

The Role of Women in the Educational System of Afghanistan (1921-2021)

*Rohollah Eslami**

*Basir Ahmad Hasin***

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Abstract

The role of women and girls in Afghanistan's education system has undergone significant transformations over the past century. Despite their active participation in various fields, traditional attitudes and patriarchal structures have consistently hindered their progress. This research examines the challenges and achievements of women in Afghanistan's education system, analyzing the impact of these developments on educational advancement and women's participation in the country's schooling system. The primary objective of this study is to investigate women's role in Afghanistan's education system from 1921 to 2021 and evaluate how these changes have affected women's access to education, the progress of the education system, and their social participation. This research is particularly valuable as it employs historical analysis to elucidate both the challenges and accomplishments women have experienced in this domain. Furthermore, its findings can assist policymakers in designing effective education programs. The results demonstrate that women's role in Afghanistan's education system has been profoundly influenced by political, cultural, and international factors. Periods such as Amanullah Khan's reign, the communist era, and the republican government saw increased female participation, while other periods, particularly under Taliban rule, were marked by women's educational deprivation. Therefore, it is recommended that education policymaking be conducted under the supervision of international organizations supporting women's and girls' rights, with active participation from religious scholars and local communities.

Keywords: Role of Women, Afghanistan's Educational System, Educational Transformations, Challenges and Achievements.

* Assistant Professor, Political Science, Ferdowsi University, Mashhad, Iran.(Corresponding Author)

Email: eslami.r@um.ac.ir

** PhD, Department of Administration and Diplomacy, Faculty of Law and Political Sciences, Jami University, Herat, Afghanistan.

Email: b.hasin@jami.edu.af

1. Introduction

Women, as half of Afghanistan's population, have always played an active and effective role alongside men in various political, economic, cultural, social, and educational fields. However, some traditional and backward views throughout Afghanistan's history have considered them incapable. This issue has caused Afghan women to face many challenges and restrictions in the last hundred years, which are recognized as obstacles to their progress. The importance of the presence of women and girls in all fields, especially in the area of social, economic, and educational activities, should be seriously considered; also, the participation of rural women in the education system and economic improvement is a subject that has always been under scrutiny, although their impact on the improvement of the social, economic, and educational situation has not been very apparent. These women, along with their families, are active in all fields, but due to traditional values and patriarchal culture, men usually have not been inclined to accept this participation.¹ The right to education and learning, for every human being, regardless of discriminatory and distinguishing standards—especially gender discrimination—is considered one of the essential and fundamental rights; because if we proceed based on logic and essence-oriented criteria in identifying and recognizing examples of fundamental rights, without a doubt, the right to education and learning is among those rights that directly constitute and sustain human personality.² The study shows Afghan women with higher education have a 13% job return rate (more than the global average of 10%). Their deprivation from education and work causes an annual economic loss of \$1.4 billion (2% of national income).³

Jawaharlal Nehru, one of the founders of modern India, emphasizes in his famous book *Glimpses of World History* how can a nation progress while half of its population is kept hidden in a kind of prison. Unfortunately, the longstanding dominance of misogyny in Afghanistan has prevented women from participating in social, political, and educational arenas with all their capabilities and resources and from gaining a deserving place in society.⁴ While the violation of women's educational rights is inextricably linked with their health.⁵ Cuéllar in his book *Our Creative Diversity*, published in 1998, stated that from the total female population in Afghanistan, only ten percent

¹. Habib Panjshiri, "Naqsh-e Zanan dar Ayande-ye Afghanistan [The Role of Women in the Future of Afghanistan]," *Majaleh Ali - Tahqiqi-Ye Daneshgah-e Kabul* 16, no. 3 (1396 [2017]): 128.

². Mohammad Ali Heydari, "Haq-e Tahsil va Amoozesh-e Zanan dar Eslam, Asnad [The Right to Education for Women in Islam: Documents]," *Faslnameh Elmi Andisheh Khatam* 1, no. 1 (1393 [2014]): 71.

³. Rafiuddin Najam, Harry Anthony Patrinos, and Raja Bentaouet Kattan. "The Mis-Education of Women in Afghanistan: From Wage Premiums to Economic Losses," *Education Global Practice* 7, no. 1 (2024): 13–14, <https://doi.org/10.1596/1813-9450-10888>.

⁴. Panjshiri, "Naqsh-e Zanan dar Ayande-ye Afghanistan," 128.

⁵. Behnaz Hosseini, *Afghan Women and America* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2024).

benefit from educational facilities and only one percent of women and girls gain access to educational opportunities in higher education institutions.⁶ Today, the restriction of girls' education and schooling is more discussed and debated. While all Islamic countries strive to bring women's education levels in line with developed societies, unfortunately in Afghanistan this important group—which constitutes half of the country's population and could, on one hand, be the main foundation of the family and, on the other, a significant part of the society's workforce—has been deprived of work and education.⁷

Education and upbringing in Afghanistan, which is known as *maaref* (education), has deep traditional and Islamic roots. The history of modern education formation dates back a century, but traditional education has developed over centuries. In the past, religious scholars as spiritual leaders played an important role in society, and the mullah and the mosque were the main centers of education and upbringing. At the beginning of the twentieth century, changes occurred in Afghanistan's educational system and modern education emerged. This transformation began due to Afghanistan's interaction with other countries and the rulers' need for modern education. Although these changes proceeded slowly, during the reign of Amanullah Khan they were considered a source of progress and societal welfare. Today, despite challenges such as the ban on women's education and work, the need for the development of modern education as a source of progress is clear to many people in Afghanistan. The role of women in this process is very vital. Women's participation in education can help change mindsets and elevate the educational level of society. Women must be active in educational policymaking so that they can become teachers, students, and future leaders, be influential, and defend their rights. This not only helps their individual progress but also leads to overall societal development.⁸ By the role of women and girls in the Afghan educational system, we mean the teachers and students of Afghanistan's schools over the past hundred years. By school, we mean the twelve-year period (grades one to six as primary, six to nine as middle, and nine to twelve as high school) which is the standard in most countries today. Without a doubt, over this hundred-year period, Afghan women and girls have faced specific and serious challenges as well as excellent and attainable opportunities—if these challenges had not stood in the way or had been removed, and opportunities for the growth and development of the country's women and girls had been provided, Afghanistan would be in a better

⁶. Kharzd Parzd Koiyar, *Tanavva'-e Khalāq-e Mā* [Our Creative Diversity] (Kabul: Markaz-e Entesharat-e Komisiyon-e Melli-ye UNESCO, 1998), 43.

