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Afghanistan, Factor 16: Education

Afghanistan: Educating Females to Improve Standard Living

Fawzia Koofi a Member of Parliament in Kabul and Vice President of the National Assembly. Her book, *The Favored Daughter*, describes the struggle of being a girl in Afghanistan, getting an education, and against all odds, becoming a female politician. Her inspirational story offers the promise of a brighter future for all of Afghanistan's citizens. Allowing all girls access to education may result in more success stories like Fawzia Koofi's.

Afghanistan is a landlocked country in the Middle East. It has a total area of 647,500 square kilometers and a population of 25,403,189 with a 2.5% population growth rate. Geographically, Afghanistan is very mountainous. ("Afghanistan"). "The warm season lasts from May to September with an average daily high temperature above 83°F. The cold season lasts from December to March with an average daily high temperature below 52°F" ("Average Weather for Kabul, Afghanistan."). It is a primarily Islamic country, 84% are Sunni and 15% are Shi'a ("Afghanistan").

Afghanistan was occupied by the Soviet Union from 1979 to 1980, at which point the Taliban government took over. The Taliban are a strict group of Muslims that enforced Muslim traditions on the Afghani people, such as making men grow beards, making women wear all-covering burqas, and banning women from school and paid employment. Following the September 11, 2001 attacks in the U.S., the United States invaded Afghanistan to find Al Qaeda members and to aid anti-Taliban militias. Roughly 33,600 American troops remain in Afghanistan today, however they are slowly being withdrawn ("How Many U.S. Troops Are Still in Afghanistan?").

Afghani families are often large. The average urban family has five children, but rural families may be much larger ("Islamic Republic of Afghanistan"). Young women generally marry between the ages of 14 and 22, and young men typically marry between 18 and 24. Women are legally able to choose a spouse, but only urban women are regularly allowed to do so; conservative religious families, who mainly live in rural Afghanistan, may not allow daughters to choose their husbands. A man may have as many as four wives, but he must care for each equally; this limits most men to one wife ("Islamic Republic of Afghanistan"). A mother's mean age at her first birth is 20.1 years old. Typically families include not only parents and children but also grandparents in either the same or an adjoining home ("Islamic Republic of Afghanistan").

As a landlocked country, Afghanistan is surrounded by Pakistan, Tajikistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and China. Because Afghanistan shares borders with these countries, traditional Afghan cuisine is influenced by the foods of south and central Asia, China, and Iran. Traditional meals include many types of *pilau* (rice mixed with meat and/or vegetables), *qorma* (meat sauce), *kebab* (skewered meat), *ashak* or *mantu* (pasta dishes), and *naan* (unleavened bread) ("Islamic Republic of Afghanistan"). With 99% of the country being Muslim alcohol and pork are rarely consumed because it goes against Islamic law ("Afghanistan."). An urban diet is usually more varied than a rural diet, but shortages of food or the money to buy it, are severe at times ("Islamic Republic of Afghanistan").

The Afghan health system is in need of great repair. Afghanistan has the highest infant mortality rate in the world, with 119.41 deaths per every 1,000 live births. 32.9% of children under five are underweight. The population includes 0.19 physicians per 1,000 citizens, despite the fact that Afghanistan spends 9.6% of its GDP on health (World Factbook). Hospitals are found only in some cities, and many lack heat,

qualified staff, medicine, and equipment. People, who can afford to do so, often go to India or Pakistan to get medical treatment. Rural areas completely lack modern medical care ("Islamic Republic of Afghanistan"). Life expectancy in Afghanistan on average is 50.11 years. 63% of sanitation facilities are unimproved (World Factbook). Water is not safe and many illnesses, including dysentery, malaria, tuberculosis, and pneumonia, affect the population ("Islamic Republic of Afghanistan").

Women of all ages in Afghanistan are treated as second-class citizens. Girls from birth are thrown into a world where males dominate. Often when a woman gives birth, if it is not a boy, the husband may become angry with the woman and the child. Girl's birthdays are not normally celebrated, especially in rural Afghanistan (Koofi 26). Another problem that many women face are convictions for moral crimes. Moral crimes can be, but are not limited to running away from home, premarital sex, and adultery. "[U]nder Afghan law, the woman is guilty of breaking sexual taboos when she engages in sexual acts outside of marriage, whether those sexual acts are consensual or not" (Dale).

"Agriculture is the main source of livelihood and subsistence for roughly 75 percent of the Afghan population" (US Aid). 59.3% of Afghanistan's total land is used in farming with the average farm size being 6 hectares of arable land (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations). 27,200 sq. km of Afghanistan's land is irrigated (World Factbook). Agriculture accounts for 29.9% of the GDP. Afghanistan produces a number of crops including opium, wheat, fruits, and nuts. Animal products include wool, mutton, sheepskins, and lambskins. (World Factbook). However, severe overgrazing and a recent drought have contributed to the decline of the livestock population (UC Davis). They export opium, fruits and nuts hand-woven carpets, wool, cotton, hides and pelts, and precious and semi-precious gems (World Factbook).

