



Breaking Cycles:

Menstrual Equity and Women's Education in Afghanistan

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Executive Summary



Our report examines the intersection of **social exclusion due to menstruation and women's education attainment in Afghanistan between 2022 and 2023**. Since the resurgence of the Taliban regime in 2021, gender inequities have markedly intensified, placing additional legal and cultural constraints on women's access to education and healthcare. Current efforts by NGOs to resolve these issues have fallen short in recognizing the sociocultural factors surrounding women's health which generate barriers to educational attainment. There is, consequently, an urgent need for more interventions aimed at supporting women's educational progression in Afghanistan, especially through the lens of menstrual equity.

We address this report to WomenOne, an NGO headquartered in New York City which takes a rights-based approach to promoting women's education worldwide. Using data from 44,874 Afghan women ages 15 to 49 from UNICEF's Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 6 (MICS6), collected between 2022 and 2023, we demonstrate the link between social taboos surrounding menstruation and women's education. Our findings reveal a statistically significant correlation between menstruation-related social exclusion and education: women with higher levels of educational attainment, on average, report higher rates of exclusion.

Specifically, we advocate for the expansion of WomenOne's educational initiative into Afghanistan through the implementation of a Virtual Educational Training Program. We seek to address the negative effects of harmful social taboos surrounding menstruation on women's educational attainment. **This initiative will empower women in Afghanistan by providing remote access to educational content as a means of addressing exclusion from work, school, and social activities due to cultural stigmas against menstruation.**



Introduction

Afghanistan has undergone multiple tumultuous regime changes since October of 2001.¹ It all began with a U.S.-led overthrow of the Taliban government, initiating a series of violent sectarian clashes involving the U.S.-backed Karzai government, the Taliban, and other resistance factions. For 20 years, the U.S. maintained a significant military presence. However, in 2021, the Taliban reclaimed complete control over the nation, coinciding with a planned reduction in U.S. presence.² In 2023 – just two years later, Afghanistan was named the lowest-ranked country in the Women, Peace and Security Index.³ Today, women and girls face severe restrictions on their ability to access education, pursue employment opportunities, and participate in public life outside of the home. Overall, the Taliban's return to power has further entrenched educational inequality and social exclusion in the fabric of Afghan society, posing significant challenges to the advancement and rights of women and girls in Afghanistan.

Already, some NGOs have sought to improve education for women in Afghanistan. Beginning in 2023, UNESCO's YALBE initiative and the national Implementing Partners (IPs), has provided Basic General Literacy, equivalent to grades 1-3, alongside pre-vocational skills to over 25,000 individuals in 20 Afghan provinces.⁴ This program focuses on women and adolescent girls, who comprise over 60% of participants. UNICEF complements these efforts with their Community-Based Education (CBE) initiative, establishing schools within a three kilometers of each child's locality.⁵

Despite efforts by other NGOs to address disparities in women's educational attainment, over 67% of Afghan women do not report any educational attainment (Figure 1). Education remains an elusive right for women in Afghanistan, curtailed by socio-political constraints, and more action must be taken to address barriers generating such gender disparities. This report aims to identify policy solutions by shedding light on the following key development question:

- **Is menstruation related to educational attainment? More specifically, do highly educated women have greater access to menstrual products and private washing facilities, and experience less social exclusion?**

Our analysis employs data from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, collected in Afghanistan between 2022 and 2023 among 44,874 women and girls aged 15 to 49. With this data, we examine the multifaceted impact of menstruation-based social exclusion through the lens of educational attainment. We use sample weights for all descriptive statistics and regressions in order to ensure the results that appear in this report are representative of the broader population of women in Afghanistan. Ultimately, this report seeks to understand the relationship between women's education and menstruation-related challenges by employing a microeconomic, household- and individual-level approach. More specifically, we focus on menstrual-related social exclusion experienced by women in Afghanistan, which is defined as a **woman's reported absence from work, school, and social activities during their last menstrual cycle.**

1 Maizland, Lindsey. "The Taliban in Afghanistan." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 19 Jan. 2023, www.cfr.org/backgrounder/taliban-afghanistan#:~:text=U.S.%20troops%20quickly%20overthrew%20the,the%20U.S.%20backed%20Afghan%20government.