⁷. Jon Bigam, *Naqsh-e Shabakeh-haye Ejtemai bar Amoozesh-e Dokhtaran dar Afghanistan ba'd az Sal-e 20* [The Role of Social Networks on the Education of Girls in Afghanistan after the Year 20] (Kabul: Institute of Civil Society, 2021).

⁸. Jamil Rahman Kamgar, *Ma'arif-e Afghanistan* [Education of Afghanistan]. (Pishawar: Entesharat-e Miyvand, 2008), 7.

situation today. In terms of the challenges and opportunities of Afghan women and girls in the educational system in the past year, sectional studies have been conducted; however, a study that descriptively and analytically examines the entire hundred years specifically focused on women and girls has not been found. The question of this research is: How has the role of women in Afghanistan's educational system changed in the last hundred years, and what impact has this had on the development of the educational system and their social participation? The purpose of this study is to examine and analyze the changes in the role of women in Afghanistan's educational system from 1921 to 2021 in such a way that the effects of these changes on the progress of the educational system and access to education for girls and women can be evaluated.

2. Research Background

Andishmand in the book "Modern Education of Afghanistan" presented the modern education of Afghanistan in six chapters. As a result, he stated that the obstacles to the progress of modern education in Afghanistan are dependent on economic, social, and cultural factors, tribal structure, and the mindset opposing modern education.⁹ The difference between this book and this article is that the book is very general and does not specifically address the role of women in the educational system.

Kamgar, in a book titled "Education of Afghanistan," examined the Afghan education system in six chapters in a compiled form. The first three chapters of this book deal with the value of education from the perspective of Islam and the history of education in Afghanistan before the era of Amanullah Khan (1921–1928), and the other three chapters are dedicated to the state of education in the diaspora and the communist era. No conclusion has been made in this book, as it mostly has a narrative aspect and nothing more.¹⁰ The difference between this book and this article is that it is very general and has not paid attention to issues such as women and girls and their role in the Afghan educational system.

Al-Shammari in an article titled "Women's Education: Cultural and Religious Strategies from the Heart of Afghanistan," stated that the prohibition of education is a major human rights challenge. This restriction is rooted in historical, social, and religious factors, and the community's resistance to women's education is often linked to fear of moral decline and prevents Afghanistan's economic development and international investment. As a result, this article advocates solutions that recognize women's education as a fundamental right and promotes it in societies such as Afghanistan and Islamic communities to eliminate the barriers to women's education and

⁹. Mohammad Ekram Andishmand, *Ma'arif Asri-ye Afghanistan 1903–2010* [Modern Education of Afghanistan 1903–2010]. (Kabul: Entesharat Miyvand, 2010): 375–380.

¹⁰. Kamgar, *Ma'arif-e Afghanistan*.

employment.¹¹ The difference between this article and this research is that it is focused on religion and cultural issues and has paid less attention to educational institutions and the role of women.

In any case, many studies and reports have been published in the field of women, education, and the educational system of Afghanistan; however, there is a lack of focused research on the role of women in the educational system of Afghanistan over the past one hundred years — research that analytically presents the challenges and achievements of Afghan women and ultimately offers useful and comprehensive solutions.

3. Research Method

This article is of both qualitative and quantitative type, and its interpretations and analyses are based on historical references and sources.¹² Of course, the reason for choosing the qualitative method for this article is that the statistics and data required for the topic under discussion are not widely available, because most data have been destroyed as a result of internal and external wars in Afghanistan. On the other hand, this article is more focused on concepts such as challenges and achievements; for this reason, providing statistics and data is only for showing the achievements. Hence, this article also uses a descriptive–analytical method; because the evidence is described in a documented manner and then analyzed.¹³ The time limitation of this research is one hundred years (1921–2021). The reason for choosing this time period is that during this time, the role of women in the educational system has gone through many ups and downs — to the extent that we can even say such a transformation has not occurred in any other country.

4. Results

Table 1: Achievements and Challenges of the Role of Women in Afghanistan's Educational System (1921–2021)

Period	Achievements	Challenges
Amanullah Khan Period (1921–1928)	1. Historical groundwork for women and girls' education 2. Establishment of the first girls' primary school, expansion of girls' schools, and sending students abroad 3. Drafting of the 1923 constitution based on the	1. Cultural and religious resistance 2. Political and security challenges 3. Lack of resources, facilities, and geographical constraints

¹¹ Mashaell al-Shammari, "Women's Education: Cultural and Religious Solutions from the Heart of Afghanistan," Middle East Council on Global Affairs, accessed August 25, 2025, <https://mecouncil.org/publication/womens-education-cultural-and-religious-solutions-from-the-heart-of-afghanistan>.

¹² Stuart MacDonald and Nicola Headlam. *Research Methods Handbook* (New York: Centre for Local Economic Strategies, 1986).

¹³ Prabhat Pandey and Meenu Mishra. *Research Methodology: Tools and Techniques* (Romania: Bridge Center, 2015), 11.

	<p>right to education for women and girls</p> <p>4. Breaking traditions and social change</p>	
Habibullah Kalakani and Mohammad Nader Shah (1928–1933)	No achievements in women's education	<p>1. Opposition to modern sciences</p> <p>2. Opposition to women's education</p> <p>3. Lack of financial resources and educational facilities</p> <p>4. Cultural, social, and security limitations</p>
Mohammad Zahir Shah and Communist Period (1933–1992)	<p>During Prime Minister Mohammad Hashim Khan (1933–1946):</p> <p>1. Expansion of women's educational institutions</p> <p>2. Sending students abroad</p> <p>3. Increase in school enrollment</p> <p>During PM Sardar Shah Mahmoud (1946–1953):</p> <p>1. Ratification of compulsory education laws for girls</p> <p>2. Development of educational infrastructure</p> <p>During PM Sardar Mohammad Daoud (1953–1963):</p> <p>1. Expansion of women's education through the establishment of “Maktab-e-Neswan” and coeducation at university level</p> <p>Democracy Decade (1960–1970):</p> <p>1. Legal reforms in favor of women's education</p> <p>2. Geographical expansion of education</p>	<p>1. Lack of financial resources</p> <p>2. Opposition from clerics and traditionalists to women's education</p> <p>3. Dependence on foreign countries</p> <p>4. War and insecurity</p> <p>5. Opposition from government elders to women's education</p> <p>6. Geographical challenges</p>