"Afghanistan's economy is recovering from decades of conflict. The economy has improved significantly since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, largely because of the infusion of international assistance, the recovery of the agricultural sector, and service sector growth. Despite the progress of the past few years, Afghanistan is extremely poor, landlocked, and highly dependent on foreign aid. Much of the population continues to suffer from shortages of housing, clean water, electricity, medical care, and jobs" (World Factbook). In fact, Afghanistan has one of the lowest percentages of people with electricity in the world, the Ministry of Energy and wind estimates that only 30% have access to electricity (Worldbook).

Criminality, insecurity, weak governance, lack of infrastructure, and the Afghan Government's difficulty in extending rule of law to all parts of the country pose challenges to future economic growth. 36% of the population continues to live under the line of poverty, and only 23.5% of the population is urbanized (World Factbook). On the Human Development Index, which "is used to measure quality of life in countries across the world," Afghanistan ranked in the Low Human Development category at 155 of 169 countries ("Afghanistan."). On the Gender Inequality Index, which reflects gender-based inequalities in three dimensions – reproductive health, empowerment, and economic activity –ranked 147 out of 148 countries. It has a 99.6 adolescent fertility rate and only 5.8% of females have at least a secondary education (Human Development Report).

In 2000, the UN created the Millennium Goals to help end poverty by 2015. They created an eight-step program to help eliminate poverty in developing nations. Goal number two is to achieve universal primary education, and goal number three was to promote gender equality and empower women. ("We Can Stop Poverty").

"If women had the same access to productive resources as men, they could increase yields on their farms by 20-30 percent. This increase could raise total agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5-4 percent and reduce the number of undernourished people in the world by 12-17 percent, up to 150 million people" (Women and Agriculture). A way to make this happen is to educate women in Afghanistan.

“Education for girls has high returns in terms of income and livelihood opportunities, including increasing agricultural productivity.” However, “wide disparities in access to education still exist, especially in rural areas.” “Girls face a variety of challenges that often combine to give them less chance of completing their education than boys” (Bertini 45).

Only 28.1% of Afghanistan’s population is literate, with 43.1% of the male population and only 12.3% of the female population considered literate. Males on average spend ten years in school, whereas females tend to only spend six years in school (World Factbook). “The Ministry of Education, in cooperation with international aid agencies, is working to provide education to everyone; however, rural areas suffer from a lack of buildings and other resources. Roughly half of school-age children attend school, yet there are significant disparities between urban and rural settings as well as genders. In rural areas, for example, where the school is far from the home, families may refuse to let their daughters travel long distances alone. More traditional families may discourage their daughters from pursuing education or may disallow it altogether. In areas that struggle with Taliban insurgents (particularly the south), girls are prohibited from going to school and most schools have been shut down. Qualified teachers, particularly female ones, are lacking. Many scholars and teachers fled or were killed during the Soviet-Afghan War” (“Islamic Republic of Afghanistan”). The Afghan education system still needs a lot of work, especially to provide equal education for all children.

Limited access to infrastructure improvements like electricity and indoor plumbing can prevent girls from going to school, because “rural girls and women are often the main fetchers of water and fuel.... In some rural areas, girls may spend up to eight hours a day walking to and from a local water source” (Bertini 32). When girls can get to school, they often do not feel comfortable for a number of reasons and therefore, do not learn as well, and may drop out. The distance to school can play a role in girls’ comfort levels. “A lack of educational facilities in many areas, especially secondary schools, increases the distance to school and can further affect girls’ school attendance. Many parents are unwilling to send girls away to these schools because of high susceptibility to taunting and violence along the way” (Bertini 47).

Another factor is school conditions. “Sexual violence against adolescent girls in school can be more likely in rural areas because schools are often male dominated and more traditional cultural norms are prevalent. Research has found that various measures of gender treatment are significantly associated with dropout rates for girls but not [for] boys” (Bertini 48). Adequate facilities can also be a major factor in why girls do not go to school. “For adolescent girls the lack of adequate sanitation facilities and privacy can have an impact on schooling. The availability of private, same-sex toilets is especially important” (Bertini 48). “A study in rural Mozambique found that the gender composition of teaching staff was highly important in household decisions to send children to school” (Bertini 48). In Afghanistan, “securing female teachers in rural areas is a significant challenge” (Bertini 49).

