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Issues Causing Girls' Dropout from Schools in Afghanistan

Abdullah Noori

Assistant Professor, English Department, Kabul University, Kabul, Afghanistan

Email - abdullahm40@gmail.com

Abstract: *The current study is a non-empirical research attempting to explore the key issues contributing to the dropout of girls from schools in Afghanistan. The paper first provides a historical background where the education of girls in the country has always been challenged. The study also explores a few studies conducted in the neighboring countries of Afghanistan where girls' education is facing similar challenges causing to their dropout from schools. Subsequently, specific challenges, such as cultural, economic, insecurity, and school-related challenges have been identified as the main challenges toward the education of girls in Afghanistan. Finally, a number of recommendation have been proposed at the end of the paper, implementing of which might be useful for the status of girls' education in the country.*

Keywords: *School Dropout; Education; Afghanistan; Girls.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Education is a vital part of life in a society. Those individuals who tend to understand the values and significance of education make better decisions for themselves and others. As Samady (2007) ^[1] expresses that in the development, reconstruction, and advancement of a country, education is an equally significant factor as the security and economic factors. Education is the foundation of a society and considered as a hope for a vivid future. Likewise, it is the fundamental right of all human beings to have access to education. According to national and international laws and the holy religion of Islam, education is the right of both males and females. There is not any discrimination on the basis of, for instance, gender, ethnicity, race, language, social status, or place of birth etc. Equality of educational opportunity is one of the prerequisites of the society. However, unfortunately, there are still many countries where educational opportunities to males and females are not equally provided.

Unfortunately, Afghanistan is one of those countries where education has always been gender biased. The education of females has always been defied in the country. Because of poverty, insecurity, illiteracy, and lack of political stability, Afghanistan has always been an unstable country. It is a war-torn country and according to UNESCO (2012) ^[2], in the world, Afghanistan is among the least educated and poorest countries with huge geographical and gender inequalities concerning having access to education. Though, toward the education of women, there are no legal obstacles. As according to Afghanistan's Islamic laws and the Constitution of the country ^[3], (Articles 43), every individual man or woman have the right to education. Furthermore, according to Article 21, "Any type of discrimination towards men or women is forbidden, and the right to education is the same for all citizens of Afghanistan; thus, no one can be deprived of this right for any reason whatsoever."

Despite the fact that in recent years, the educational sector of Afghanistan has had substantial advancements, but in terms of gender, this progress has been uneven. For instance, in elementary schools, the number of girls' enrollment is half the number of boys, and in secondary school, this number is three times less than that of boys (Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2013) ^[4]. Furthermore, According to Ministry of Education (MoE) Report (2010) ^[5], in comparison to girls, there is a better opportunity for boys to complete primary school. For every girl who completes her education, there are two boys who graduate. Furthermore, the dropout rate of girls in comparison to boys is twice of the boys.

Moreover, especially in rural areas, the enrollment rate of females in secondary school gets ten times lesser than the enrollment of boys (MoE, 2010). That is, in secondary schools, a number of girls drop out of school. This issue raises serious questions that why the enrollment of girls gets significantly low in secondary schools in comparison to their enrollment in primary schools. Surely, there are some unique factors or reasons that cause this significant increase in the dropout rate of girls.

According to Shahidul & Karim (2015) ^[6], the increase of the dropout rate is not only caused by one factor, but there are many factors that contribute to dropouts of girls. Although, many studies around the world have been carried out to examine the dynamics causing the dropout of girls, but in Afghanistan, there are only a few studies conducted to investigate the reasons behind the dropout of girls from schools. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to explore the major factors or challenges that cause girls to dropout of schools. These challenges would be explored in terms of cultural issues, economic problems, insecurity, lack of professional teachers, especially female teachers, inappropriate school environment, long distance of school, and the lack of quality education in the country, in the light of the available literature.