2 "How the Taliban Enables Violence Against Women." United States Institute of Peace, 7 Dec. 2023, www.usip.org/publications/2023/12/how-taliban-enables-violence-against-women#:~:text=And%20when%20women%20are%20detained,Women%2C%20Peace%20and%20Security%20Index.

3 "Timeline: The U.S. War in Afghanistan." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-war-afghanistan>.

4 "Community-Based Literacy and Complementary Learning Possibilities." UNESCO Kabul, www.unesco.org/en/fieldoffice/kabul/expertise/education/literacy-learning-possibilities.

5 "Education." UNICEF Afghanistan, UNICEF Afghanistan, www.unicef.org/afghanistan/education.

Data

We employ data from UNICEF's Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 6 (MICS6), which was collected in Afghanistan between 2022 and 2023. More specifically, we employ data from the women's surveys. Our use of individual sample weights ensure's the data's representativeness. The key variables which we examine in this report are:

Social Exclusion Due to Menstruation

- *Due to your last menstruation, were there any social activities, school or work days that you did not attend?*

Private Washing & Changing Facilities

- *During your last menstrual period were you able to wash and change in privacy while at home?*

Access to Menstrual Products

- *Did you use any materials such as sanitary pads, tampons or cloth?*

Educational Attainment

- *What is the highest level of school attended?*

Percentage of Women by Education Level, 2022-2023

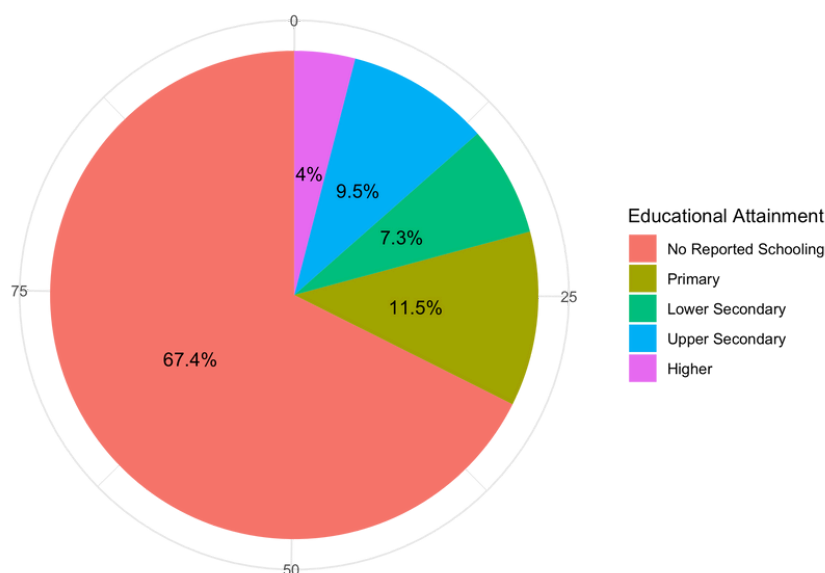


Figure 1

We omit two educational groups from this visualization, together representing less than a third of a percent of the female population. First, we exclude women who report early childhood education – schooling prior to first grade as their highest level of education, composing 0.11% of women in Afghanistan. We hypothesize that women with access to schooling follow through until at least primary education, or otherwise do not attend school, thus representing a minuscule sector of the female population. Similarly, formal Islamic education (FIE) composes 0.22% of women in Afghanistan. Since FIE is distinct in its emphasis on Islamic religious teachings, it is also omitted here, as FIE is not representative of higher levels of academic achievement.

Although we exclude early childhood education (ECE) and formal Islamic education (FIE) from our descriptive statistics above due to their small sample sizes, we include these two categories in our analysis throughout the report. Our reasoning for including ECE and FIE in the subsequent analysis is twofold. First, the inclusion of ECE creates continuity in the levels of education recorded by Afghan women. If we were to lump together ECE and primary education, for instance, our categories of educational attainment would no longer be even, and it would be difficult to establish the correlative narrative that women with higher levels of educational attainment experience higher levels of social exclusion due to menstruation. Moreover, the inclusion of formal Islamic education is crucial in establishing the argument that one barrier to women's educational attainment in Afghanistan is rooted in sociocultural norms around menstruation. Since the content of formal Islamic education is predominately religious and cultural, observing higher levels of social exclusion among women with religious schooling supports our central claim that characterizes the relationship between social taboos surrounding menstruation and educational access.