	Communist Government (1978–1992): 1. Creation of the Democratic Women's Organization of Afghanistan 2. Legal changes in favor of women's education	
Mujahideen and Taliban (1992–2001)	Implementation of educational laws in line with Islam and the Hanafi school of thought	1. War and destruction of educational infrastructure 2. Decrease in female teachers 3. Discriminatory policies against women 4. Religious and cultural restrictions
Hamid Karzai and Mohammad Ashraf Ghani (2001–2021)	1. Bonn Agreement and new constitution 2. Drafting of the 2003 constitution 3. Ratification of protective treaties and laws 4. Drafting laws for the Ministry of Education 5. Practical participation of women in public spheres 6. Positive shifts in attitudes toward women's education 7. Financial support from international organizations and foreign countries for women's education 8. Expansion of educational facilities for girls and women	1. The situation of women in Afghanistan as an imported and unstable phenomenon 2. Conflict between women's education and dominant religious interpretations 3. Contradictions in the legal system 4. Deep-rooted discriminatory customs among the people of Afghanistan

5. Discussion

5.1. Entry of Women into the Education System (Reign of Amanullah Khan 1921–1928)

In the contemporary history of Afghanistan, the role of women, especially during the reign of Amanullah Khan (1921–1929), is considered a period of transformation and significant social and cultural changes. Amanullah Khan,

as a modern-thinking king, made many efforts to improve the status of women and elevate their level of education. He realized the importance of women's education and sought to create educational opportunities for girls. Queen Soraya, the wife of Amanullah Khan, is recognized as a key figure in these transformations. In 1920, she founded the first primary school for girls under the title of "Esmet School." This school, aimed at providing primary education for girls, not only helped to raise their awareness and knowledge but also gradually became a symbol of social changes in Afghan society.¹⁴ This period also witnessed the approval of the country's first constitution in 1923, which recognized the right to education for all Afghan citizens and mandated free and compulsory primary education.¹⁵

In 1923, Masturat School was opened in Kabul. This school started with 34 students and quickly grew. Over time, the number of students in this school reached 200, and its graduates were sent to countries such as Turkey, Germany, and France for further studies. This action indicated a serious determination to improve women's academic status and prepare them to play active roles in society.¹⁶ Masturat School, which was later renamed Malalai High School, continued to grow despite challenges and opposition from some religious scholars and local influential figures. Initially, this school had only two classes, but with the increase in the number of students and classes, it became the largest girls' school in Afghanistan. In 1928, the number of students reached 800, indicating the success of this educational program.¹⁷

However, the efforts of Amanullah Khan and Queen Soraya faced challenges. One of the key moments of this period was Queen Soraya's bold act in the Loya Jirga, where she removed the veil from her face and declared the freedom of Afghan women. This symbolic act represented her determination to fight against old traditions and to strive for women's rights.¹⁸ Some religious scholars expressed concerns about the education of girls in schools and called for a return to home-based education. These concerns indicated the cultural and social tensions between tradition and modernity that Afghan society faced at the time.¹⁹

Overall, the efforts of Queen Soraya and other women in establishing and developing girls' education in Afghanistan were important steps toward improving the status of women and creating educational opportunities for them. These developments not only impacted women's lives but also laid the

¹⁴. Andishmand, *Ma'arif Asri-ye Afghanistan*. 17- 18.

¹⁵. Heydari, "Haq-e Tahsil va Amoozesh-e Zanan," 214.

¹⁶. Andishmand, *Ma'arif Asri-ye Afghanistan*, 19.

¹⁷. Al-Shammari, "Women's Education," 6.

¹⁸. Humaira Haqmal, "The State of Women's Education in Afghanistan," In *The Role of Women and Gender in Conflict* (Granada: Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, Granada University, 2012), 215.

¹⁹. Andishmand, *Ma'arif Asri-ye Afghanistan*, 21.

groundwork for broader social changes in Afghan society.²⁰ Despite challenges, this period demonstrated the determination and will of Afghan women to obtain their rights and actively participate in society.²¹ The modernization program of Afghanistan, which aimed to change the status of women, began during the reign of Amanullah Khan (1921–1929). Amanullah, the hero of the fight against British colonialism and a pioneer of transformation in the country, made women's education and the establishment of girls' schools one of his most important initiatives. This program faced negative reactions from tribal leaders and traditional families. He also appeared in public along with his wife without hijab, which influenced unveiling policies in Iran as well. However, due to Amanullah's overthrow by conservatives, measures regarding forced unveiling were not implemented until after the king's trip to Turkey and meeting Atatürk. Amanullah's reforms were met with tribal revolts, and as a result, he was forced to leave the country.²²

In 1928, King Amanullah Khan and Queen Soraya, influenced by reforms in Europe and Turkey, introduced modern changes in Afghanistan such as girls' education, abolition of bride price, and banning polygamy. However, these reforms faced fierce opposition from traditional leaders and rural tribes who viewed them as un-Islamic. The Loya Jirga (Grand Assembly) rejected raising the marriage age, upheld polygamy, and opposed girls' schooling. Forced to retreat, Amanullah Khan abandoned his reforms—girls' schools were closed, and women were once again required to wear the burqa.²³ These developments showed the serious challenges in the path of modernization and changing women's status in Afghanistan, which faced social and cultural resistance.²⁴ Despite the challenges and threats from traditionalist reactions, Amanullah Khan's reform programs achieved significant gains for women's rights and gradually began the process of liberating women as equal citizens. These transformations, although faced with many difficulties, were signs of progress and change in attitudes toward the role of women in Afghan society.²⁵ The history of women's education in Afghanistan is clearly intertwined with concepts such as moral decline, Westernization, and subjugation. From the beginning of women's education during Amir Habibullah Khan's time and then under Amanullah Khan's rule, the subject

²⁰ Haqmal, "The State of Women's Education," 214.

²¹ Andishmand, *Ma'arif Asri-ye Afghanistan*, 21.

²² Fatima Sadqi, *Siyasat-e Bargha: Zanan-e Afghan va Dowlat-haye Pish va Pas az Taliban* [The Veil Policy: Afghan Women and the Governments Before and After the Taliban] (Kabul: Arman Shahr, 2011), 53–54.

²³ Huma Ahmed-Ghosh, "A History of Women in Afghanistan: Lessons Learnt for the Future or Yesterdays and Tomorrow: Women in Afghanistan." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 4, no. 3 (2003): 2–5.