“The returns to female secondary education are estimated to be in the 15 to 25 percent range, a higher return rate than for men. [Also], an increase of 1 percent in female secondary education attendance adds .3 percent to the country’s average annual per capita income growth. Investment in girls’ education also provides a national demographic dividend of great savings and increased economic growth, because of lower fertility rates and a larger, and more productive workforce” (Bertini 2).

As girls become more educated and economically empowered women, their influence will grow in the home and in the community. By equipping adolescent girls with what they need to become healthy and educated human beings, their social, economic, political, and human capabilities increase and are passed on to the next generation breaking the cycle of poverty. A mother’s education, health, and social status have a significant impact on the health of her children. Doubling the proportion of women with secondary

educations would reduce average fertility rates from 5.3 to 3.9 per woman. Educated women are 50% more likely to immunize their children. “The transformation begins by viewing rural adolescent girls as valuable human beings capable of significant accomplishments” (Bertini 2).

Afghanistan’s schools must learn to accommodate the new female students for its society to prosper. There are many ways to do this. A few include teaching in the mother tongue, making the schools safer for girls by having same sex schools and increasing the number of female teachers in rural schools. Teaching in mother tongue will help girls feel more comfortable at school and will increase their learning ability. “In Mali teaching in the mother tongue decreased dropout rates and grade repetition, with rural children scoring higher on national exams than their urban peers” (Bertini 50). Not only would this help girls stay in school but also “most linguists agree that having command of your native language is the best basis for learning a foreign language or an official language such as English and French” (Bertini 50). This breakthrough for teaching rural girls has sparked many organizations to work to preserve native languages and create school materials for these languages (Bertini 50). Teaching in the mother tongue will also help women economically. “Most rural commerce is conducted in local languages.” Therefore, by teaching girls their local language, their bargaining skills will increase as their language skills increase (Bertini 50). Also, many rural health clinics use local language, so if women know their language, it is easier for them to communicate what is wrong with themselves or their children, which will create a healthier society (Bertini 50). Teaching in the mother tongue in rural Afghan schools would likely help keep girls in school, as well as make it easier for them to learn other languages.

Creating same sex-schools would allow girls to feel safe at school, and to experience leadership opportunities. Creating single-sex schools will help girls feel less threatened about going to school. “Not having boys in class eliminates the potential for harassment between and during classes. [It also allows] for girls to take leadership roles and voice their opinions easier because they do not have the fear of “appearing ‘smart’ or ‘smarter’ than the boys in a cultural environment that might not support that” (Bertini 53). The Afghani government should therefore support the BRAC project, which “focuses on creating safe places for girls to attend single-sex schools” (Bertini 48). They should also be creating more schools like the one Shabana Basij-Rasikh created. Basij-Rasikh is the managing director of SOLA, the School of Leadership, Afghanistan, “ the first and perhaps only boarding school for girls in Afghanistan” (Basij-Rasikh). If we create more schools like SOLA then girls will have a better environment in which to learn.

Another thing that will help educate girls is installing female teachers in more schools. “Exposure to female teachers is one of the greatest quality indicators for girls’ schooling and has shown to have a positive effect on enrollment and retention rates.” Female teachers make girls feel safer than with male teachers, and it also gives girls a role model (Bertini 53). However getting female teachers to teach in rural area is a challenge because “ such positions may be seen as difficult culturally, or unsafe” (Bertini 49). Afghanistan should therefore set up incentive programs to entice female teachers to rural areas. For example the program set up by Oxfam in Afghanistan is meant to help “attract qualified female teachers from the provincial capital to move to remote, rural areas of the Badakhshan province of Afghanistan.” There, “girls attendance at school went from seventy girls before the incentive program to over 1,100” (Bertini 49).

These changes will not be easy and will require a lot of work from many organizations. Afghanistan’s government needs to make female education a priority because it will help them gain leadership in their country as well as improve the living environment. UN should also help developing countries, like Afghanistan educate women. The UN has much better resources to get female teachers to rural areas and to create same sex schools. Additional charities such as BRAC and Girls Learn International can also help create same sex schools for girls in developing countries.

Afghanistan has a long way to grow until it can fully operate and properly take care of its people. Better education of women will help speed this process up. The Afghani government, UN, and private charities need to work to get same sex schools more readily available in rural Afghanistan, as well as getting more female teachers to teach in rural Afghanistan. They also need to help implement teaching in mother-tongue language. All of these will increase the comfort level of girls in school, and this will lead to a better education. The girls in Afghanistan want and need an education and know the value of an education. As eleven-year-old Bilqis Ehsan, from Kandahar, Afghanistan, told NPR, "Education is like a gold – when you get it, it will always be in your mind and you can profit from that. No one can steal it from your mind. We can do everything by education. It will shine in your life."

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