

# Female Education in Afghanistan: Opportunities and Challenges

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**Abstract:** *Female education in Afghanistan has witnessed a number of ups and downs throughout the history of Afghanistan. In the history of Afghanistan, the people who suffered the most in the part of education were female. From the very beginning, female education was not that much satisfied prior to the civil war in Afghanistan but the three-decade civil war and conflicts made the situations worse for female learners. It was the government of Taliban (1996-2001) when the female education fell to 0%. Hopes came to lives with the establishment of the new government and support of the international community in 2001. However, after sixteen long years, the female education is still substandard. The focus of this study is on the unequal access to females and males in primary, secondary and particularly at higher education. The study will also explore the major obstacles that hamper females' education. This study is based on the collection of data available in different research papers, educational articles, reports and numerous other related sources.*

**Key terms:** *Female Education, Afghanistan, Educational opportunities, Challenges.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Education is one of the fundamental rights of every child. Education enables a human to live with dignity and as an engaged citizen. The social and economic development of families as a whole greatly depends on education. Although education improved in the recent years, the girls still suffer from disadvantage and exclusion from the education system. According to UNICEF (2015)<sup>[1]</sup> report, nearly 31 million girls of primary school age and 32 million lower secondary school age girls are out of school. Education is an intrinsic right of girls as well as a critical lever that will help in reaching other developmental objectives. Educating a girl will surely break the cycle of poverty. There will be very fewer chances of early and unwilling marriages in educated girls; so they will be less likely to die in childbirth; more likely to have healthy babies and will surely send their children to school as well. When there is a chance for every child to have access to a quality education rooted in human rights and gender equality, it creates a ripple effect of opportunity that influences generations to come.

Education is universally acknowledged to benefit individuals and promote national development. To educate female and males will surely produce a similar increase in their subsequent earnings and provide both boys and girls with grand opportunities and choices in the future. However, educating girls provide numerous additional socio-economic achievements that surely benefit the whole societies. These benefits comprise of the increment in economic productivity, increase in the family income, delayed marriages, reduction in the mortality rate, and better health and survival rates for infants and children.

Over the years, the focus of education has been on access and parity (that is, closing the enrollment gap between girls and boys) while the amount of attention given to retention and achievement or the quality and relevance of education is not sufficient. Enrollment and retention can be increased by providing quality and relevant education and also require stern steps to ensure that boys and girls are able to fully realize the benefits of education. It is also of paramount importance that concentration should be equally given to both boy and girls' education. Concentration on only one group will never yield a positive result. The primary focus on girls' access to education may neglect boys' education needs. This approach also fails to deal with the norms and behaviours that bring about inequality.

Gender inequality remains a major barrier to human development. For the last two or three decades, major strides have been taken for the education of girls and women, but they have not yet gained gender equity. There is a number of barriers and challenges that keep a child away from school especially girls throughout the world. These barriers range from supply-side limitations to the negative norms and beliefs. The education of girls is hugely caused to be wobbly by the pressure of poverty and the lower level of parents' attention and value to their education. There are a number of discrimination patterns like harmful gender norms and lower social status of women and girls that really undervalue the education of girls. Although primary school enrollment is improving day by day, the primary education completion rates of girls' usually lag behind as well as their transition rate to secondary school. Girls usually compel to leave school, because to help at home, they get pregnant, they are married, school is out of reach of them or due to the worry of safety and reputations parents has about their daughters.

## 2. BACKGROUND OF STUDY:

The three decades civil wars have ruined every sector of Afghanistan especially the education sector which damaged the most. The schools were ruined and burnt in every part of the land. People migrated to different countries and especially those who were literate left the land early and left the county with the black clouds of ignorance.