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY:

Afghanistan is an ancient country with 5,000 years rich history. Throughout the history, education has constantly tackled numerous challenges, especially the education of women. According to Rafi (2001)^[7], before the rise of Afghanistan as a nation-state, children, primarily boy, would get education from the then literate people, but it was never in a formal manner. It mostly occurred in mosques, houses, and legal courts. Rafi further asserts that it was not until the King Sher Ali Khan's government (1868 until 1879), that it was realized that the traditional way of education has to alter into a modernized education in accordance with the development in other areas of social life. During Sher Ali Khan's reign, two schools, Harbi School and Molki School were founded. These two schools were considered new and modern. Later, during the government of King Habibullah Khan, 1901 until 1919, another school named, Habibia School was founded and it was functional alongside with Harbi School. However, these schools were limited to only male students. After Habibullah Khan, King Amanullah Khan considered the development of education a vital priority. During his reign, education developed considerably. Many schools were founded both in Kabul, the capital of the country, and as well as in provinces. The first girls' only school called Maktab-e Mastrat (women school) was founded in 1921 in Kabul. According to Ghobar (1967)^[7], "by 1927, the public school system had expanded to 51,000 students (including only a few hundred girls) enrolled in 322 schools" (p.20). In 1923, the first Afghan Constitution called "Nezamname" was ratified, and it acknowledged that all Afghans have the right to education and made education of primary level mandatory. The participation of girls in schools was growing fast. However, regrettably, with the collapse of King Amanullah's regime, all his plans were compromised. The schools opened during his government were shut down, and girl's education was totally banned (Ghobar, 1967)^[7].

According to Rafi (2001)^[7], after 1930, boys' schools were gradually opened, but because of the cultural sensitivity of the time girls' schools stayed closed. Girls' schools did not open until in 1933, King Zahir Shah took the government. Later, in the course of the presidency of King Mohammad Daoud Khan, the developments in the educational sector were quite significant in comparison to epochs (Haqmal, 2012)^[8]. During his presidency, girls and boys were supported to access school. To make it short, the same ups and downs continued from the collapse of Mohammad Daoud's until the establishment of the interim administration in 2001.

However, in 2001 after to the collapse of Taliban, and the establishment of the interim administration, exceptional opportunities for females were provided to attend school. "The situation, concerning women's education after the fall of the Taliban renewed hope and promise" (Haqmal, 2012, p.219)^[8]. People sent their sons and daughter to schools. In 2004, with the enactment of the new Afghan Constitution, it obliged the government to provide education free of cost to all Afghan nationals up to Bachelor's degree (Official Gazette, 2012; Afghan Constitution)^[3].

However, in the last few years, the enrollment rate of girls is gradually dropping (MoE, 2010)^[5]. The efforts of donor and the central government in regards to improving education have slowed down, and the concern of increasing insecurity in the country is swiftly wearing away the accessibility to education for many girls in the country. To this end, this paper is an attempt to look at some of the key factors contributing to the dropout of girls from schools in Afghanistan in the light of available literature.

2. METHODOLOGY:

In this article, the researcher utilizes a qualitative approach making use of previously conducted studies that look into the issue of girls dropping out of schools. Most of the resources used in this study are current and conducted by national and international organizations in Afghanistan. In the meantime, researches conducted in other parts of the globe that are published in reputable journals are also used to get a better and deeper understanding of the matter in Afghanistan.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Dropout of girls from school is not only a phenomenon in Afghanistan. This phenomenon is observed in many countries around the world. A number of studies have been carried out to investigate the reasons why girls dropout of school. A few of such studies will be mentioned in this paper.

Khan, Azhar, & Shah (2011)^[9] conducted a study in rural areas of Pakistan to investigate the causes of dropouts of girls. In the study the researcher examined the perceptions of both parents and girls in order to discover the reasons of girls dropping out of school. The findings of the study reveal that the major factor that caused girls dropout of schools was poverty. Poor economic status of the families prevented the parents to send their girls to school. Furthermore, other reasons contributing to the issue as reported in the study were the lack of interest of both parents and children in overall education, the death of the parents, and household responsibilities.

In India, Rajistan Province, Kukreti & Saxena (2004)^[10] piloted a similar purpose. The study discovered that the interest of girls in school, teaching methods, poverty, early marriages, and illiterate parents contributed to the increase in the dropout rate of girls from schools. The study besides pointing out other factors, stresses that the phenomenon of early marriage was the most severe factor causing the dropout of girls.

In Bangladesh UNESCO and CDRB (2002) ^[11] conducted a study to explore the reasons why girls dropout of schools. The study reveals that the dropout of girls was attributed to two main factors: first, early marriages, and second severe poverty. The study adds that early marriages were associated with cultural factors in the country. Similarly, poverty was another factor that caused girls dropout of schools.

