a plant, and two girls who do laundry.

Who works where?

In addition to being depicted in non-stereotypical roles, women are also presented equally in the labour force. In the first-grade textbook, there are two lessons where women are represented as factory labourers with daughters who wish for the same job opportunities. Three other lessons represent women as skilled labourers. For example, we learn from the text that 'Ghodsia's mother is a professional carpet weaver. Ghodsia is interested in becoming as skillful as her mother' (First-grade Democratic Republic of Afghanistan DLA, 29). In the picture, Ghodsia is watching her mother as she works. Although carpet weaving might seem like a stereotypical role for women, the text describes Ghodsia's mother as professional and skilled. Both characters in this story have agency. Ghodsia imagines herself in the workforce where she can utilise her skills in the same way as her mother.

By contrast, there is no lesson where boys dream about their fathers' jobs, although they help their fathers in the same way. This might be an intentional effort to instil in girls the idea that working in industry or in an office is possible by depicting their mothers' generation as already part of that workforce. Boys, on the other hand, might think their future presence in the labour market is guaranteed, so this point does not

need to be highlighted for them. This insistence on preparing girls for the labour market cannot be completely accounted for by the growing economy of Afghanistan in the 1980s. Rather, the pro-Soviet and Marxist-oriented government seems to have played a role in dispersing these ideas in Afghan textbooks. The PDPA government aspired to follow the Soviet model. Boys and girls learned about their potential roles in the workforce through their school textbooks.

Young and old, outside and inside

In the 1980s textbooks, women and men are shown equally inside and outside of home settings, although the visuals often depict younger girls outside and adult women in domestic spaces. In the text, however, there is equal representation of young and old women in outside settings. Younger women in outside settings are also pictured in non-traditional dresses and mostly without hijab (see Figure 2). This distinction between younger and

Figure 2. Depictions of young women and girls in non-traditional outfits outside, and older women with traditional outfit in domestic settings (First-grade Democratic Republic of Afghanistan Dari language arts, 33, 65, 71; Second-grade Dari language arts, 28, 31, 47).

older generations is not limited to women and girls; the same applies to young men, who wear non-traditional outfits when outdoors, whereas older men (characterised as grand-fathers, farmers, and shopkeepers) wear traditional Afghan clothes, grow beards, and provide young children with stories and advice. These depictions encourage youth to welcome the change in outfits as a sign of a more modern era where men and women work as labourers, doctors, nurses, teachers, and librarians.

Overall, both the textual and visual analyses suggest equal gender representations in the 1980s DLA textbooks of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. Not only are women represented as often as men in frequency, but the status of women and their representation in public areas is equal to that of men. In fact, girls' ambitions to advance their education and to work are represented more so than those of boys.

Legitimacy from the Soviet and Eastern Bloc

The Soviet-backed Democratic Republic of Afghanistan government envisioned implementing Marxist ideology in Afghanistan in order to ensure support from the Soviets and other state members of the Eastern Bloc. In the 1980s, the Soviet Union extended its influence to central and southern Asia. As a global power, its norms travelled beyond its borders. The Democratic Republic of Afghanistan changed the educational policies of the previous monarchy and adopted a secular approach to education and social service. The secularisation of education was partnered with the expansion of education and public services to women and girls. The themes emerging from our findings align with this political regime. The greater amount of references to women and the representations of women challenging stereotypical roles are indications that the government attempted to distance the new generation from traditional Afghan social and cultural norms. Findings from this period demonstrate the case of a country using women's representation to advance their political ideology despite backlash from its citizens, Islamic neighbours, and the United States and its allies. With Soviet backing, the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan was able to withstand such opposition.

Findings for the Islamic State of Afghanistan (1992–1996) and Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (1996–2001)

The development of the textbooks used during the next two regimes began during the command of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. In 1979, the Soviet Army and Afghan forces entered a decade-long war with mujahidin groups who viewed the education system and curriculum as anti-Islamic and anti-Afghan (Jones 2009). During the Soviet-Afghan War and the subsequent seven-year civil war among mujahidin groups, the mujahidin targeted schools with rockets and executed many graduates of the communist education system (Baiza 2013).