According to (EPD, 2011)<sup>[2]</sup> the political situation of the country is affecting access to higher education, especially for women, and the access to higher education extremely reduced after the fall of the communist regime led by Najibullah in 1992. In the era of Mujahideen government (1992-1996) access to higher education became very limited. In the era of Taliban (1996-2001) the situation went from worse to worsen and coeducation was outlawed and women were banned to education until the fall of their government in the year 2001. In the government of Taliban, schools were operating but they allowed only male education and strictly rejected and banned the female education. As a result majority of Afghan female deprived of education and went into the world of ignorance. According to BBC NEWS (2014)<sup>[3]</sup>, in 2001 no girls attended formal schools and there were only one million boys enrolled. After the fall of Taliban regime and with the establishment of new government, the focus was given to education and no doubt the education sector improved and is improving day by day. The schools reopened, and new schools are building in every part of the country. Teacher training colleges are introduced in every province as well as to some of the districts. The circle of universities expanded to almost every province. Private universities are increasing in number day by day. However, with all these improvements and advancements the education system still is struggling especially in the part of female education. Despite great increase in the enrolment for the last several years, nearly one-third of districts have no schools for girls (Narayan, Rao & Khan, 2010)<sup>[4]</sup>. In some part of the country the number of female students is fair but in most of the part, the females are deprived of education. According to BBC NEWS (2014)<sup>[3]</sup> only 26% of the Afghan population is literate and the rate decreases in the part of women, which is only 12%. Of the school-age children, only 38% (4.2 million in real number) do not have access to schools of which the most are girls. There are several causes to the problem. According to UNICEF report (2013)<sup>[5]</sup> the biggest cause of low female enrollment in school is because of the insufficiency of schools and infrastructures. Similarly, the regions which are under the control of Taliban are affected the most and have no running girl schools at all as they are against of female education. The attacks of insurgents who are against the female education have significantly increased the closure of girls' schools (UNWOMEN, 2013)<sup>[6]</sup>. Tradition is another cause that hampers female education. The majority of Afghan population consists of Pashtoon who traditionally do not give much importance to female education. They allow girls only for primary education, just to learn basic reading and writing but after primary education, their educational career begins uncertainty. For girls, it's enough to read and write and more than that is not necessary (Jackson, 2011)<sup>[7]</sup>. In their culture and tradition female are not allowed to go outside of homes, without extremely emergency cases. The people who allow their female to go outside of the homes on daily basis are considered substandard in the society. The poverty, security, and forced marriages are among the several other factors that cause serious hurdles in the way of female education in Afghanistan. This study will put some light on gender inequality in education and the situation of female education in Afghanistan.

### 3. GENDER INEQUALITY –DEFINITION:

Gender inequality according to Wikipedia refers to unequal treatment or perceptions of individuals based on their gender. It comes into being from the different social roles of gender. Gender equality in the context of education can be defined in many ways. According to Jha (2007)<sup>[8]</sup>, it can be defined as to ensure equality on the part of entitlement, opportunities and the power to use the entitlement and both male and female of different social, ethnic, linguistic or economic group be able to use these opportunities. According to Subrahmanian (2003)<sup>[9]</sup> as cited in Shayan (2015)<sup>[10]</sup> we have four aspects in the part of education equality "equality of access, equality in the learning process, equality in educational outcomes and equality of external results". a) Equality of access is when both male and female have equal access to formal and informal education and can be enrolled from school to University. b) Equality in the learning process is when the educational institutes provide both male and female with the same opportunities, participation, and curriculum and teaching methods. c) Equality of educational outcomes is when both male and female students are provided with equal success given equal efforts. d) Equality of external results is when both male and female are given the same status in the society after the completion of their education.

### 4. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Cooray & Potrafke (2011)<sup>[11]</sup> carried a study to investigate whether the political institution or culture and religion cause gender inequality in education. They included up to 157 countries over the period of 1991-2006. The result shows that it is not a political institution that influences female education; it is neither autocratic regimes nor democracies that discriminate against girls in rejecting educational opportunities but it is culture and religion that cause gender inequality in education. According to UNICEF report (2013)<sup>[5]</sup>, the biggest cause of low enrollment in school is because of the insufficiency of schools and infrastructures resulting long walking distances and the lack of security. Overall there are 14000 schools at the current time of which there are only 15 % for girls and 50 % of them are without buildings, clear water and sanitation facilities. According to UNWOMEN (2013)<sup>[6]</sup> for Afghan women, education is not an easy option. According to Haqmal (n.d.), one of our conclusions shows that due to bad security and the elimination of women and girls have suffered the female education in other areas as well. He adds that there is a number of factors that hamper girls' access to school and education of which the major one is social factors which have a negative effect, notably: lack of security, worsen by long distances, lack of transportation means, shortage of

female teachers, lack of clear water and healthcare. Along with these factors, forced marriages make it difficult for girls and women to continue their education. Security is also an important factor as most of the opponents are busy on destructive activities by burning down girls schools as they are against of female education.