²⁴ Mohammad Reza Farzanegan, and Mohammad Haroon Asadi, *Attitudes toward Women's Education in Afghanistan* (CESifo Working Papers, 2024), 2.

²⁵ Haqmal, "The State of Women's Education," 215.

was entangled with sensitive cultural issues, and efforts for women's education were seen as attacks on Afghan culture and religious values, especially in areas such as hijab, marriage customs, and divorce laws. Resistance to women's education was not limited to a specific period, and even before that, the percentage of educated women was significantly low. The transition toward formal education faced serious obstacles rooted in deep social narratives. During Amanullah Khan's time, the royal family and nobility's position on hijab, as a symbol of women's backwardness, played a significant role in creating public dissatisfaction, which eventually led to their downfall. This shows that the political framework of women's issues enabled traditional society to consider women's education a tool of Westernization, family breakdown, moral decay, and an insult to Islamic values.²⁶

5.2. Exclusion of Women from the Education System (Habibullah Kalakani and Mohammad Nader Shah, 1928–1933)

Habibullah Kalakani came to power in 1928 after the fall of Amanullah Khan's government and made fundamental changes in all public and governmental affairs. Among the most important changes of his era were as follows: The annulment of all Amanullah Khan's reforms, abolition of the military conscription system, termination of women's education, non-interference in clerical affairs, and refraining from retaliation against the Shinwari tribe...²⁷

His supporters and army had already declared Habibullah Kalakani as Amir Habibullah, the Servant of the Religion of the Messenger of Allah, King. Also, Habibullah Kalakani, in the early days of his reign, said:

“In the first days of my monarchy, I issued the order to close schools and abolish Amanullah Khan's reform programs...”²⁸

Habibullah Kalakani, by issuing a decree to close schools, sought to fulfill the demands of religious scholars opposed to Amanullah Khan and the rebellious tribal leaders to legitimize his rule. This action, which coincided with the abolition of some of Amanullah's reforms, has been described as a reactionary move. Some, such as Ludwig Adamec, an American researcher, believe that Kalakani did not oppose education per se, but acted due to a lack of budget and public pressure. Nevertheless, the closure of schools and restrictions on press freedom ended the first wave of modern education and media growth in Afghanistan and severely limited the social environment.²⁹

²⁶. Al-Shammari, “Women's Education,” 2.

²⁷. Ludwig Adamec, *Ravabet-e Khariji-ye Afghanistan dar Nimeh-ye Avval-e Qarn-e Bist* [Foreign Relations of Afghanistan in the First Half of the Twentieth Century], trans. Muhammad Fadhel Sahebzadeh (Kabul: Kanoon Tarjomeh Aasar-e Jihad Afghanistan, 1992), 117.

²⁸. Andishmand, *Ma'arif Asri-ye Afghanistan*, 39.

²⁹. Adamec, “Ravabet-e Khariji-ye Afghanistan,” 259.

The government of Mohammad Nader Shah was established after the removal of Habibullah Kalakani in 1929. His first ten-article decree was issued, with article eight addressing education:

“Knowledge and technology are considered among the most essential needs for Afghanistan’s religious and worldly progress, and the current government considers this matter very important. Whenever a national assembly is formed and the people’s representatives gather, it is hoped that a better way will be found for this matter so that the people may prepare themselves for their own defense”.³⁰

During the reign of Mohammad Nader Shah (1929–1933), the educational system was accompanied by severe conservatism, and the role of women in education was extremely limited.³¹ Nader Shah initially kept girls’ schools closed and only in 1931, by establishing a midwifery course at the Women’s Hospital and then a girls’ school (Maktab-e Niswan) in Kabul, were small steps taken toward women’s education. One of the key points of this period was the severe restrictions on women’s education. Fearing traditional opposition, Nader Shah refrained from expanding female education. Only girls’ schools in Kabul remained active, and women’s education was conducted on a very limited scale.³²

The primary focus during this period was on practical training like midwifery programs, while girls’ schools were largely limited to traditional and religious education. Under strict military and government control, any independent educational activities by women were suppressed, with curricula deliberately designed to exclude women from political participation. This approach represented a clear regression compared to Amanullah Khan’s reform era, as Nadir Shah’s cautious revival of girls’ schools only maintained minimal educational opportunities for practical and symbolic purposes, never allowing women to regain their previous level of educational attainment.³³

5.3. Re-entry of Women into the Education System (Mohammad Zahir Shah and the Communist Era, 1933–1992)

After the assassination of Nader Shah, Mohammad Zahir Shah ascended to the throne, ushering in notable changes to Afghanistan’s education system across several phases. Under Prime Minister Mohammad Hashim Khan, education was heavily scrutinized due to the involvement of a madrasa student in Nader Shah’s assassination, leading to a climate of suspicion and surveillance in schools.³⁴ Ghulam Mohammad Ghubar characterized Hashim Khan’s policies as detrimental to national unity and cultural growth, accusing

³⁰. Andishmand, *Ma’arif Asri-ye Afghanistan*, 45.

³¹. Ahmed-Ghosh, “A History of Women in Afghanistan,” 6.

³². Andishmand, *Ma’arif Asri-ye Afghanistan*, 48–49.

³³. Andishmand, *Ma’arif Asri-ye Afghanistan*, 3–49; Zahir Tanin, *Afghanistan dar Ghorne Bist* [Afghanistan in the Twentieth Century]. (Herat: Quds, 2005), 115.

³⁴. Andishmand, *Ma’arif Asri-ye Afghanistan*, 55–56.

him of fostering tribal rivalry.³⁵ Despite these repressive tendencies, the period saw notable academic developments, including the dispatch of 98 students abroad in 1938. Although Hashim Khan was an outspoken opponent of women's education, schools for girls such as Kabul Female High School and Zarghona High School were established in 1941 under societal pressures.³⁶ Modern subjects and physical education became part of the curriculum, and statistics confirmed a gradual increase in female student enrollment.³⁷ A major institutional milestone was the founding of Muasisa-e Aali-ye Niswan in 1943, a 20-member women's union aimed at advancing Afghan women's education and awareness.³⁸ According to the Kabul Yearbook, between 1933 and 1967, female student enrollment increased from 5,371 to 72,437, female teachers from 329 to 1,697, and girls' schools from 11 to 357.³⁹

