

# **Analysis of the Impact of U.S. Aid for Girls' Education Initiatives in Afghanistan, 2001-2020**



*Afghan school children attend class in June 2009, Kabul, Afghanistan. ([U.N. Photo / Fardin Waezi](#))*

***May 9, 2022***

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:**

As the conversation shifts from the immediate need to evacuate Afghans to debating policy for what is next, it is critical that the U.S. and international community draw on lessons learned from the past twenty years in order to improve the situation for Afghans and the future of Afghanistan moving forward. Because education is such an important indicator for so many other measures in Afghanistan, it is imperative that policy makers understand the impacts, both large and small, of education aid for women and girls, as well as the country as a whole.

This research provides a quantitative analysis of the impact of U.S. aid for education initiatives for women and girls in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2020. The team deployed a quantitative statistical analysis approach, and collected data from non-profit organizations, international organizations, and U.S. government agency records to enable statistical analysis. While this is an incredibly complex and nuanced topic with many research limitations, the following research finds statistical significance between U.S. aid funding for women and girls' education initiatives and various indicators of levels of democracy in the country as well as measures of women's political participation. Our research found no statistical significance between U.S. funding and measures of educational participation and completion for girls or economic participation. This paper makes the following recommendations for moving forward:

1. Establish a working relationship with and urge the Afghan government (Taliban) to increase education funding.
2. Support gender-based programming in Afghanistan and ensure gender disaggregated data can be obtained.
3. Encourage accurate, reliable data collection and increase focus on monitoring and evaluation of programming.
4. Invest in community-based and innovative education solutions.

## **PROJECT RATIONALE:**

With the unraveling of America's 20-year war in Afghanistan still fresh in the American psyche, the topic of foreign aid to Afghanistan is both timely and important. The U.S. and international community have largely frozen aid funds flowing into the country after the severance of diplomatic ties with the Taliban; however, this posture could change if the current humanitarian crisis continues. This humanitarian crisis that has been unfolding in Afghanistan since the Taliban took control in August 2021 continues to threaten the lives of citizens and activists who remain, particularly women and women's rights defenders. Since President Biden announced plans to withdraw troops from Afghanistan in April 2021, more than 500,000 people have been displaced in the country, of which eighty percent are women and children.<sup>1</sup> In a statement last fall, UN Secretary-General António Guterres said that the situation in Afghanistan is a "looming humanitarian catastrophe."<sup>2</sup> With banks closed, international assets frozen, and sanctions and border blockages halting most economic aid and official trade, the economic system is in freefall. Government salaries have not been paid in months and the cost of basic goods is rising rapidly, so even if people had access to money, they likely would not be able to afford necessary items.

These immediate humanitarian challenges are only part of the problem. Another seemingly impossible challenge is creating an effective and sustainable structure of Afghan governance and economic development in the face of nearly two decades of failed attempts. Over the past twenty years, the U.S., its allies, and non-governmental organizations have provided an enormous amount of aid to Afghanistan. Between 2001 and 2020, the U.S. provided over \$150 billion in nonmilitary aid to the country funding education, healthcare, governance

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<sup>1</sup> "Humanitarian Crisis in Afghanistan." Women's Refugee Commission, February 2, 2022. [Link](#).

<sup>2</sup> United Nations University Centre for Policy Research. "Relief Is Not Enough: A Mandate for Diplomacy in Afghanistan." United Nations University Centre for Policy Research. October 22, 2021. [Link](#).

reforms, and infrastructure.<sup>3</sup> This aid money helped build about 20,000 elementary schools, and as a result, far more students were enrolled in school, jumping from 900,000 in 2001 to more than 9.5 million in 2020.<sup>4</sup> The number of universities grew sharply<sup>5</sup> and Afghans enrolled in higher education soared from 7,000 in 2001 to about 200,000 in 2019.<sup>6</sup> While no female students attended college in 2001, 54,861 were enrolled by 2019.<sup>7</sup>

The treatment of women and girls in Afghanistan has been a priority area of concern for outside observers, as many fear that the Taliban will revert to their old brutal and repressive treatment of women, and education has proven to be a litmus test. Research has shown that societies that protect, empower, educate, and respect women are safer and more secure. While there are limitations to providing aid to, maintaining a formal diplomatic relationship with, and influencing the new Taliban regime, understanding how U.S. education aid from the past twenty years impacted various indicators in the country at the macro-level could provide policy makers with important insights to inform an approach for eventually working with the Taliban and making the case for strategic investments in the education of women and girls in the country.