The Social Exclusion Factor

In order to develop an understanding of how factors related to menstrual health affect women's educational attainment in Afghanistan, we consider a variety of variables: access to menstrual products, ability to wash and change in private during menstruation, and social exclusion due to menstruation. Table 1 shows the results of a multivariate regression describing the relationship women's education attainment, the aforementioned menstrual-health variables, and other variables included for model fit.

	Dependent variable Highest grade attained
Age at first marriage	0.267*** (0.016)
Urban/rural	0.036 (0.145)
Age	-0.050 (0.169)
Year of Birth	0.008 (0.169)
Social exclusion due to menstruation	-0.582*** (0.127)
Availability of washing during menstruation	0.165 (0.236)
Access to menstrual products	-0.014 (0.227)
Wealth score	0.805*** (0.052)
Constant	-5.973 (236.763)
Observations	4,216
R2	0.154
Adjusted R2	0.152
Residual Std. Error	4.349 (df = 4207)
F Statistic	95.532*** (df = 8; 4207)
Note	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

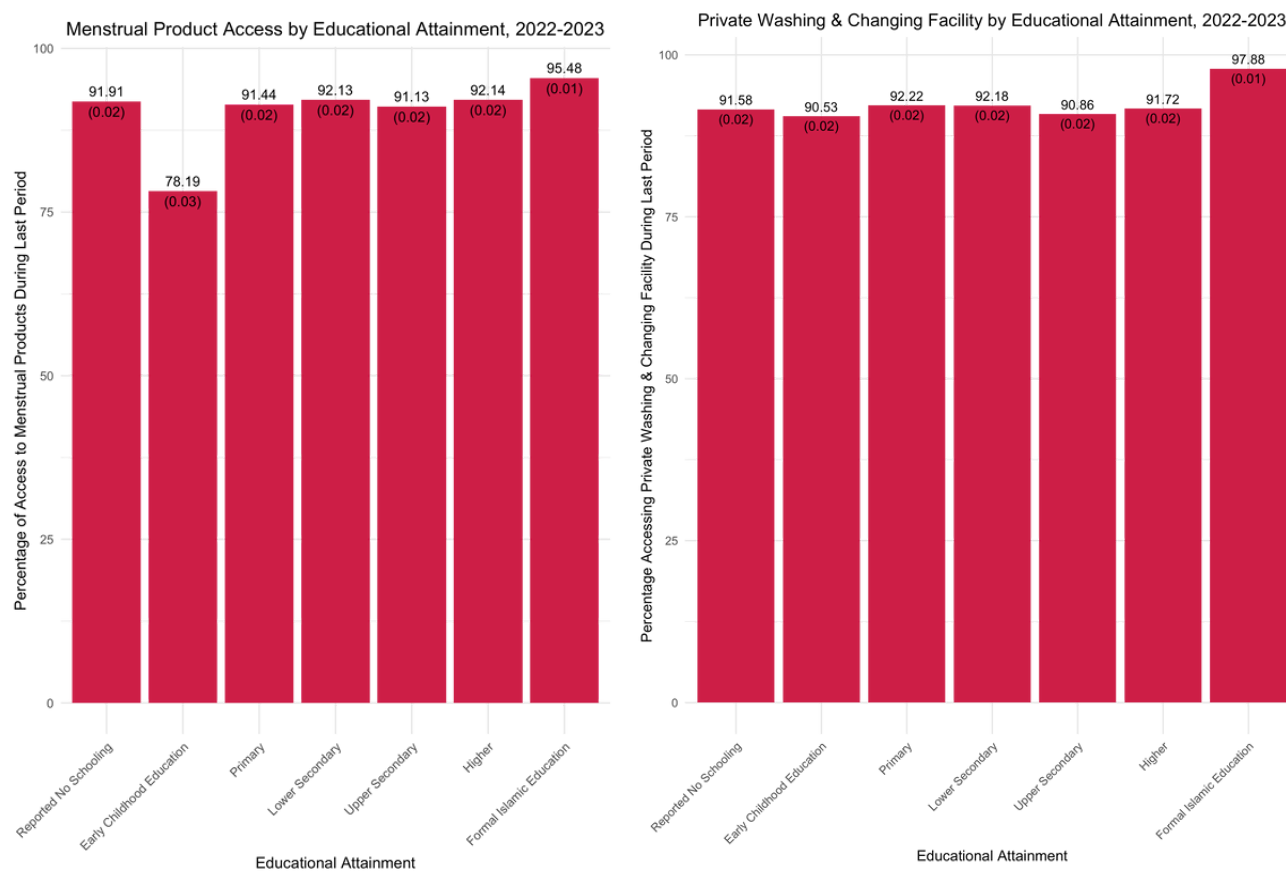
Here, we measure educational attainment by the highest grade level attended, rather than the highest grade completed. Of the eight explanatory factors considered, three are significantly correlated with educational attainment. Most relevant to our research question, we find that women experiencing social exclusion due to menstruation attain 0.58 more years of average education, holding all else constant. This result is statistically significant at a p-value of 0.001, indicating that we are highly confident that we observe dependency between social exclusion due to menstruation and educational attainment among women in Afghanistan. Although educational attainment is the outcome variable measured by this regression, we argue that this relationship is one of reverse causality: women with greater levels of educational attainment are more likely to experience social exclusion, due to the institutional hostility to women's education in Afghanistan, as well as cultural taboos surrounding menstruation.