When Sardar Shah Mahmood became Prime Minister in 1946, his tenure aligned with World War II and the adoption of a constitution mandating primary education for both sexes.⁴⁰ Instruction in schools was now conducted in Pashto and Farsi, easing pedagogical challenges. Afghanistan's 1946 entry into UNESCO helped expand educational opportunities, especially for women, as emphasized by a 1949 UNESCO delegation.⁴¹ During this time, educational services were extended to rural and remote areas. A new institution for women, led by five senior figures, promoted women's education discreetly.⁴² Girls' schools were gradually opened in Kabul, Kandahar, Maimana, and elsewhere, culminating in the formation of a women's literature department.⁴³

Sardar Mohammad Daoud, a strong proponent of educational reform, initiated collaborations with Columbia and New York colleges to train primary teachers and opened a women's school in Kunduz in 1955.⁴⁴ Two five-year educational plans followed. The first (1956–1961) targeted rural primary education, though only 5% of eligible children attended school. The

³⁵. Mir Gulam Mohammad Ghobar, *Afghānistān dar Masīr-e Tārīkh* [Afghanistan on the Path of History] (Pishawar: Dar Al-Salam Kutubkhane, 1388 [2009]), 176.

³⁶. Ghobar, *Afghānistān dar Masīr-e Tārīkh*, 208.

³⁷. *Salnameh-e Kabul* [Kabul Almanac]. (Kabul: Maktabe Kabul, 1946), 104.

³⁸. Mokhtar Hussain Heydari, *Huquq-e Zanan dar Afghanistan: Dastavardha-ye Gozashteh va Chaleshaye Ayandeh* [Women's Rights in Afghanistan: Past Achievements and Future Challenges] (Kabul: Mo'aseseh Ayandeh Pazhuhi-ye Jahan-e Eslam, 2021), 3.

³⁹. *Salnameh-e Kabul*, 76.

⁴⁰. Saifuddin Samadi, *Ta'lim va Tarbiyeh va Jame'eh-ye Afghan dar Ghorne Bisat* [Education and Society in Twentieth-Century Afghanistan]. (Kabul: Anjoman-e Farhang-e Afghanistan dar Faranseh, 2002), 12.

⁴¹. Kamgar, *Ma'arif-e Afghanistan*, 50.

⁴². Seyyed Qasim Rashtia, *Khatirat-e Siyasi-ye Seyed Qasem Rashtia* [Political Memoirs of Seyed Qasem Rashtia]. (Kabul: Matboo'at-e Afghani, 1997), 53.

⁴³. *Salnameh-e Kabul*, 80.

⁴⁴. Abdul Hamid Mobarez, *Tahlil-e Vaqea'at-e Siyasi-ye Afghanistan* [Analysis of Afghanistan's Political Events]. (Kabul: Markaz-e Nashrat-e Miyvand, 1996), 187.

second (1962–1967) focused on secondary and high school expansion, with specific efforts for girls, including the establishment of Balgis High School. The lifting of the hijab in 1958, introduced by Daoud and supported by the royal family and Soviet backing, significantly increased female participation across all sectors, including education. Co-education in higher institutions was introduced as a revolutionary step.⁴⁵ Still, female presence lagged behind males; in 1955, girls made up just 8.25% of students, though this rose to 15.5% by 1965.⁴⁶

In the final decade of Zahir Shah's monarchy, known as the "Decade of Democracy," Prime Minister Dr. Mohammad Yusuf oversaw the 1965 constitution, which guaranteed free and compulsory education for children aged 7 to 14.⁴⁷ Female participation improved, with 14.1% of primary school students being girls in 1988. Rural education also expanded significantly; by 1990, there were 366 girls' schools in rural Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the percentage of female students declined to 9.7% in 1975, despite an absolute increase in numbers, indicating that growth did not keep pace with male enrollment.⁴⁸

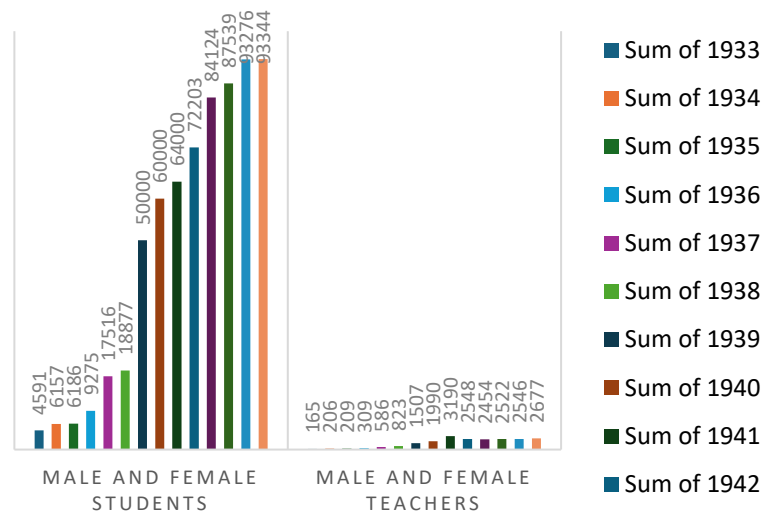


Figure 1. The Increase in Women's Participation in Afghanistan's Educational System. Data from Andishmand, *Ma'arif Asri-ye Afghanistan*, 61.

⁴⁵ Andishmand, *Ma'arif Asri-ye Afghanistan*, 81–83.

⁴⁶ *Salnameh-e Kabul*, 77–85.

⁴⁷ Mohammad Sidiq Farhang, *Afghanistan dar Panj Qorun Egher* [Afghanistan in the Last Five Centuries] (Pishawar: Nashr-e Miyvand, 2020), 63.

⁴⁸ Andishmand, *Ma'arif Asri-ye Afghanistan*, 99.

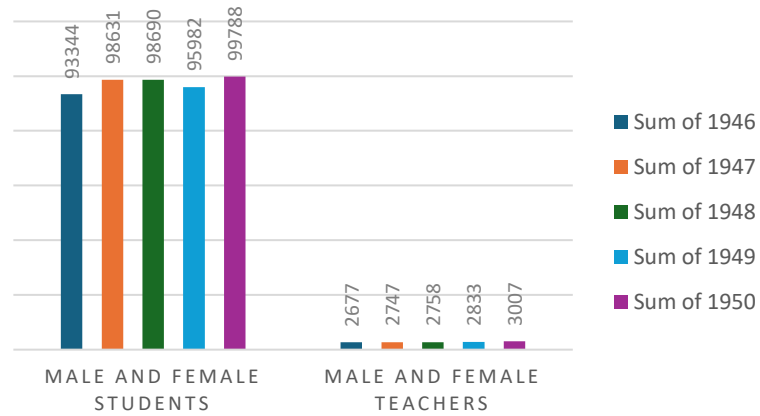


Figure 2. Increase in the Enrollment of Women and Girls in the Education System. Data from Andishmand, *Ma'arif Asri-ye Afghanistan*, 83.