**5. METHODOLOGY:**

Qualitative method is used for the study. The study is based on the previous studies. The data is collected from very authentic and genuine sources like UNICEF, UNWOMEN, UNICEF, BBC News reports, National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment reports, Afghanistan Millennium Development Goal Report, Afghanistan National Education for All reports, EPD reports, Amnesty International reports, World Bank reports, OXFAM, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Higher Education Afghanistan and numerous other sources.

**6. DISCUSSION:**

Afghanistan is a historical country and its history of education is always full of problems, especially in the part of females. There was no concept of female schools and most of the time religious education was provided inside of the home. The first time the issue of female education was taken under consideration was in the reign of King Amanullah Khan (1919-1929). This was the beginning of female education in the history of Afghanistan. But with the fall of his government, the female education also started its downfall. The boy’s school continued to be open; however, girls’ schools were closed. In the era of Sardar Mohammad Daud Khan in the 1960s once again the female education developed and female once again started access to schools. From the era onward female education experienced up and downs until 1996 when the Taliban took the reign in hands. This was the time the female education stopped completely and there was no single girl going to school. After the fall of Taliban and with the establishment of new governments, the main focus has been given to education. However, the female education is still missing the momentum and flow.

**7. FEMALE EDUCATION SINCE THE FALL OF TALIBAN GOVERNMENT:**

Since the fall of Taliban Government and the establishment of the new government with the support of the world community; the immense focus has been given to education. What happened in the last three decade in the history of Afghanistan was a nightmare for every Afghan. Most of the Afghan believe that the root of all problems afghan faced was the lack of education, so with the establishment of new government everyone insisted and demanded the remedial of the educational sector. The government has also given prime focus to education and improvement can be seen in various areas. However, the female education did not improve that much as it was supposed to be and is still under question.

**7.1 Literacy**

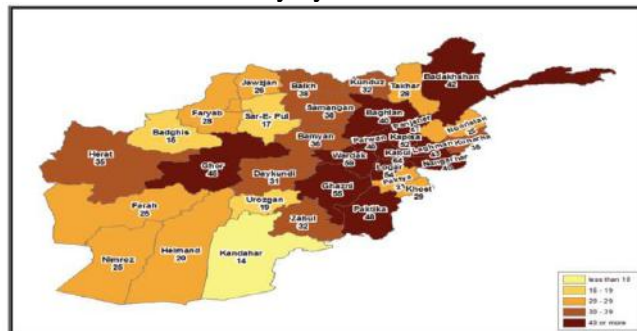
As a war-torn country, Afghanistan is not having a great record of literacy on the world literacy list. The government has taken certain initiative to cover the issue. Various literacy courses are usually offered by different NGOs and agencies throughout the country. However, the situation is still not in a good shape and is unsatisfactory, especially for females. In 2004, the literacy rate for males and females (ages 15 to 24 years) was 50.8% and 18.4% respectively. Literacy rates for the same age group in 2005 were as overall 31.3%; females 19.6%, and males 39.9%. The 2007 literacy rate (ages 15-24) for males was 50.8%, and for females was 18.4%. The Afghan literacy rates are the lowest compared to all the SAARC countries, and the Afghan female youth literacy rate declined from 19.6% in 2005 to 18.4% in 2007. This is an alarming development (Alvi, 2011) [12]. Similarly, according to National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA, 2009) [13] the female literacy rate is nationally estimated to be 12% and 18 out of 34 provinces having the rate of 10% or less than that. There are some provinces particularly the provinces located in the southern part of the country where the rate was just 1% which is a crystal clear example of lack of opportunities for a female to have an access for literacy learning. According to Afghanistan MDG report (2010) [14], at present Afghanistan has the lowest rate of literacy among other developing countries which is 23.5% of which 87% females are illiterate.