Part of the financial and military support from the United States and regional anti-communist states provided to counter Soviet influence were funds to develop pro-mujahidin textbooks. One such source was a $60 million grant from USAID for textbook development through the University of Nebraska Omaha (Spink 2005). Referred to by Afghans today as *J is for Jihad*, these textbooks included Dari, mathematics, science, history, and geography lessons and were intended for Afghan children in refugee

camps in Pakistan. When the Communist government fell in 1992 and the United States and its allies left Afghanistan, they left millions of copies of these textbooks, which made their way into schools in Afghanistan as substitutes for the previously used socialist textbooks.[6]

The Taliban, which literally means 'seekers of knowledge', overthrew the mujahidin-led government in 1996. The Taliban encouraged religious studies for boys but denied the right to education for girls. Although they removed science, history, and geography from the *J is for Jihad* curriculum, they continued to use the textbooks for other subjects, including DLA. These textbooks promoted resistance towards groups that did not practise Islam, oriented students politically, reinforced jihad (war or struggle against non-believers) of a violent nature, and inured boys to exclusively male education. Under the Taliban regime, only a small percentage of girls risked attending underground schools (Fleming 2005).

Men and boys as fighters

The recurring themes in the 1990s textbooks are the ideas of 'jihad', 'us versus others', 'xenophobia', 'religious rituals', and 'hatred toward others'; only about 20% of the lessons focus on other topics (agriculture, farming, and nature). In the counter-communist regime, lessons and stories are centred on fighters and their bravery; boy characters in textbooks wish to join their fathers and their male compatriots on the battlefields to battle the Soviet army. According to this narrative, men and boys fight while women and girls are intentionally or inadvertently excluded from the textbooks. Women's roles during the war, whether seen as significant or stereotypically suffering victims (Schrader and Wotipka 2011), are disregarded completely in the *J is for Jihad* textbooks.

Few references to women

In stark contrast to the previous era's textbooks, the references to women in the *J is for Jihad* textbooks are highly limited. We find no references to women in the first-grade DLA textbook of this curriculum; the second-grade textbook briefly mentions women just four times. References to women in the *J is for Jihad* textbooks occur in the following contexts only: in the story of Adam and Eve; when referring to the Prophet Mohammad's mother; in describing the structure of a heterogeneous family; and when detailing how to pay respect to one's parents. Women in these textbooks are referred to by their role in the family, and except for Eve in the creation story, women are never referred to by their given names. 'Jamila', 'Ghodsia', 'Nahid', and 'Sara' disappear from textbooks, and instead mother, sister, and daughter appear in the textbooks as extremely minor, supporting characters. Removing women's names and binding them to their roles in the family in relation to men shows an intentional effort to undermine women's agency and individual personalities.

Boys go to school, girls help their mothers

In these narratives in which women's roles are constrained to the family setting, girls' schooling and women in teaching roles are altogether dismissed. Although two lessons

in the 1990s textbooks state that Islam encourages men and women equally to seek knowledge (for example in the first-grade *J is for Jihad DLA*, 23), our analysis suggests that the dominant themes show only men and boys receiving education. Although girls and boys of the same age are present as characters, only boys go to school while girls, introduced as the boys' sisters, stay at home, help their mothers, and make food for their brothers. Women and girls are pictured in domestic settings doing chores while men and boys participate in responsibilities outside of the home. This distinction recurs in all instances and perpetuates the norm that the value of women and girls lies in doing domestic chores and obeying men. One such example is about a boy named Salim:

> I have a sister and a brother. When we get up, after washing our faces, my father, my brother and I go to the mosque to pray. My mother and my sister pray at home. Then together we recite the Quran. My brother helps my father to work on the farm. My sister helps my mother.