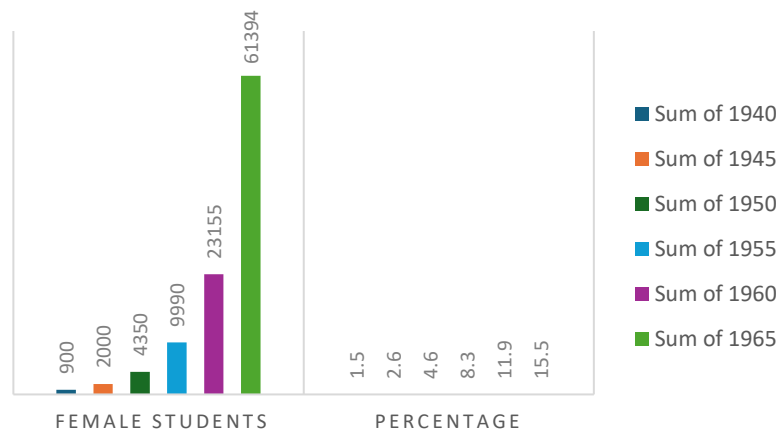


Figure 3. Increase in Women's Enrollment in Afghanistan's Educational System. Data from *Salnameh-e Kabul*, 20.

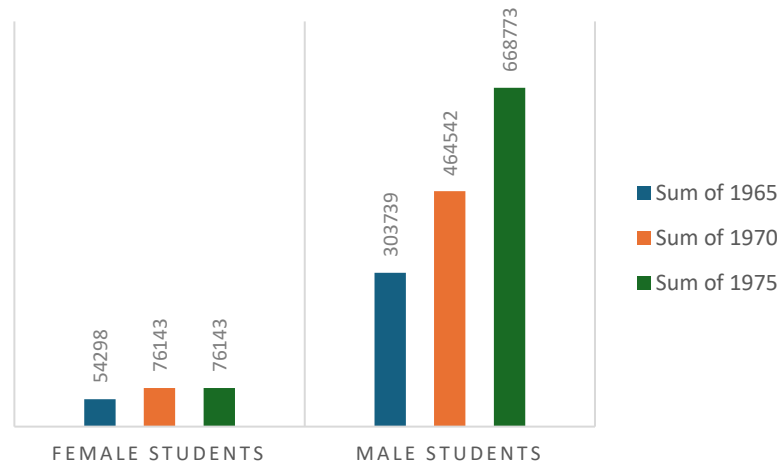


Figure 2. The Increase in the Enrollment of Women and Girls in the Education System. Andishmand, *Ma'arif Asri-ye Afghanistan*, 99.

5.4. Presence of Women in the Educational System During the Communist Era

The communist era, which was entirely accompanied by coups, was a period filled with bloodshed and war, and this significantly impacted the quantitative presence of women and girls in schools. In the constitutions of the People's Democratic Party, universal, compulsory, and free primary education for all Afghan children was considered. However, the communists had serious problems with religious sciences and the clergy sector; therefore, they placed schools and the educational system in service of communist ideologies. For this reason, with each passing year of the communists' rule in Afghanistan, a sharp decline in the number of male and female students was seen. Of course, in the beginning, it was slightly increasing — for example, in 1978 the number of girls' schools was 486, but in 1979 it increased to 509 schools.⁴⁹ According to other statistics, in 1982 the presence of women and girls in schools reached up to 31%. As education was placed in service of ideology during this period, the curriculum was completely changed and the school subjects were entirely directed toward Soviet-style education. In this period, a lot of attention was paid to women's education, so that by 1988, female teachers in primary schools had reached 55%, in secondary schools 33%, and in universities, 60% of students were girls. Of course, this increase was related to the internal wars, compulsory military service of young men, and the escape of male professors from the country.⁵⁰ During this period, literacy for women of all ages became compulsory. In this period, the Democratic

⁴⁹. Planning Directorate, *Ehsaiye Ta'lim va Tarbiyeh-e Sal* [Annual Education Statistics], (Kabul: Ministry of Education and Training, 1390 [2011]): 30.

⁵⁰. Andishmand, *Ma'arif Asri-ye Afghanistan*, 164–165.

Women's Organization of Afghanistan was also established. According to statistics from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), women's illiteracy in 1967 was about 90%, but by 1985 it had dropped to 20%. In this period, many female and male students were sent to the Soviet Union for further education. What is particularly noteworthy about women is that by 1980, any kind of activity by women in the educational system in the rural areas of Afghanistan had completely ceased, because most rural areas had fallen under the control of the opposition and the Mujahideen, who believed that their honor (namus) should not be educated under the supervision of foreigners.⁵¹

5.5 Exclusion of women from the education system again (Mujahideen and Taliban 1992–2001)

When Burhanuddin Rabbani came to power as the head of the Mujahideen government on June 28, 1992, in the first policy of this government, education was considered one of the essential duties of the Islamic state, and the creation of a curriculum based on Islamic principles was emphasized. The Mujahideen government considered the development of education both quantitatively and qualitatively in its educational development programs and raised slogans about eradicating illiteracy. Regarding women's education, their view was:

“The Islamic state will seriously focus on the fundamental reform of the women's education system and acquainting them with knowledge, culture, and essential education according to the needs of the Islamic society, and will enable them to benefit from all the rights and privileges granted to them by the shining teachings of Islam so that they may attain their rightful status in a cultured and Islamic society.”⁵²

Shortly after the government announced its education policy, Afghanistan plunged into civil war, leading to the collapse of the education system and destruction of most schools. During the Mujahideen era (1993–1995), only 11% of girls had access to schools, while curricula became entirely religious.

The Taliban, a group emerging from the Mujahideen, came to power in 1996. Their presence in the capital began with the collapse of modern education. In the first year, the Taliban even shut down all boys' schools in major cities—there was not even one school open in Kandahar city. With the Taliban's takeover in 1996, women were entirely removed from offices and schools. For instance, Zarghona High School, one of Kabul's girls' schools, was converted into a boys' Qur'an memorization center. In a meeting with a UN delegation protesting the closure of girls' schools, the Taliban's foreign minister said:

⁵¹ Kamgar, *Ma'arif-e Afghanistan*, 105.

