

**Forum:** Economic and Social Council

**Issue:** Access to Education for Women and Children in Afghanistan

**Student Officers:** Sadie Rittman and Ayala Ples

**Position:** Chairs of the Economic and Social Council

## **Introduction**

“Education is a fundamental right for every human being. It fosters dignity, freedom and is vital if we are to enable Afghanistan to mobilize all the resources of its people”

(Quoted by Mr. Eide, head of the UN assistance mission in Afghanistan for the 'education for all' millennium development goals).

There are two different systems of education in Afghanistan. The older religious schooling system is taught by Mullahs in the local mosques, teaching the religious content of the Koran, reading, writing and arithmetic. Another system of education was introduced in 1964, when the new constitution under King Zahir Shah provided free and compulsory western style education to all levels. During this time period, prior to Afghanistan's civil war, many universities and colleges were established, the secondary school system was expanded and approximately half the population of Afghanistan under the age of 12 was given access to primary education.

However, a civil war ending the king's rule erupted in 1973 by a coup followed by a communist counter-coup. Eventually the Afghan capital, Kabul, fell to a hardline Pakistani sponsored movement called the Taliban in 1996. The Taliban regime disbelieved in gender equality and banned education for females. In addition, they ensured that the main source of education was from the Mosque schools, the first system of education mentioned above, rather than the second system introduced by King Zahir Shah. Subsequently, terrorist attacks in New York City in September of 2001 led to the defeat of the Taliban by the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance Military action due to the Taliban's sheltering of Osama Bin Laden, the leader of the terrorist attacks.

The UN sponsored political reconstruction included the adoption of a new democratic constitution. Hamid Karzai – the new president of Afghanistan was given substantial international aid to restore the nation's educational system. By 2003, due to a collaboration between the government and UNICEF, 7,000 schools were in operation in 20 of the 34 provinces of Afghanistan, and 27,000 teachers were teaching 4.2 million children. However, 2003 estimates report that a high percentage of Afghans, 57% of men and 86% of women, were illiterate.

Although approximately 4.2 million children are being educated, 60% of these students must study in tents or similar unprotected structures. This is a major issue due to the presence of regular Taliban attacks upon schools; in 2009 there was a total of 150 schools that were destroyed by Taliban attacks. Also, of the 4.2 million students it has been reported that only 1.2 million are female. This is only 28.6% of the students. The cause of this relatively low percentage is due to Taliban ideas of gender inequality, parental discomfort in sending female children to learn in unstable environments (tents, etc.),

disapproval of daughters being taught by male teachers and the early marital age which takes females away from education.

## **Key Terms Defined**

### **Coup**

A sudden, violent and illegal seizure of power from a government.

### **Fundamentalism**

The interpretation of every word in the sacred texts as the literal truth.

### **Gender inequality**

Disparity between individuals due to gender.

### **Illiteracy**

the inability to read or write.

### **Literacy rate**

The proportion of the population aged over 15 who can read and write.

### **Millennium development goal: education for all**

This is the second of eight millennium development goals set out by the United Nations to be achieved by 2015. The target of the goal regarding universal education is 'to ensure that by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling'.

### **Mosque**

A Muslim place of worship.

### **Mullah**

A muslim learned in Islamic theology and sacred law.

### **Qur'an/ Koran**

The islamic sacred book, believed to be the word of God. There are 114 units of varying length which address all aspects of human existence, including social organization and legislation.

### **Taliban**

A fundamentalist Islamic military force that governed Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001.

## **General Overview**

Afghanistan is a lesser economically developed country in the Middle East/Middle Asia, with a ranking of the 4<sup>th</sup> largest death rate in the world. This indicates that the country has limited funding available to be allocated towards educational purposes. 42.9% of the

population is aged below 15 years old, and therefore should be enrolled in primary and secondary education in accordance with the millennium development goal that aims to provide primary education for all. Yet, as explained in the introduction, educational opportunities for children, especially females, is lacking. The thirty years of civil war that Afghanistan experienced severely undermined the country's educational provisions, putting Afghanistan among the world's lowest ranked in terms of educational attainment at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels with approximately 5 million children receiving no form of schooling. This problem is emphasized by the fact that only 24% of Afghanistan's population is located in urban areas, where there would be more schooling opportunities. There is also much gender-based disparity with regards to education in Afghanistan. Taking this into account, the school years expectancy in Afghanistan is an average of eight years. However, the school years expectancy for females is only four years, meaning that the average highest level of education for females is that up to grade 4.