The group partnered with The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Project on Prosperity and Development (PPD) to analyze the impact of U.S. investment in women and girls' education programs and initiatives in Afghanistan since 2001. The group researched the relationship between U.S. aid for women and girls' education and outcomes such as increased levels of female school attendance and completion, female economic participation, female political participation, and various indicators of liberal democracy.

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<sup>3</sup> Shah, Mohammad Qadam, "What did billions in aid to Afghanistan accomplish? 5 questions answered," *The Conversation*, October 26, 2021. [Link](#).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

## **BACKGROUND:**

On March 23, 2022, thousands of Afghan girls headed to school for the first time in nearly eight months; however, within hours, they were sent home, many in tears. In a last-minute policy reversal, the Taliban backtracked on a decision to reopen secondary schools and sent them home.<sup>8</sup> Before this reversal, many observers thought that there was a chance the Taliban might be becoming more progressive; however, this move has shown that the “new” Taliban are beginning to look a lot like the “old” Taliban who ran the country from 1996 to 2001. When American forces withdrew from Afghanistan in August 2021, the big question was how the Taliban would make the transition from a fundamentalist insurgency to governing a country. Girls’ education became the litmus test. In August, there was some hope they wanted to show a gentler, more progressive face and that it had made some changes in order to effectively govern a population of nearly 40 million. At the Taliban’s first press conference after seizing power, a spokesman reassured the world that women would be “very active” in Afghan society.<sup>9</sup>

The reversal on the decision to allow girls to attend secondary school is just one of a string of recent oppressive edicts and moves that seem to suggest that the Taliban has not changed since its brutal rule in the late nineties. New rules ban women from traveling long distances without a male chaperone and years of progress are being threatened. A key difference between now and the last time the Taliban were in power is that Afghan women have changed after two decades of an American-backed government. Between 2000 and 2018, the female literacy rate more than doubled to 30%.<sup>10</sup> Before the Taliban seized power last year, nearly 30%

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<sup>8</sup> “No Country for Young Women: The Taliban are Pushing Females Out of Public Life,” The Economist, April 2, 2022. [Link](#).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

of civil servants were women, and many women had university degrees.<sup>11</sup> Thousands of women got jobs as doctors, lawyers, and law enforcement officers. Maternal mortality declined sharply and female life expectancy rose by ten years.<sup>12</sup> “Progress,” as defined by western democracies, had been made, and the education of women and girls and their inclusion in politics and the economy appeared to be a common denominator.

While the situation is still unfolding, the economic effects of removing women from the classroom and the workforce are already being felt in the country. In terms of the increase in hourly earnings from an extra year of schooling, the return on educating girls in Afghanistan was more than double that of educating boys.<sup>13</sup> The children of educated mothers have long been better educated, healthier, and likely to earn more later in life. The UN has reported that keeping women out of work costs Afghanistan up to \$1 billion, or 5% of the GDP.<sup>14</sup>

Education has long been a key focus for U.S. foreign aid. Policymakers are generally in agreement that education is crucial to bettering livelihoods and improving economic stability in developing countries. Researchers have found that investment in education leads to higher incomes, economic stability, and better health among other positive development outcomes.<sup>15</sup> While data suggest that access to and quality of education has generally improved in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, challenges still remain, especially in countries like Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup> Despite these challenges, education remains a top priority for foreign aid funding. According to a 1980 Government Accountability Office report on USAID programs, “education is a vital element in the successful socio-economic development of a country. Ignorance and illiteracy hinder

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> “Foreign Assistance and the Education Sector: Programs and Priorities,” Congressional Research Service, July 2021. [Link](#).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.