> I go to school and study, my mother bakes bread, my sister washes the dishes, I bring water and help them. People who live together should help each other. (Second-grade *J is for Jihad* DLA, 35)

In addition to the stereotypical roles in which women are represented in this excerpt, there is explicit exclusion of girls from schooling: while Salim goes to school, his sister stays home and helps with chores.

Religious rituals

The general theme throughout the *J is for Jihad* textbooks is religion. It is mentioned in nearly 80% of all lessons, either implicitly or explicitly as when the lesson is aimed at teaching a religious ritual. In fact, references to religious rituals and practices are frequently found in these textbooks. The following is an example from the first lesson in a DLA textbook that teaches first-grade students the letter 'A' at the same time that it introduces the concept of monotheism:

> Alif (the first letter of Dari alphabet)

> Alif for Allah (God).

> God almighty is one.

> Note for teacher: Teacher should tell students to say 'almighty' whenever they hear the word Allah. (First-grade *J is for Jihad* DLA, 3)

Before first graders are introduced to other letters in the alphabet, the second lesson teaches them about the prophet Mohammad:

> Prophet Mohammad peace be upon him.

> Prophet Muhammad is the messenger of God.

> Note for teacher: Teacher should make the students understand that they should say 'peace be upon him' when saying the name of the prophet. (First-grade *J is for Jihad* DLA, 4)

A few pages later in the same textbook, the concept of jihad is introduced in a lesson that aims to teach the letter 'J':

Letter 'J'

Jihad is obligatory.

My uncle has gone to do jihad.

My uncle gave water to a mujahed. (First-grade *J is for Jihad* DLA, 10)

Overall, these findings suggest that the sponsors of *J is for Jihad* and their Afghan partners envisioned preparing a generation of fighters – all boys – who were to fight the Soviet army and the Soviet-backed Afghan government. Islam is used in these textbooks as a tool to justify the fight and to mobilise future fighters. Originally intended for Afghan boys and girls inside refugee camps in Pakistan, these textbooks directly target boys in order to instil the spirit of jihad in them (Burde 2014). There are no depictions of women or girls as they are not viewed as having the ability to contribute directly to the fight against communism.

Fragmented and isolated governments

Our lesson-by-lesson comparison of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan's DLA textbooks with the *J is for Jihad* demonstrates almost no similarity in terms of gender representations and general content. This demonstrates the fundamental opposition of the regimes under which these two sets of textbooks were taught. While the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan advocated Marxist and communist ideologies, the mujahidin adopted anti-communist beliefs reflected in the *J is for Jihad* textbooks. From 1992 to 1996, the pseudo-government in Kabul was unconcerned with gaining either internal or international legitimacy. In 1996, when the Taliban conquered mujahidin factions in Kabul and established the Emirate of Afghanistan, the only countries in the world that recognised the government were Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. The Taliban, like their predecessors, were primarily concerned with advancing their political ideology. In this context, the Taliban advocated teaching the *J is for Jihad* textbooks in boys' schools while schools for girls were all closed.

In conclusion, between 1992 and 2001, textbooks supported a militant ideology that purposely left out women and girls. These textbooks were taught under two consecutive regimes, the Islamic State of Afghanistan and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, in co-ed schools and then exclusively in boys' schools under the Taliban. During this period, the governments in power were weak and engaged in civil wars. These two factors, along with the alignment of the content of *J is for Jihad* with their political system, deterred the Taliban from publishing new textbooks (Davis 2002).

Findings for the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2001–2012)

In 2001, Afghanistan returned to wider international attention when the Taliban refused to hand over the Al-Qaeda leaders who planned and led the 9/11 attacks against the United States. These events led to the invasion of Afghanistan by the United States and its international allies. Working together, the international community established an interim government with Hamid Karzai as leader, who was elected president in 2004 and re-elected in 2009.