Table 1.

A multivariate regression for which the dependent variable is years of education. Independent variables are age at first marriage, urban or rural location, current age, year of birth, whether or social exclusion was experienced due to menstruation, ability to wash during menstruation, access to menstrual products, and wealth score. The results show age at social exclusion due to menstruation – as well as age at first marriage and wealth score – were correlated with years of education and statistically significant at a p-value of 0.001. The adjusted R-squared value of 0.1521 indicates that 15% of variation in educational attainment can be explained by the variables in our model. This regression is based on data from the Afghanistan Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, collected in 2022 and 2023.

Access to menstrual products and private washing facilities is robust across educational levels.

The relationship between higher levels of educational attainment and higher reported rates of social exclusion due to menstruation is substantiated by descriptive statistics from Figure 2. Interestingly, from Table 1, we find no evidence of a significant relationship between educational attainment and ability to access menstrual products, nor do we find evidence of a relationship between education attainment and access to a private washing facility during menstruation. Figures 2a and 2b match these expectations, showing that over 90% of women have access to both of these resources, with the exception of one break in this trend for menstrual product access by women who received only an early childhood education (ECE). We confidently report with a standard error of 0.03 that 78.19% of ECE-only women report use of menstrual products – pads, tampons, or cloth – during their last menstrual cycle. However, we attribute this discrepancy for ECE-only women to the extremely small sample size of this group, which includes only 80 observations. **All in all, these relatively high rates reflect consistent access to menstrual products and private washing facilities across all groups of educational attainment. This indicates that the barrier to women’s educational attainment in Afghanistan is not one of access to menstrual resources. Instead, we argue that social exclusion bars women from educational achievement.**



Figures 2a, 2b

We find no clear relationship between access to menstrual products (2a) or washing facilities (2b) with educational attainment. Rather, access to these resources is relatively consistent across women with all levels of educational attainment. Data is from the Afghanistan Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, collected in 2022 and 2023.

Menstrual taboos affect women of different educational levels differently.