⁵² Sibghatullah Mojaddedi, *Khat-e Mash Dowlati-ye Eslami-ye Afghanistan* [Kabul Islamic State Policy of Afghanistan] (Kabul: np, 1371 [1992]), 19.

“We have commitments to our military personnel, one of which is to prevent women from working and studying...”⁵³

Until the end of this period, the doors of schools remained closed to women and girls, and they were never allowed to work in offices and were completely isolated from society. During this period, strict restrictions were imposed on women's clothing—women were required to wear the burqa, which covered their entire bodies, meaning even their hands and faces were not visible. Hearing the voice of an unrelated woman was also considered forbidden.⁵⁴

5.6. Reentry of Women into the Educational System (Hamid Karzai and Mohammad Ashraf Ghani 2001–2021)

The fall of the Mujahideen and the Taliban and the beginning of the Republic era with the presidency of Hamid Karzai marked a new phase in the history of modern education in Afghanistan. For the first time in a century of the formation and development of the country's modern education system, four million students, both boys and girls, entered schools in 2002.⁵⁵

Women's education in Afghanistan over the past two decades has seen significant growth at both non-higher and higher levels due to investments by the government and international organizations. After the fall of the Taliban, the number of schools and universities, especially in the private sector, increased, and girls' participation in primary and secondary levels rose by 11%, reaching 38.85%.

However, gender inequality in higher education (less than 0.30) and the high illiteracy rate among women (87% compared to 61% among men) remained serious challenges. Although cultural barriers in this area were fewer and the gender parity index at the primary level improved to 0.76, regional disparities and the continuation of the educational gap—especially in provinces—indicate that Afghanistan has not yet reached the sustainable development goals regarding inclusive and quality education for women.⁵⁶

Table 2. Percentage of Girl and Boy Students in Afghanistan's Schools Between 2002–2019⁵⁷

Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
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⁵³. Vahid Mojda, *Afghanistan va Panj Sal Salte-ye Taliban* [Afghanistan and the Five Years of Taliban Rule] (Pishawor: Nashr-e Ney, 2021), 88.

⁵⁴. Ataullah Ahmadi et al., “Tobacco Harm Reduction in Afghanistan: A Recipe for Improving Smokers' Health,” *Substance Abuse Treatment, Prevention, and Policy* 18, no. 1 (2023): 9. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13011-023-00517-2>; Andishmand, *Ma'arif Asri-ye Afghanistan*, 225–227.

⁵⁵. Andishmand, *Ma'arif Asri-ye Afghanistan*, 244–247.

⁵⁶. Ali Ahmad Kaveh, *Zanan-e Herat: Jayegah va Tavanmandi-ye Zanan dar Khanvadeh va Hozeh-ye Omumi* [Women of Herat: The Status and Capabilities of Women in the Family and Public Sphere] (Herat: Institute for Strategic Studies of Afghanistan, 2020), 64–65.

⁵⁷. Kaveh, *Zanan-e Herat*, 67.

Male	72.4 8	66.2 3	75.9 3	65.7 9	64.8 5	64.6 2	62.2 4	62.8 5	61.8 4
Female	27.5 2	33.7 7	24.0 7	34.2 1	35.1 5	35.3 8	35.7 6	37.1 5	38.1 6
Year	201 1	201 2	201 3	201 4	201 5	201 6	201 7	201 8	201 9
Male	60.5 6	61.2 0	59.8 8	60.0 5	59.8 6	60.7 3	61.0 0	61.1 5	0
Female	39.4 4	38.8 0	40.1 2	39.9 5	40.1 4	39.2 7	39.0 0	38.8 5	0

Between 2002 and 2019, the share of female teachers in Afghanistan's education system did not significantly change and increased by less than 3%. This rate aligns with the overall participation of women in the government labor force, which has grown by only about 3% in the last two decades and remains low.

During the Republic period in Afghanistan, significant progress was made in women's education, driven by legal reforms, institutional developments, international support, and shifting societal attitudes. The Bonn Agreement of 2001 laid the foundation for gender inclusivity in governance and education, leading to the appointment of Sima Samar as Minister of Women's Affairs. The 2003 Constitution further reinforced this by asserting justice, equality, and non-discrimination, particularly in education and political participation.⁵⁸

Support institutions like the Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission were established to oversee and advocate for women's rights. These bodies developed and implemented policies in collaboration with civil and international partners, focusing on legal reform, public awareness, and complaint registration. Organizations such as World Vision also partnered with government institutions to boost women's political and social participation, particularly through local women's councils.⁵⁹

Afghanistan made strides in legal frameworks supporting women. The country ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women in 2003, committing to integrate its principles into national policies. The Law on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (2009) and the Law on the Prevention of Harassment Against Women and Children (2015) marked legal progress, although implementation challenges persisted. These laws emphasized women's right to education and

⁵⁸ Mokhtar Hussain Heydari, *Huquq-e Bashari* [Human Rights] (Kabul: Nashr-e Vaje, 2017), 1; Ahmad Alizadeh, "Farayand-e Shekl-giri-ye Qanun-e Asasi-ye Afghanistan," [The Process of Forming the Constitution of Afghanistan] (Kabul: Entesharat-e Komisiyon-e Mostaghel-e Huquq-e Bashari-e Afghanistan, 2004), 326.