With substantial aid from international sources, Afghanistan was able to provide compulsory education from grades one through nine and free up to and including the undergraduate level. The state also began offering free vocational education, teacher education, and Islamic education in separate tracks at the secondary and tertiary levels. Today, according to the Ministry of Education, more than seven and a half million students are enrolled in primary and secondary schools in 11,000 schools across the country. In 2001, there were no girls enrolled while today there are three million enrolled – about 35% of students (Samady 2013). Girls typically remain in school for seven years, compared with nine years for boys (World Bank 2016).

Women return but less strongly

The Taliban's extreme practices toward women, including their ban on education for girls, lasted until the regime's collapse in 2001 when schools were opened again to girls. Our findings point to a return of women and girls in new textbooks published by the Ministry of Education with aid from the international community. However, women are still outnumbered by men overall and depictions of women are mostly dependent on men: women appear only as a man's mother or sister. In over half of the instances, women are shown completing household duties, often with men's support. The unequal representation of gender in the textbooks from the 2000s involves both the frequency of references to men and boys and women and girls, as well as stereotypical roles for women and girls.

In these domestic roles, women are presented as relatively passive, peripheral, and dependent. For instance: 'the boys brought water from the well. Nazifa [a girl] washed the peppers with water' (First-grade DLA, 39). Or 'Mansur [a boy] brought a bar of soap for Sediqa [a girl]. Sediqa washed clothes with the soap' (First-grade Islamic Republic of Afghanistan DLA, 69). The complementary roles of women are reflected in how the texts often (19 out of 26 times) present women only after first presenting men.

In textbooks from the 2000s, the only career that women have outside the household is as teachers, although estimates put the proportion of women teachers in Afghanistan at less than 30% (Sigsgaard 2009). Girls are depicted as students who never state what they want to pursue in the future. Women are limited to doing chores inside the home as mothers, daughters, sisters, and caregivers, whereas men, in addition to having similar roles, are also depicted as doctors, engineers, skilled labourers, and bakers.

Women in hijab: conformity to Islam and local norms

Over the past four decades, Afghan governments imposed their ideal attire on women across the country, disregarding women's preferences and cultural or religious norms. Unlike its predecessors, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan did not enact an official dress code, although its textbooks suggest clear guidelines for women's clothing. Apart from a few young girls who are depicted without hijab, women are represented in outfits with hijab both in domestic and public spaces in all but one instance. Men are always depicted in traditional outfits in domestic and public spaces, except in work settings (see Figure 3). Following the widespread backlash against Amanullah Khan's efforts to remove hijab in the 1920s and resistance against girls' education in the 1980s, the depiction of women in hijab in the current textbooks may be an indication of the

Figure 3. Depictions of women in traditional outfits with hijab (First-grade Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Dari language arts, 2, 44; Second-grade Dari language arts, 18, 38).

cautionary approach of the government to preserve its internal legitimacy among the more traditional members of its population.

Depictions of young girls up to a certain age without hijab conform to both conventional Islam and the practices of the majority of Afghans. In Islam, girls are required to wear a hijab after the age of nine. Unlike the textbooks of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan in which both children and young women are presented in non-traditional attire without hijab, the Islamic Republic textbooks clearly distinguish representations of women of different ages. Our counts indicate that in 20 out of 28 lessons with the same story, women and girls are depicted differently in the textbooks from the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan compared with those used under the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. This is illustrated in the story in Figure 4 about a young girl who is shown getting up, making her bed, brushing her teeth, exercising, and receiving help from her mother. In contrast, the Islamic Republic textbook presents the mother's character in hijab when she helps her daughter prepare to go to school. There are also differences in the images of the families of the young girls having breakfast together. Under the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, they are wearing non-traditional attire without hijab, while in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the mother and older sister both wear hijab.

Islamic and republic: reaching an equilibrium?