Figure 2c examines how social exclusion due to menstruation varies for women who have achieved different levels of educational attainment. **Social exclusion is defined as exclusion from social activities, school, or work during their last period due to menstruation.** As expected based on the results of our previous multivariate regression (Table 1), **there is a clear increase in the percentage of women experiencing social exclusion due to menstruation as levels of educational attainment increase.** The number of women experiencing this during their last menstrual cycle jumps from 30.3% among those who did not report their education to 38.54% among those who received higher education. Figure 2c also reveals a high level of social exclusion experienced by women with a formal Islamic education, at almost 48%. This may be reflective of the taboo surrounding menstruation in Islam; in particular, the Quran prohibits participation in prayer or religious fasting during menstruation.⁶ The increase in social exclusion rates for women with ECE could, once again, be due to the small sample size of this group. Note that the standard errors shown in Figures 2a, 2b, and 2c are small, indicating that we are confident that the observed results are reflective of the population.

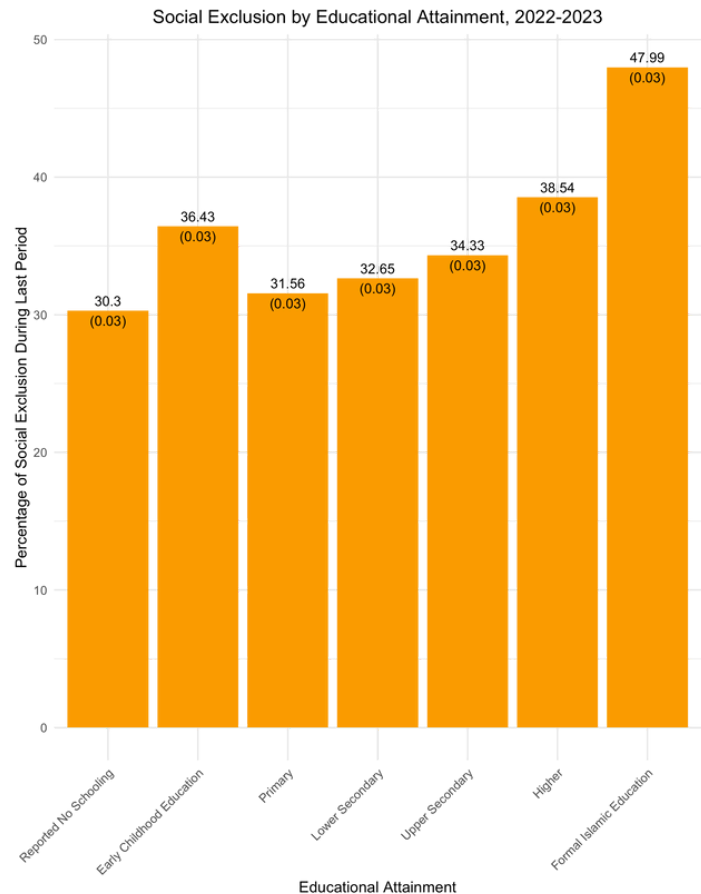


Figure 2c
Rates of social exclusion due to menstruation are higher among women with greater educational attainment levels. Data is from the Afghanistan Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, collected in 2022 and 2023.

We argue this trend – in which women with more education are excluded from work, school, and social activities due to their menstrual cycle – is due to Taliban laws prohibiting women from attending school and promoting greater gender imbalances in education. This argument is strengthened by the fact that, from Figure 2c, we find that women with formal Islamic education experience the highest rates of social exclusion among any level of educational attainment. Compared to rates of male attendance, significantly less women are permitted – by both law or tradition – to attend school in Afghanistan. Figure 1, shown on page 4, illustrates this phenomenon: a mere 4% of Afghan women⁷ reported higher educational attainment, in contrast to the 67.38% who did not report any educational attainment at all. Thus, because men constitute the majority of degree-seeking individuals in Afghanistan, we hypothesize that university infrastructure in Afghanistan is not built to accommodate or welcome women. Ultimately, this may include accommodations like virtual classes or sick days for women experiencing particularly harsh symptoms, protection from harassment, and equitable access to resources such as textbooks and transportation to school.

6 Bramwell, Kris. "Ramadan: Women's 'Shame' of Eating During Menstruation." BBC, 1 June 2018, www.bbc.com/news/world-44304012.

7 Zirack, Laiq. "Women's Education: Afghanistan's Biggest Success Story Now at Risk." The Diplomat, 10 Sep. 2021, thediplomat.com/2021/09/womens-education-afghanistans-biggest-success-story-now-at-risk. Accessed 8 Apr. 2024.