Looking at the literature above, the causes identified in those study are quite similar to the causes why girls dropout of schools in Afghanistan. Thus, in the following section will talk about the factors of girls dropping out of schools in Afghanistan. These factors have been divided into five major sections: 1) cultural factors, 2) insecurity, 3) poverty, 4) school level factors, and 5) overall education quality. Additionally, each section is divided into further sub-sections.

4. FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE DROPOUT OF GIRLS IN AFGHANISTAN

4.1 CULTURAL BARRIERS

4.1.1 Cultural Beliefs

Cultural barriers are the key reason that girls do not attend or dropout higher than primary school and/or that their parents do not allow them to do so. According to Jamal (2016) ^[12], cultural barriers are dominant mostly in the southern provinces of Afghanistan, where the people of those provinces are mostly Pashtuns (one of the largest ethnic groups in Afghanistan). The author adds that “there [is] consensus that gender discrimination is widespread in Pashtun communities, including in the area of education” (p. 4). They have a code called “Pashtunwali” which is a tribal code. According to Pashtunwali, the honor of men and the dignity of the family and tribe are above all other things. The code says that a woman has to stay at home, and she has certain roles and duties. For instance, some of these roles and duties are: preparing the food, childbearing and taking care of children, homemaking, getting water, and etc. There is a famous Pashtu proverb that says; “for women either the house (kor) or the Grave (for)”.

Furthermore, Jamal (2016) ^[12] study explores that in those regions men are not supposed to carry out such tasks that are related to women. Thus, if a man is seen to do so, people will ridicule and insult him by calling him different things, such as, “women’s puppet.” Therefore they believe that if a girl is to go to school, she would have schools assignments to do, and then she can’t do the house chores. Moreover, it is considered a shame to send girls to schools beyond primary school. A study conducted by AREU (2013) ^[4] reveals the people believe that if there girls are admitted in school, the distress of being shamed by neighbors and also extended relatives is widespread. They say that people would talk bad things about them, which is humiliating for the family members. However, it is important to mention that Pashtunwali is mostly followed by those Pashtuns who live in rural areas, not by many of those living in urban areas.

4.1.2 Religion

A mistaken interpretation of religious beliefs is another major factor contributing to not attending or dropout of girls (Jamal, 2016; Shayan, 2015; Mashriqi, 2016) ^{[12] [13] [14]}. They reveal that there are some people who misinterpret the religious, Islamic beliefs, and state that there is no place for the education of women in Islam. “Many parents fear that their daughters will become alienated from traditional lifestyles and values, or that they will not make good wives and mothers if they go to school” (UNESCO, 2012, as cited in Shayan, 2015, p. 281) ^[13]. Furthermore, the religious leaders in the mosques (Mullas) have a great influence on people and community. Often they would speak against the education of females, and there are many people who tend to believe them without thinking or finding the answers themselves. However, the holy religion of Islam doesn’t teach us against the education of females. There are numerous Hadiths that support the education of both males and females. For instance, it is narrated that Anas bin Mâlik said: The Messenger of Allah said: “Seeking knowledge is a duty upon every Muslim.” (Sunan Ibn e Majah, Book of Sunnah, Hadith no 224).

4.1.3 Early or Forced Marriages

Early or forced marriage is one of the key reasons for the dropout of girls from school. Regrettably, early and forced marriages are very common in Afghanistan. Such marriages have serious negative impact on the females’ lives, for instance, deprivation to access schooling. In the meantime, it is noteworthy that in early marriages economics often play a significant role, and this is a practice that is affected by a complex mix of social and cultural aspects (Haqmal, 2012) ^[8]. For instance, when it comes to the marriage of girls, there are people who wed their girl to a much older man than her and see the marriage as a source of revenue in the form of a bride price. Though there is “Maher” in Islam, but as the Prophet instructs Muslims, and says that the best marriage is the one that has the lowest Maher. Nonetheless, in Afghanistan, it is more like selling their girls in return for a large sum of money. After marriage “they are not allowed to attend school because of their domestic responsibilities and motherhood” (Shayan, 2015, p. 281) ^[13]. The obstacles presented by motherhood are for example, in schools, there are no facilities where they can keep their babies; thus they would prefer not to go to school (Haqmal, 2012) ^[8]. The general perception of the family is that it is enough for girls to only learn the basics and be able to read and write; beyond that, it is not necessary.