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan has the 'republic' component of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and the 'Islamic' component of the Islamic State of Afghanistan. As such, it combines both social liberal political and Islamic practices in the new

Figure 4. Depictions of women in the same story in the textbooks under the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (*Top row:* First-grade Democratic Republic of Afghanistan Dari language arts, 9; *Bottom* row: First-grade Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Dari language arts, 1).

government of Afghanistan, and consequently, in the curriculum and textbooks. After 2001, the Afghanistan government has included a combination of mujahidin leaders, technocrats close to the Democratic Republic government, those loyal to the previous monarchy, and a young-educated generation (Giustozzi and Ibrahimi 2013). This composition suggests that the current Afghan government is heterogeneous with different voices participating in decision-making.

Since 2001 and to the present day, the presence of the international community in Afghanistan and its financial and political support to the fledgling democracy have been pervasive (Barfield 2010) and 'absolutely necessary to make the state work' (Sigsgaard 2009, 22). The influence of the international community on Afghanistan's education system became official at the end of 2002 when, during a national workshop organised by USAID, UNICEF, and UNESCO, members of key non-governmental organisations and a consulting company working in Afghanistan developed a draft of the new curriculum framework (Georgescu 2007). The second revision of the textbooks developed according to this framework was published in 2012. In order to achieve political sustainability, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan must hold itself accountable and responsive to the concerns of its constituents and include women in the process (Moghadam 1994; Abirafeh 2009).

Even so, unequal gender representations in the current textbooks may be attributable to local, traditional concerns. The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan has successfully merged *Islamic* and *Republic* aspects in its title, thereby showing its desire to balance global and local norms. The government seeks to ensure that the education system and textbooks

Table 2. Gender representations in Dari language arts textbooks by political regime in Afghanistan.

Regime in Power	Gender representations		
	Women's representation	Women's agency	Women in labour force
Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (1978–1992)	High	High	High
Islamic State of Afghanistan (1992–1996)	Low	Low	Low
Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (1996–2001)			
Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2001–present)	Medium	Low	Low

do not to antagonise its citizens. As such, current DLA textbooks maintain religious components by presenting women in hijab and traditional Afghan outfits and by allocating some lessons to religious topics including God, Prophet Mohammad, and Hajj (the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca).

Representations in textbooks are reflective of the contexts in which the texts are created and countries increasingly incorporate elements of what are considered legitimate elements of world culture (Nakagawa and Wotipka 2016). Gender representations in current textbooks demonstrate a balance between local values and global norms, a possible indication that the state seeks both internal and external legitimacy. The current government is open to adopting global norms in order to secure support from the international community. As a consequence, women and girls made a return to the current textbooks. The representations of young girls without hijab therefore might be a gesture to the international community, while the prevalence of women in hijab adheres to local norms. Although the status of women and girls in the current textbooks is not equivalent to their status in the 1980s textbooks, it is a step forward compared to the 1990s ones.

Conclusion

Our examination of gender representations in primary-level DLA textbooks used in Afghanistan reveals that the frequency and nature of references to women and girls changed dramatically between 1980 and 2010, as illustrated in Table 2. The woman who worked in the 1980s and was her daughter's role model disappeared from the textbooks for a while; when she returned in the 2000s, she was less ubiquitous, with less agency and authority, and was not a skilled labourer.

During the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (1978–1992), gender representations in DLA textbooks in Afghanistan were egalitarian – women and girls were depicted as frequently as men and boys, including in public spaces. Additionally, there were efforts to display girls' ambitions to advance their education and to be employed in the formal labour market. During this period, the representation of women and girls was high compared to other textbooks in the Muslim region (Durrani 2008; Amini and Birjandi 2012; Ullah and Skelton 2013).

In 1992 the shift towards anti-community ideology under the mujahidin reduced women's roles portrayed in textbooks. Women were almost completely excluded from these textbooks, which were also used by the Taliban regime. The lack of representation of women was extreme, even when compared to the textbooks in countries such as Saudi Arabia (El-Sanabary 1994). Names of women (never girls) were referenced only in a few religious historical accounts (e.g. Eve) and as having peripheral roles within male-

dominated families. This latter point is further exemplified by narratives of boys attending school while their sisters stayed home to help their mothers. Only boys were seen as crucial to militancy against non-believers encouraged under Taliban rule.