The maps below provide a striking image of the gender gaps in literacy:

Adult Female Literacy by Province 2012



Adult Male Literacy by Province 2012





Source: AMICS

MICS 2010- 2011, CSO, UNICEF p 44

## 7.2 Grade 1-12

According to Jackson, (2011) <sup>[7]</sup> as the girls grow older their access to school decreases. He mentions the Ministry of Education stance that there are 5124 primary schools, 3634 secondary schools and 2702 high schools in the country of which 39.1% are girls primary schools and this ratio come down to 28% at the secondary level. “There is only one high school in a district in Herat province. Students cannot come from far away villages and there is no transportation. So girls quit after secondary level, get married and have children. Even if they want to return, there is no place at the school where a woman can keep their children, so they stay at home” (Jackson, 2011, p.18) <sup>[7]</sup>. Lexow (2012) <sup>[15]</sup>, notices that although there has been seen some nationwide advancement in the ratio of female to male in primary, secondary and tertiary education, the disparity of boys and girls ‘enrollment among different provinces still exist. The index of gender parity for primary education was 0.69 whereas it was 0.49 for secondary education. It shows that still, the disparity exists among gender enrollment. There are 10 provinces with 30% enrollment of female. The province which is at the bottom is Uruzgan with 11% of female enrollment, Helmand is after that with 20%, Zabul 21%, Paktia 21%, Khost 24%, Badghis, Wardak with 25% and Kabul province with 30%, Badakhshan is close to parity with 47% girls enrolled, followed by Hirat 46%, Nuristan 45%, Laghman and Bamyan with 44%, and the remaining provinces have female enrollment between 31-43%. According to Shayan (2015) in every level of education, there are great numbers of differences of male-female ratio based on statistics. The numbers of female students decrease to a great extent on the level of higher education. According to EFA Report (2015) <sup>[16]</sup>, the education system has big gaps of gender. The literacy rate of women as compared to men is lessened than one-third of that of men and except Kabul where it is just above 40%; it is constantly low across every other province. However, with the difference of age, it changes as the younger generation tend to have higher literacy rate but despite this, the male youth literacy rate is still more than double of the female youth literacy rate.

## 7.3 Higher Education

As compared to primary, secondary, and high school the inequality in gender is greater in higher education and the reason is that they are not provided with the opportunities to carry on their higher studies (Shayan, 2015) <sup>[10]</sup>. According to packer et. al (2010) <sup>[17]</sup> cited in (Shayan, 2015) <sup>[10]</sup> in the year 2001 the number of the student was just 7800 which represent one of the lowest numbers of enrollment in the world. According to Samady (2013) <sup>[18]</sup> the number of male and female students in the year (2002) was 27000 and 4200 respectively. In the year (2004) it was 24500 and 6200, in the year 2006 it was 30600 and 8800, in the year 2008 it was 48200 and 12900, in the year (2010) it was 62900 and 14830 and in the year (2012) it was 81785 and 19215 respectively for male and female. These figures really display a big gap of inequality in education on the part of girls in the higher education level.

## 8. THE MAIN OBSTACLES FOR FEMALE EDUCATION:

Due to internal conflicts and bad security, the delivery system of supplies to schools, enrolment, monitoring and school supervision is hampered badly. The custom which is against of female education further backing the challenges. Early marriage is another serious issue that hampers female education. The overall shortage of teachers and the serious need for female teachers along with a shortage of physical structure are the factors that hinder female attendance at schools, especially in the rural areas. According to Karlsson and Mansory (2007) <sup>[19]</sup>, there is no separate building for male and female, schools are very far, insecurity and absence of female teachers are some of the reasons that troubles females compare to male. Among the 4.2 million out of school children, 60% are female and there are no students in grades 10-12 in 200 districts of 412 urban and rural districts across the country (UNICEF, 2011) <sup>[20]</sup>. According to amnesty international (2011) <sup>[21]</sup>, the main factors that affect female education are Taliban and other armed groups. They are targeting teachers, students and girls’ schools. According to Jackson (2011) <sup>[7]</sup>, poverty, early forced marriages, lack of security, lack of family support, lack of female teachers, long distances to school, low quality of education, absence of female schools, harassment, lack of community support are the main obstacles that hinder female education in Afghanistan. Pessala (2012) <sup>[22]</sup>, interviewed Afghan female and found that 77% of Afghan female are deprived of school, having 1.8 years average level of education. The respondent, whose formal education was less than 13 years, responded that the family is the main obstacle of their schooling. 16% replied that it is their family need for work which has limited their education. 14% replied that there are no schools available for them and 10% said that it is their family poverty that hinders in the way of their education.