Policy Recommendation

We recommend that WomenOne develop and facilitate a Virtual Educational Training Program in Afghanistan to mitigate the mechanisms through which social exclusion due to menstruation limits women's access to education. This initiative entails partnering with international organizations to create a comprehensive curriculum aligned with global standards, including those endorsed by UNICEF, and partnering with grassroots organizations to implement the program with cultural knowledge and sensitivity. **Due to the structural barriers to formal, in-person education during Taliban rule, we argue for the distribution of offline educational content accessible on iPads, which will allow for sustainable expansion of education access for women in areas with little to no internet access.** Specifically, online educational resources also offer flexibility in learning schedules, allowing women to manage their studies around their menstrual cycles and personal commitments without the need to attend physical classrooms.

Our proposal includes four elements:

- First, WomenOne's **field partners will distribute iPads to women and provide in-home training** for the recipient about how to use the technology.
- Second, WomenOne will conduct an **introductory needs assessment** – similar to the survey initiative conducted by WomenOne in Kenya and South Africa – of each woman's current level of education and literacy and pair her with the most appropriate curriculum.
- Third, women will participate in the **curriculum of pre-downloaded content from certified WomenOne teachers.**
- Fourth, initial field partners will conduct **periodic check-ins with recipients to ensure that the program is running successfully and effectively.** We will first implement this model with a trial group and, if successful, expand the project to the extent that resources allow.

Our policy recommendation is firmly rooted in WomenOne's overarching mission to empower women and girls to exercise their fundamental right to education. We advocate for the expansion of WomenOne's educational initiatives in Jordan, Turkey, and Senegal into Afghanistan. Ultimately, by leveraging the proposed Virtual Educational Training Program to mitigate the mechanisms of social exclusion stemming from menstruation, WomenOne will work towards removing obstacles hindering women's access to education in a nation in which women's rights to access education are threatened daily.



Limitations

We would like to acknowledge several limitations to our research and recommendation. First, it is probable that the 44,874 women whose responses are recorded by the survey may have concealed or downplayed their true level of education to safeguard themselves from potential harm or discrimination. While there exists a section in the survey questionnaire which allows data collectors to record information about who else was present during interviews, we are ultimately uncertain as to how severely women may have experienced sociopolitical pressure to alter their responses to survey questions. Second, given our small standard errors, our data may have been relatively homogenous. This implies that many of the respondents in the data were similar in their characteristics and answers to survey questions. Future surveys could include more respondents of greater diversity. Third, ongoing political instability may stand in the way of future implementation of our recommendation. Exploring possible solutions which work with and around legal and cultural restrictions will prove important in addressing social exclusion to improve women's access to education in Afghanistan.

Future Considerations

The results of our multivariate regression (Table 1) revealed that a one year increase in the age of first marriage for a woman in Afghanistan is associated with a 0.27 expected increase in average educational attainment, controlling for her location, age and birth year, wealth score, and the aforementioned menstrual health factors. Additionally, a one unit increase in a household's wealth score is associated with an expected .81 increase in a woman's average educational attainment, holding all else constant. Although we instead chose to focus on social exclusion in this report, marital age and wealth score may also prove to be areas for fruitful future analysis. Additional policies targeting these could potentially also improve educational attainment among women.

Conclusion

Afghanistan's regime changes over the past 20 years have resulted in challenges in access to education for women and girls. Our multivariate regression and descriptive analysis examine the relationship between educational attainment and various menstrual health factors to generate a robust policy recommendation for WomenOne. Our findings indicated that **there is a statistically significant correlation between social exclusion due to menstruation and education attainment, implying that barriers to women's educational attainment are at least partly cultural.** Our analysis also reveals a consistent and high access to period products and washing facilities at all levels of educational attainment, indicating that education access is not an issue of access to menstrual resources, but rather an issue of cultural norms and imposed regulations. Based on these findings, **we recommend a Virtual Education Training Program that goes beyond current NGO initiatives by providing offline and personalized learning to women that can be accessed regardless of social exclusion caused by cultural taboos surrounding menstruation.**

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