Finally, women's presence was revived in the textbooks produced in the 2000s under the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. However, their status is not where it was in the 1980s. Not only are women and girls depicted less frequently than men and boys, but they are shown to be passive and in family roles primarily. Whilst men are seen in a variety of professions, women are only shown as teachers. Attire is of significance in these books – only young girls are shown without hijab.

Results from this study suggest that short-term political regimes in Afghanistan depict women and girls in ways that express strong political or religious views in order to distract from internal problems. Afghanistan remains a fragile state (Davies 2011). Under such conditions, the country faces challenges providing 'gender-responsive education' (Kirk 2007, 183) and perhaps it can never be 'value free' (Woo and Simmons 2008). As exemplified by *J is for Jihad*, education has been used to promote exclusion and fuel conflict rather than peace, tolerance, and equality (Burde 2014; Vanner, Akseer, and Kovinthan 2016).

Conversely, education has the power to help countries overcome the negative effects of fragility. With one of the largest portions of the national budget allocated to the Ministry of Education (Sigsgaard 2009), aid from foreign countries and organisations now requires Afghanistan to respond to both local and global pressures. The Afghan government must constantly balance competing expectations so as to maintain and gain legitimacy from both inside and outside its borders, a task it has struggled with in the past (Barfield 2010; Ansari 2012). Adhering to changing global norms regarding gender equality is one way for the country to secure international legitimacy (Barfield 2010; Ansari 2012); however, it must also be internally acceptable in order to be sustainable (Abirafeh 2009).

Efforts by policy-makers working in Afghanistan must continue to focus on gender representations in textbooks. International educators and policy-makers have been cautioned against forcing changes too quickly in their choice of curriculum for post-conflict-affected zones and fragile states (Novelli and Cardozo 2008). In a context such as Afghanistan, where education has undergone numerous societal changes and no consensus has been reached as to how to achieve gender equality, the use of incremental changes in gender representations in textbooks rather than dramatic modifications may be more effective. For example, girls and women could be portrayed in ways that resemble their actual roles in public and private spheres of Afghan society. Such an approach is more likely to meet the interests of Afghanistan's heterogeneous population and avoid backlash. In order to achieve what Ullah and Skelton (2013, 191) refer to as a 'less-essentialist portrayal of gender in society and culture', efforts should be made both to include women in the policy-making process and to ensure that portrayals of men and boys are not neglected. Developing a benchmark for future editions of textbooks will help Afghanistan arrive at the long-term goal of achieving gender equality in education.

Notes

1. Taliban is used as 'an umbrella term' referring to several groups that oppose the current government and foreign military presence in Afghanistan (Sigsgaard 2009).
2. Anti-communist Muslim guerrillas also known as jihadists and holy fighters.

3. Even in majority Pashtu provinces, school textbooks were published and written in Dari during the period of our analysis. Currently, the Ministry of Education publishes two sets of textbooks – one in Dari and another in Pashtu – in which the content is nearly identical. Starting in fourth grade, Dari and Pashtu speakers learn the other as a second language.
4. As with all textbook analyses, the classroom environments in which these textbooks were used cannot be reconstructed. Without additional data from classroom observations, teacher interviews, and focus group discussions with students, textbook studies cannot predict the extent to which conceptions of gender found in textbooks have been practiced or disregarded in schools.
5. Efforts made to collect textbooks used under the monarchy government in Afghanistan were unsuccessful. Thus we cannot determine the extent to which the egalitarian gender representations witnessed during this regime differed from those before it. For a more detailed overview of the status of women in Afghanistan's modern history, see Moghadam (1997).
6. For a more detailed analysis of the development and consequences of 'jihad literacy', see Burde (2014).

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Disclosure statement

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