### 8.1 Traditional and Religious Barriers

The great portion of Afghan population comprises of Pashtuns. According to Jamal (2012) <sup>[23]</sup> as cited in Shayan (2015) <sup>[10]</sup> one thing that affects female education in Pashtoon the most is tradition and its values. He explains that there is a general tendency among all Pashtoon to very strictly follow a Pashtoon related regulation called “Pashtoonwali” which is an ethnic code and is quite clear to all Pashtoon. It is not written but it is something understood to every Pashtoon. He claims that this code or regulation is the main cause that prevents female from

education. There is a Pashto proverb which says; “for women, there is either house (kooor) or the Grave (goor)”. He further adds that according to Pashtoonwali, they will allow their daughters to go to school in case if the school has female teachers and near to their houses. According to EFA (2015)<sup>[16]</sup> it is the common belief of all Afghan families that they will send their daughters in case if they are provided with schools near to their houses. Looking to the current economic situation of the country, it seems impossible to provide that many schools. However, there is a number of families who believe and argue that there is no need for female education at all.

### **8.2 Early Marriages and Social Norms**

According to World Bank report (2005)<sup>[24]</sup>, it is the tradition of early marriages in Afghan culture that cause both social and legal hurdles in the way of female education. It is not just the domestic responsibilities after marriage that hampers female education but there is a law passed in the year 1970s which banned married female from high-school education throughout the country. The law was maintained by the Afghan government in Sep 2003. In order to find a way of solution for the issue, the ministry of education set up a vocational school, high school in the women affairs ministry. Finally, the law was abandoned by the presidential decree and with the new law, the married female was allowed to go to schools. The formal ban was removed and allowed a married woman to attend schools. However, the problem persists as it is not only the formal ban that prevents the married female from attending schools but there is a number of other obstacles that hinder female education. The most important of them are parents and religious leaders.

### **8.3 Insecurity**

Lack of security is another main obstacle that hinders female education. The armed conflicts are causing everyone to stay home especially girls. The insurgent is trying their best to restrict the activities and progress of the current government. They are not happy with the current education system too and are totally against of female education. This is one of the main obstacles in the way of accelerated educational progress. The countries engaged in war will go backwards in the education (UNESCO, 2011)<sup>[25]</sup>. According to the Ministry of Education (2006)<sup>[26]</sup>, it is security issues that parents are hesitant to send their daughters to schools as the school are far away from their homes.

### **8.4 Poverty**

Although the education system in Afghanistan provides free education to all Afghans throughout the country, the poverty of families still is a gigantic obstacle in the education of children's, especially in the rural areas and among girls. The country is lacking resources to be able to support the poor to cope with the opportunity costs associated with basic education. In a country having annual per capita GDP about US\$180, paying a user fee of US\$6 per year per child in addition to other costs for uniform, books, transport, stationary, midday meal, etc is too much of a financial burden for the poor (Mojaddidi et al., 2006, p.15)<sup>[27]</sup>. It is still challenging to achieve required progress in gender equity in education. In situations where the family face an economic problem, the person who has to sacrifice is a daughter. The parents' preference of son over daughter becomes obvious in time when the family is going through hard economic situations. They really give preference to boys as compared to girls and poverty, therefore, is more of a barrier for the schooling of girls than of boys. The poor families may not afford to enrol their every child to school. Boys come first to education as compared to girls in the primary level of schooling. It is not only the fees for girls' education but some other problems like a uniform, school meal costs too. So to bring back female students to schools and keep them to continue their education, it is necessary to back them financially and find ways of solution for them. There are 36% people who do not have the strength to meet their daily life needs. Part of income is because of child's work. Most of the girls are not able to continue their studies because of their poor economic conditions (Paktin, 2013)<sup>[28]</sup>.

### **8.5 Lack of Qualified Female Teachers**

Jackson (2011)<sup>[7]</sup> carried a survey and found that more than a quarter (26.4%) of the participant stated that it is the lack of female teachers that has resulted in female education to suffer. According to Samady (2013)<sup>[18]</sup>, it is the shortage of female teachers in a number of provinces that hinders in the way of female education development. According to EFA (2015)<sup>[24]</sup> the number of female teachers at (Grade 1-12) had reached 32.91% in 2013 from 30.9% in 2012. However, the situation in rural provinces such as Paktika, Paktia, Khost and Uruzgan, is very worse, having less than 5% female teachers. Half of the total districts do not have female teachers at all. According to EFA (2015)<sup>[24]</sup> there are no female teachers in almost 80 districts out of 364 districts, and for the majority of districts the female qualified teachers are unavailable especially for secondary grades and this is the major cause of girls leaving schools. One of the major reasons for the least number of female teachers in the suburbs is because of social custom and tradition that does not allow adult female outside of the homes in the Afghan society. The lack of trained teachers in a specialist subject, e.g. maths and science is another issue altogether for remote area female students. ( Oxfam in Afghanistan, 2014)<sup>[29]</sup>