4.2 INSECURITY IN THE COUNTRY

Perhaps the biggest challenge toward the education and dropout of girls from schools is the insecurity problem in the country. Afghanistan is a war-torn country, which has been suffering from civil war for the last three and a half decades. This long war has wearied away access to fundamental services like education. According to Jackson (2001) ^[15], in her study, the participants expressed that they wanted to send their daughter to schools; however, due to the bombing and shootings they can not send them to school.

The insurgents do not want girls to peruse education any higher than primary school. Insurgents mainly target female schools, female students, and female teachers. There are numerous reports that Taliban in the attempt to close girls' schools have attacked the school directly, released gas into the air, poisoned drinking water, and threatened governmental employees and teachers via distributing threatening letters (night letters) (Shayan, 2015) ^[13]. Consequently, it has had some alarming consequence, such as teachers quitting their jobs, and parents holding their youngsters home due to the distress for their welfare.

4.2.1 Harassment

According to Mashriqi (2016), threats on the way to or from school are another obstacle toward the education of females. According to Haqmal (2012) ^[8] while some girls are walking toward their school, on the way men or boys would harass them; consequently, the families will not allow their girls to go to schools. In other cases, usually, when a girl goes to school, she is accompanied by one of her family member, such as her brother or father. Furthermore, those women who attend school or university at night are worried of commuting back to their homes since while waiting for a car along the road, many vulgar drivers would stop close to them and harass them by asking them to get in the car. Thus, most of these girls take these negative comments seriously and decide not to go to school or university anymore.

4.3 POVERTY

4.3.1 Financial need of the Family

As mentioned earlier, Afghanistan is a war-torn country. Due to the long civil war, many families have lost those in charge for providing financial support to their family. Hence, when there is no one to support the family, the children have to stop attending schools and start working in order to find a means of income. Jackson (2001) ^[15] reveals that majority of the participant in her study stated poverty as the main contributor to the dropout of girls from school. When it comes to girls in poor families, they would force their girls to work on the farms with the other family members, which would limit them from attending school. Though education up to bachelor level in Afghanistan is free of charge, but there are families who cannot afford the additional expenses, for example, school uniform, stationery, pocket money, and sometimes transportation expenses lead to the dropout of girls from schools.

4.3.2 Parents Preference toward Boys

According to Shahidul & Karim (2015) ^[6], the investment of parents in their children's welfare is frequently gender biased. According to UNESCO (2012) ^[2], in the world, Afghanistan is among the least educated and poorest countries with huge geographical and gender inequalities concerning having access to education. In many regions of the country, parents prefer to invest on their boy rather than their girls to attend school. Jamal (2016) ^[12], expresses that in his study, most of the poor families believed that spending on their girls is not a good investment. Parents argue that sooner or later, girls will marry and would be obliged to follow the customs and commands of their husband's families. On the other hand, boys will stay with the family and support the family.

4.4 SCHOOL-LEVEL FACTORS

4.4.1 School Distance

Though many schools have been established around the country, but still there are many students who have to travel a long distance to get to school. According to Jackson (2011) ^[15], distance is seen as a major factor when girls reach adolescence. When girls reach adolescence and travel a long way to get to school, according to the cultural norms, such doings are considered to dishonor or shame the families. Furthermore, on the way, they would also be verbally or sexually harassed. As Haqmal (2012) ^[8] study reveals, people especially in the rural areas argue that the local government in their region is weak and the distance to school is quite a lot. Thus, parents believe that it is not good for grown-up girls to be seen traveling that far a distance.

4.4.2 Inadequate Infrastructure

In a school, facilities, such as building, clean drinkable water, desks, chairs, and restrooms are important. Jamal (2016) ^[12] found out that many female participants in the study stressed that there are inadequate facilities in their schools. For instance, there is no clean drinkable water, no furniture, and restrooms. Lacks of such essential facilities demotivates the student and ultimately result in their dropout from school. There are many provinces where

schools do not have a building. Thus, the females and their families argue if there is no wall or proper facilities such as toilet, parents would much rather not send their girls to school. Moreover, in the absence of school building or facilities will make girls feel at risk and stop them from craving to go to school. These obstacles are particularly strong in the conflict-affected regions of the country.

4.4.3 Shortage of Female Teachers

Though the number of female teachers has increased significantly in the urban areas, but in rural areas, there are very few female teachers at schools. In Afghanistan, female teachers constitute only 1%, 3 %, and 4 % in the provinces of Khost, Uruzgan, and Paktika (MoE, 2010) ^[5]. This shortage is mostly due to the fact that the participation of girls in education is low. So, as a result of a shortage of female teacher, the government hires male teachers to teach in girls' schools. However, this is not acceptable for the families of females to study under a male teacher.