### **Females and education**

During the years of Taliban rule in Afghanistan, education in schools for females was completely abolished. This was due to their fundamentalist Islamic views, where women are seen as inferior to men and have less rights and importance in society. To quote the Quran, "Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women). So good women are the obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah hath guarded." Subsequent to the Taliban losing power in 2001, the new president aimed to restore education in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, only approximately 28.6% of students attending schools are female, and 86% of females remain illiterate. The primary school completion rate is a shockingly low 13%. Despite the fact that the Taliban no longer controls the rule of Afghanistan, there are still many obstructions which face females with regards to their education. Firstly, due to Islamic ideas and tradition, many families object to send their daughters to be educated by male teachers. This is an issue because it means that schools for females and males would potentially have to be segregated and there is a disparity of sufficiently educated female teachers as females only account for approximately one quarter of Afghan teachers. In addition, many parents disapprove of the poor quality of schooling environments, as many schools are located in tents or other unstable structures. Lastly, many female students drop out significantly early from school to be married, stunting their educational development. Reports claim that the main factors dividing education female children are accessibility and security, other reasons including child labor, poverty and child marriage.

### **Taliban threat to schools**

Despite the new democratic government, Taliban threats remain in Afghanistan, causing much instability, particularly in the South and East of the country. The way in which the Taliban protests the government is often in the form of violent terrorist attacks. Many of these attacks are directed at schools due to the Taliban's beliefs that children should attend religious mosque schools, while females should attend none at all.

## Higher education

Recently, the government of Afghanistan has taken great leaps towards the improvement of tertiary education. Since the democratic president's inauguration, nineteen higher education institutions have reopened and student enrollment has increased drastically, from 4,000 students in 2001 to 37,000 in 2007. Nevertheless, there is a critical lack of professionals available for an effective teaching in these educational institutions plus the issues of (often) inadequate infrastructure, lack of computer or technology facilities and limited budgets. In addition, due to fundamentalist ideals, though many families may be open to primary education for females, significantly fewer are willing to provide tertiary education for them, meaning sending them to university. See the table below, citing figures recorded in 2007:

Number of higher institutions	19		
	Male	Female	Total
Number of students	26,398	7,668	34,066
Number of lecturers	1,795	302	2,097

Source: Ministry of higher education, Afghanistan.

\*Note the large difference between female and male students and lecturers as well as the large ratio of students to lecturers.

## Major Parties Involved and Their Views

### UNICEF

This is the United Nations children's fund. It aims to provide health, education, equality and protection for all youths around the world. They have been working in Afghanistan to improve the quality and accessibility of primary, secondary and tertiary education in the country. UNICEF supports Afghanistan's government in efforts to direct children to schools, while also distributing "school-in-a-box" which includes pens, textbooks and teaching instructions to provide education in a more flexible manner. UNICEF also addresses the issue of the lack of female teachers by providing female literacy programs in hopes to create more female teachers.

### UNGEI

This is the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative. The organization works to improve the quality and accessibility of education for females worldwide, and therefore sees much importance in its role in Afghanistan. UNGEI launched the 'Afghanistan Girls' Education' initiative in March 2007. This initiative works to strengthen political commitment to improve girls' education through lobbying, function as an information resource of girls' education in Afghanistan, implement activities to increase the enrollment and retention of girls in schools, strengthen the protection of schools and provide incentives for female teachers.

## **USA**

The USA has had major involvement in reopening educational opportunities for children in Afghanistan following the collapse of the Taliban regime. As stated by the American government, the USA, with the support of NATO, helps Afghans to regain the resources and capacity to take charge of their own future and development, including the development of a stable and accessible education. The United States Agency for International Development has repaired over 680 schools in Afghanistan and printed 60 million textbooks. They have also enrolled over 170,000 students into an 'accelerated learning' program, over half of these students being girls, meaning that the USA has a strong initiative in promoting gender equality in education in Afghanistan.

## **Taliban**

The Taliban, a fundamentalist military force, had control of Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, prior to the establishment of the current democratic government. The Taliban viewed education as solely appropriate for males, and therefore banned females from attending schools. They believed that male education should be traditional and religion based, and therefore promoted mosque schools. It is due to the Taliban that the quality of education is so poor in Afghanistan. Though the Taliban is no longer in power, they remain a major threat to schools in Afghanistan. They continue to discourage females from attending schools and trigger a high amount of violent and dangerous attacks upon schools through out the country as an action based upon their views and ideas of education.

## **Japan**

Japan is a nation with a strong economy and a formidable commitment to promoting children's rights. There has been much Japanese involvement in Afghanistan with regard to the provision of adequate education in the country, joining Japan with USA in the ranks of major donors to education initiatives in Afghanistan. As an example, Japan has recently donated 10.8 million dollars for education programs for displaced children returning to their village and refugee children returning to Afghanistan. This generous donation was crucial to the development of quality education in Afghanistan.