### **8.6 Lack of family support**

One of the main problems for the female education in Afghanistan is the lack of family support. As it is very clear that family support plays a very fundamental role in one's education but female in Afghanistan is deprived of this blessing. The situations and circumstance in Afghanistan have made most of the parents not to send their daughters to school. Studies show that one of the greatest obstacles in the way of female education is parents' decisions of not

allowing their daughters to schools. The study carried by Jackson (2011)<sup>[7]</sup> shows that a great number of participants (31.8%) is the belief that it is lack of family support that hinders female education. A great number of parents approximately 55% were interviewed and they responded as they can send only one daughter to school; 19.5% said that their daughters went to the schools but they dropped out; 14.2 % said that they do not like to permit female to schools and 11.3% replied that their daughters are not yet in the school age.

## 9. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

The history of education in Afghanistan is not very satisfactory from ages, especially for females. The female education went through some serious problems throughout the history of Afghanistan particularly in the time of Taliban regime when the number of female students was equal to none (1996-2001). It was the time when other nations were practising modern education. They were in search of strategies how to further improve the education system to meet the needs of the time; as it was the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century. On the other hand, for Afghan female education, it was the worse time ever. With the fall of Taliban regime and establishment of new government, situations got better and are improving day by day in the part of education. However female education still is struggling and as compared to male education it is still not in a satisfactory condition. Studies have proven that female education has improved compared to past but, still, it is not in the shape, which needs to be. It still is in a poor state. Even though a large portion of the state budget is allocated for education and with the aids of the international community for the improvement of education sector; the problem still persists. A great portion of the female population is deprived of education as compared to male. The problem exists in all level of education i.e. the primary, secondary, high school and higher education and has a direct proportion with the different levels. That is, as the level of education goes up the problem also increases.

There is a number of challenges for female education that can be briefed as social-cultural norms, poor economy, internal conflicts, bad security, and unsupportive environment. Tradition and culture are the main challenges to the female education. It is the common mindset of family elders that there is no need of female education. The lack of nearby schools and to walk long distances to schools in an insecure environment increase their concerns. The next major obstacle in the way of female education is the low economic conditions of most of the families. Families are unable to support their daughters economically. The lack of qualified female teachers is another problem that discourages female students. As there are no separate universities for male and female and all universities have coeducation system so, being a traditional society, where females are not allowed to share the same classroom with males is another problem altogether that hampers female education at higher education level.

This study has pointed out numerous factors that actually affect female education the most and causes inequality in the part of female education. The most challenging of them is tradition and generally established beliefs about female education. According to these beliefs, it is not female who need to go to school. Traditionally they have divided the role of labour for male and female and according to that role females are not required to go outside of the home and their role is within the household and is much focusing on man serving.

The importance of an educated female cannot be denied as it is the first teacher to a child. An educated woman builds educated society so her illiteracy will badly affect the future of a nation and will be a huge challenge for the progress of the country. It was cleared in the study that most effective factors that hamper female education are society, culture and traditions. So it is not easy to overcome the problem easily and cannot be solved in an overnight but, still, recommendations are offered regarding the problems:

- As a traditional society, there is very strong position and role of the religious leaders (Imam) in the society. So it will be better to have them motivate people, especially family elders for female education.
- Arrange public awareness programs especially for parents to brief them about the importance of female education by giving examples from the society i.e. if we do not let our daughters to school so then we will have no female doctors which consequently is a problem for our females.
- Provide girls with more schools as compared to boys. As boy can manage to access to far away school compare to female so, it will be a good idea to increase female school which will result in every female student to have a nearby school and parents will have no concerns then.
- Train a few female and then have them to provide literacy programs for other females inside of their homes. As, usually, the family elders do not allow them to go outside of their homes.
- Motivate female teachers through qualification base salary increment. Currently, most of the female teachers are not qualified enough and they do not study further because it does not much affect their salary.
- The government should monitor the projects working for female literacy. As most of the projects are without positive result and they are just by name. So if they are monitored and observed properly, they will be compelled to work in the related area.

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