⁵⁹ Heydari, *Huquq-e Bashari*, 3-4.

obligated educational institutions to take preventive actions against violence, such as integrating relevant topics into curricula and ensuring safe learning environments.⁶⁰

The Ministry of Education also mandated educational reforms to raise awareness of women's rights and combat violence. Article 12 and Article 35 of relevant laws prescribed punishments for obstructing women's access to basic rights, including education. However, societal and cultural resistance hindered their full enforcement.⁶¹

Women's involvement in public life also expanded. Since 2002, women actively participated in governance and education, including the introduction of a master's degree in Gender and Women's Studies at Kabul University, where 70% of the first cohort were female. Women also assumed roles in elections and state institutions, signaling a gradual yet tangible transformation in gender roles.⁶²

International aid played a vital role in these achievements. Between 2002 and 2020, the U.S. allocated over \$787 million to support Afghan women and girls. National Education Strategic Plans from 2006 to 2021 emphasized gender equity, supported by organizations such as UNICEF, UNDP, and USAID. These efforts improved school infrastructure and increased girls' enrollment nationwide, including in remote regions.⁶³

However, these achievements remained fragile. Women's educational gains were largely driven by foreign support and were mostly visible in urban areas. The return of the Taliban in 2021 severely reversed progress, imposing bans on girls' education beyond sixth grade and suspending women's university attendance, drawing international condemnation.⁶⁴

Religious conservatism also challenged gender equality in education. Many religious scholars and institutions opposed laws supporting women's rights, citing contradictions with Islamic teachings. High-profile appointments like that of Seema Joyenda as governor were met with religious backlash, illustrating how gender equality often clashed with prevailing interpretations of Sharia.⁶⁵

⁶⁰. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Gozarash-e Moghaddamati va Dowom Dore'i-ye Jomhouri-ye Eslami-ye Afghanistan be Komite-ye Mahv-e Taba'oz-e Alayh-e Zanan* [Preliminary and Second Periodic Report of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women] (Afghanistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1390 [2011]), 2; Heydari, "Haq-e Tahsil va Amoozesh-e Zanan," 81; Heydari, *Huquq-e Bashar*, 5.

⁶¹. Heydari, "Haq-e Tahsil va Amoozesh-e Zanan," 78 - 80.

⁶². Heydari, *Huquq-e Bashar*, 6.

⁶³. "Kholase-ye Gozash-e SIGAR: Zanan-e Afghanistan dar 20 Sal Gozashteh Dastavardha-ye Qabel-e Tavajjo'ii Dashteh And [Summary of the SIGAR Report: Afghan Women Have Achieved Significant Accomplishments in the Past 20 Years]," *Daily of Afghanistan*, June 16, 2021, http://www.dailyafghanistan.com/opinion_detail.php?post_id=156820

⁶⁴. Heydari, *Huquq-e Bashar*, 7-8; "Afghan Women and the Risks of Reintegration and Reconciliation," Human Rights Watch, accessed July 28, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2010/07/13/ten-dollar-talib-and-womens-rights/afghan-women-and-risks-reintegration-and>.

⁶⁵. Heydari, *Huquq-e Bashar*, 9.

Afghanistan's legal framework itself embodied contradictions. While the constitution advocated gender equality and compliance with international human rights conventions, enforcement was undermined by conflicting interpretations of Islamic law. This duality stunted efforts to create an inclusive educational system.⁶⁶

Cultural norms and traditions remained another major barrier. Especially in rural areas, patriarchal values discouraged girls' education and reinforced domestic roles for women. Restrictions such as requiring male permission to leave home limited women's access to education and public life. Gendered socialization further entrenched inequalities, as boys were prepared for economic participation and girls for household duties.⁶⁷

Additional challenges included societal discrimination (54%), inadequate academic preparation (53%), childcare and family responsibilities (46%), and domestic duties (45%)—all contributing to a complex landscape where legal advancements often failed to translate into lived realities.⁶⁸

In summary, the Republic period witnessed notable achievements in women's education in Afghanistan, underpinned by constitutional reforms, institutional support, legal frameworks, international aid, and growing public support. Nonetheless, the fragility of these gains, rooted in cultural resistance, legal contradictions, and political instability, underscores the need for sustained efforts to ensure the continuity and inclusivity of educational opportunities for Afghan women.

6. Conclusion

The role of women during Amanullah Khan's era was marked by the establishment of the first girls' school, groundwork for women's presence in the educational system, and the passing of laws related to women's and girls' education. Amanullah Khan also enacted and implemented veil-lifting laws to improve women's status, especially in education. His plans and actions significantly impacted women's and girls' education; however, one of Amanullah Khan's main mistakes was rushing to implement reforms without considering the religious clergy, which led to the fall of his government and the rise of Habibullah Kalakani and Nader Shah. Kalakani, who belonged to the clerical class, not only stopped women's education but also removed women from all areas of society. Similarly, Nader Shah followed Kalakani's path; he introduced some reforms, but very cautiously and slowly. With the rise of Zahir Shah and the communists, women reentered education and other sectors of society. During this time, supportive laws for women's education, and the expansion of educational facilities both quantitatively and geographically, emerged. Many women were sent abroad for education and

⁶⁶. Heydari, *Huquq-e Bashari*, 230.

⁶⁷. Heydari, *Huquq-e Bashari*, 45.

⁶⁸. Kaveh, *Zanan-e Herat*, 63.

higher studies, infrastructure was developed, and a considerable number of women and girls entered the educational system. One of Zahir Shah's main challenges was dependence on foreign countries and the opposition of the clergy to women's and girls' education, which contributed to the fall of his government to the communists. The communists, who were staunch opponents of the clergy and illiteracy, introduced widespread reforms in education and women's status. Women played a significant role in education during this period, but due to neglecting and opposing the clergy, internal wars broke out, leading to a decrease in women's educational presence and the eventual takeover by the Mujahideen and the Taliban, who completely crippled the education system and women's participation in it. From 1996 to 2001, no girls attended school.

With the fall of the Taliban in 2001 and the rise of the republican governments of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, the golden age of women's role in education began. During this period, women—through the help of foreign countries and international women's rights organizations—gained an unprecedented status in education, with their participation in the educational system increasing from 20% to 40% between 2002 and 2021. However, women's role in education during this period also faced fundamental challenges, including war and insecurity, opposition from many clerics, and cultural opposition to women's education in many areas, especially rural Afghanistan.

In general, we can say that the role of women in Afghanistan's education system over the last hundred years has witnessed many ups and downs and transformations, closely tied to international support and organizations. Whenever foreign countries and international support organizations were present in Afghanistan, the role of women in education increased; whenever they left or were unable to operate, women's role in education declined significantly. Another issue is the behavior of the clergy and local Afghan communities toward women's and girls' education, which has contributed to both the rise and fall of their role in education. This segment of society has regarded women's education as foreign and a Western-imported phenomenon. Another factor influencing women's educational roles has been the rise and fall of progressive leaders and their reform plans and protective laws. The most important issue with such leaders is their lack of interaction with all social classes and their weak anthropological and cultural awareness—they are authoritarian, and when they fall, all their achievements vanish as well.

7. Recommendations

Afghan government leaders must learn from the history of Afghanistan and abandon autocracy in the realm of women's and girls' roles in the educational system, because neither copying Western education systems has worked, nor has the exclusion of women and girls from Afghanistan's education system.

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