## **The Government of Afghanistan (GoA)**

The new democratic government of Afghanistan has provided radical changes following the overthrow of the Taliban regime. For example, they have reopened universities, schools and have spread awareness on the importance and accessibility of education in the nation. Under this government, 4.2 million Afghan children now attend schools, which is a major increase from the Taliban years. The GoA continues to work with organizations such as UNICEF, as well as other governments such as the USA and Japan, to work towards improving the quality, accessibility and awareness of education in Afghanistan. However, because the government is quite poor, there is a lack of funding for education, which remains an issue that Afghanistan must face.

## Timeline of Events

<i>Year</i>	<i>Event</i>
1964	King Zahir Shah constructed a constitution that provided compulsory and free education to children of all levels.
1973 - 1996	Civil war in Afghanistan had drastic effects on the smooth running of education.
1996	The Taliban took control of Afghanistan and banned females from attending any form of schooling and established mosque schools as the main form of education.
2000	Millennium development goal number 2 (achieve universal primary education for all) established by the UN, aimed to be met by 2015
2001	Defeat of the Taliban by anti-Taliban Northern Alliance Military action. UN sponsored political reconstruction. Hamid Karzai became the new democratic president of Afghanistan.
2003	7,000 schools were in operation in 20 of the 34 provinces of Afghanistan, and 27,000 teachers were teaching 4.2 million children.
2007	60% of students studying in tents or other unprotected structures Only one quarter of Afghan teachers are women
2009	Over 150 schools destroyed by Taliban attacks (within the year)
2010	2.5 million girls in school of the 5 million children not attending school, most are girls

## UN Involvement

The United Nations has been constantly involved in Afghanistan throughout the past few decades. Beyond the issued UN resolutions (which are listed below), the UN's main role is proving humanitarian aid to the hard hit population and especially to the young people who make up most of the population.

### The 1980s

Early in 1980, the Security Council met to consider a response to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, but a draft resolution condemning it was not passed, due to the negative vote of the USSR.

### The 1990s.

In 1991, responsibility for Operation Salam - the UN's emergency relief programme for Afghanistan - was taken over by the Secretary-General's Personal Representative at the time, Benon Sevan. In that year, WFP provided 60,000 metric tons of food to needy Afghans, while FAO provided 6,800 tons of seed and more than half a million fruit and poplar saplings.

## **2000 and beyond**

The conflict in Afghanistan continued unabated until the end of 2001. Throughout this period, the international aid community, including the United Nations, tried with varying levels of success to ensure that the victims of the war and turmoil - ordinary Afghans trying to live their lives - received at least the minimum needed for survival. Political and security problems, in the absence of an effective government, caused frequent interruptions in the flow of humanitarian assistance, and various crises required the temporary departure of UN and non-governmental aid workers.

United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) is a political mission established at the request of the Government to assist it and the people of Afghanistan in laying the foundations for sustainable peace and development. UNAMA activities focus in Political affairs, Relief, Recovery and Reconstruction and Human Rights. UNAMA recently celebrated the International Literacy Day; following is the Secretary-General's message concerning this day: "This year's observance of International Literacy Day highlights the central role of literacy in the empowerment of women." Literacy transforms the lives of women, their families, communities and societies. Improving Afghanistan's literacy is a key development goal for the country, which has only 26% literacy among over 15-year-olds and only 12% among girls and women over 15 years.

UNESCO and UN-Habitat work to support the Government of Afghanistan in tackling the country's literacy problem, whose Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE) sets the national framework for this task. It is essential that everyone working to improve literacy in Afghanistan reach out to communities that are under-served, vulnerable to exclusion and who are living in extreme poverty.

### **UN resolutions on Human rights in Afghanistan:**

Resolution 40/137 of 13 December 1985	Resolution 48/152 of 20 December 1993
Resolution 41/158 of 4 December 1986	Resolution 49/207 of 23 December 1994
Resolution 42/135 of 7 December 1987	Resolution 50/189 of 22 December 1995
Resolution 43/139 of 8 December 1988	Resolution 51/108 of 12 December 1996
Resolution 44/161 of 15 December 1989	Resolution 52/145 of 12 December 1997
Resolution 45/174 of 18 December 1990	Resolution 53/165 of 9 December 1998
Resolution 46/136 of 17 December 1991	Resolution 54/185 of 17 December 1999

Resolution 47/141 of 18 December 1992	Resolution 55/119 of 4 December 2000
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## Possible Solutions

The Afghan Government's national plans aim to reduce the rate of illiteracy by 50 % by 2015. This target is clearly set by the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS), National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) and the National Literacy Action Plan. UNESCO and UN-Habitat programmes give practical support to achieving this goal through UNESCO's Enhancement of Literacy in Afghanistan Programme (ELA) and UN-Habitat's Learning for Community Empowerment Programme (LCEP-2). Equally important is to increase a worldwide awareness and keep open channels of communication.

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