4.4.4 Teacher attitudes toward students

Inappropriate treatment by teachers, for instance, scolding, battering, and bad language has destructive effects on student psyche and creates psychic complexes in students Haqmal (2012) ^[8]. As Keçici, Beyhan, & Ektem (2013) ^[16] mention that such behaviors lead to negative consequences on learning and behavior of students and decrease total self-confidence and learning skills of the students. Consequently, teachers' use of verbal abuse is an issue that leads to absenteeism and also dropouts. As a result, many girls dropped out of school due to the unsuitable conduct of the teachers.

4.5 QUALITY OF EDUCATION AND QUALIFIED TEACHERS

Since the fall of Taliban in 2001, numerous schools have been built and many teachers are hired all over the country. However, the quality of education provided in those schools is often questioned. According to Jackson (2011) ^[15], in her study, the participants expressed that the low quality of education and lack of qualified teachers contributed to the dropout of girls from school. Though the Ministry of Education requires the teacher to have at least a bachelor degree to teach at the school, yet this requirement is not put into practice. "The growing numbers of dissatisfied and disappointed students and parents erode support for education as a national priority; uneven access and inequitable allocation of scarce resources underscore the populace's worst fears about government institutions" (Jackson, 2011, p. 20) ^[15]. Consequently, many families do not wish to send their girls to school because they believe that despite all the problems they might face, it would be a waste of time; instead, they could help in the household affairs.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study explores some major factors such as cultural, economic, school, and social factors affecting the dropout of girls in Afghanistan. Though it is true that these factors also influence the dropout of boys but they significantly affect girls. These particular factors create lower educational chances for girls overall. As the study puts forward, in Afghanistan many traditional, cultural, and inaccurate religious beliefs hinder the education of girls. Some traditional cultural practices and inaccurate beliefs of a specific religion or community immensely create obstructions to girls' education, particularly in the male-dominated settings.

As this study explores, some people in the country believe that women should only be confined to the four walls of the house and not allowed outside since people in that particular society might talk ill about them. This outlook has had a great influence on the education of girls. For a country to make progress, equal participation of males and females is necessary. Moreover, economic factor is another major barrier toward the education of girls in the country. Those families with a low income find it quite challenging to tolerate the costs of their daughters' education. Additionally, some parents tend to deal with the issue of education in a biased manner. They prefer their boys to get education in comparison to girls since their sons' will support the family someday. A number of school factors mostly attributed to lack of facilities available in schools such as sanitation facilities, quality of education, and qualified female teachers, also influence the dropout rate of girls from school. Though most of these factors are allied with school resources but in other cases, an unequal distribution of school resources is also evidently linked to the geographical location of schools. Hence, schools in urban regions facilitate more for girls compared to schools in rural regions. This uneven distribution of resources is also because of corruption in the government. The government official report of schools that actually do not exist and the funds allocated to those schools are embezzled.

6. RECOMMENDATION:

In light of the discussion above, the study suggests a few profitable recommendations that the government could implement to improve the education of girls in the country.

First, the government should launch a vast public awareness campaign in the country, to inform the people of the importance of girls' education and their right to education. Since the local religious leaders in the country have a significant influence on the people, they should be called for to address the issue at least on Fridays before the Friday

prayer. Furthermore, parents must be enlightened about their wrong notion regarding the investment on girls' education.

Second, the government must establish partnerships with NGOs and donors to address the poverty-education issues, and with the help of these partnerships a suitable environment, where at least the necessary facilities, such as classrooms, clean water supply, and gender sensitive facilities, would be available for the education of girls. Furthermore, especially in rural areas, accessibility to education should be enhanced, so that the parents, without worrying for the safety of their girls, could send their girls to nearby schools.

Third, though according to the Education Law of the country, education up to primary level is compulsory and up to Bachelor level free of cost, yet scores of children are not enrolled in schools. Only the concession of school fee is not enough for students, especially girls. Therefore, the government should also attempt to provide lunch and transportation facilities or allowances for them.

Finally, so as to cater to the quality of the education, the government should seriously implement the policy that no teacher should be hired to teach in school unless they have at least a bachelor degree. Implementing these recommendations may probably have a positive influence on the condition of girls' education in the country.

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