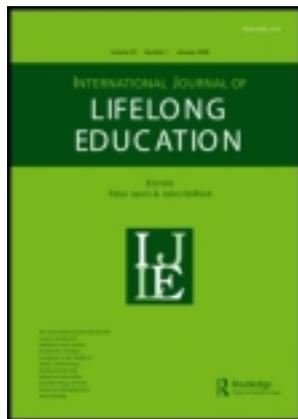


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# A progress report on women's education in post-Taliban Afghanistan

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This article examines the relative progress and major setbacks in the education of Afghan women from the end of the Taliban regime until the present, focusing on government and NGO reconstruction efforts. It is argued that these projects promote the agendas of the state and of NGOs over the needs of women and girls. The adversities arising from recent waves of violence affect the female population most acutely. Just when the education sector was making tentative progress, with some girls' schools being built and operating, the current security realities pose major hurdles to post-conflict reconstruction and rebuilding. This is the environment in which Afghan women continue to struggle against the misogynist and fanatically militant elements that have threatened any areas of progress within the rebuilding of the country. As such, security and a reorientation of state and NGO policies are essential preconditions for women's educational attainment.

## Introduction

Since the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan as a result of the October 2001 US campaign, there has been much boasting and self-praise by the Bush administration about progress in the area of Afghan women's education. In reality, many governmental and non-governmental institutions, along with commercial industries, have capitalized on the post-war reconstruction in order to promote their own respective agendas, a substantial component of which consists of lucrative deals as well as image enhancement of certain individuals and organizations. How have these agendas translated into the facilitation of women's education in Afghanistan? This study examines the impact of the post-Taliban institutional structures in Afghanistan and how they contribute to, or impede, the rebuilding process of the education sector, specifically as this process affects girls and women.

Although there has been a little progress, the impediments to women's education in the post-Taliban era have been overwhelming and formidable, and indeed have involved great dangers for practitioners and students. Thus, while many Western-based governments, institutions, and industries congratulate themselves on how effectively they have contributed to post-war reconstruction in Afghanistan, and in particular to women's literacy and education, the realities on the ground have been far from promising.

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Very few non-governmental organizations (NGOs), government-sponsored development projects, and reconstruction plans bear any credibility, and even fewer have substantive results to boast of. This article analyses the operations of post-Taliban NGOs, the government agendas of the major players in the 2001 US-led campaign, and post-conflict donors, and examines how these have affected the education sector in Afghanistan. Since the US led the campaign in Afghanistan, this paper focuses primarily on the US and the Bush administration; White House claims of major progress in women's education in the post-Taliban era are here contested. The impediments to women's education, primarily those related to security issues are highlighted because overall, Afghanistan's rebuilding process must focus on security and stability in order to generate the environment in which reconstruction can occur. As Barnett Rubin, who recently travelled to Afghanistan, eloquently describes it: 'If the United States wants to succeed in the war on terrorism, it must focus its resources and its attention on securing and stabilizing Afghanistan' (Rubin 2007).

An extremely frustrating aspect of writing this paper has been my effort to discover the actual activities of the Afghanistan educational ministry and/or its activities in relation to NGOs. For example, are there partnerships between NGOs and the ministry? I have tried for over a year to get direct information from contacts in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Afghan Embassy in Washington, DC, and unfortunately I have not received any feedback or co-operation from any of these contacts and potential resources. Some of them replied saying that they would answer, but then never did so, and when I tried to follow up with them they did not respond.

### **NGOs, governments and post-conflict reconstruction**

Government claims in the form of White House press releases have been grandiose concerning the progress made in democratizing and rebuilding Afghanistan. However, their descriptions have been far from the reality. According to Barnett Rubin:

The Bush administration entered Afghanistan determined to strike al Qaeda, unseat the Taliban, and then move on, providing only basic humanitarian aid and support for a new Afghan army... US policy-makers have misjudged Afghanistan, misjudged Pakistan, and, most of all, misjudged their own capacity to carry out major strategic change on the cheap.

Washington's appeasement of Pakistan, diversion of resources to Iraq, and perpetual underinvestment in Afghanistan—which gets less aid per capita than any other state with a recent postconflict rebuilding effort—have fueled [the] suspicion... that Afghanistan is not a high priority for the United States—and that the Taliban are winning as a result. (Rubin 2007)

Afghanistan is second only to sub-Saharan Africa in terms of measures required for poverty alleviation, and according to the US Institute of Peace, reconstruction aid to Afghanistan soon after the fall of the Taliban was only USD \$67 a year per Afghan, which is significantly less than what the IMF states was allocated to Bosnia (\$249) and East Timor (\$256) (Moreau et al. 2006). Although international donor conferences have seen pledges as high as \$15 billion, actual transfer of funds has

amounted to far less (Moreau et al. 2006). In a previous article, I argued for a massive increase in the amount of aid to be distributed, and that such aid needs to be distributed at once and not over time (Alvi-Aziz 2003). However, the outcome to date has not even achieved adequate provision of aid funding. Given this context, it is no surprise that in November of 2006 the UN and the Afghan government reported that growth 'is still not sufficient to generate in a relatively short time the large numbers of new jobs necessary to substantially reduce poverty or overcome widespread popular disaffection' (Rubin 2007).

Moreover, NGOs are often pressured to comply with government policies in relation to the reporting of progress on the ground. In at least one extreme case, a USAID-supported NGO had their report about internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Iraq rejected because it did not support government policy (Garcia Del Soto 2006). Such interference is a problem which many NGOs face. In a similar vein, governments at times interfere with humanitarian aid efforts. I was told by US soldiers serving in Afghanistan that during the February 2006 earthquake, the Musharraf government in Pakistan allegedly refused to allow US military humanitarian aid in Afghanistan to enter Pakistan's air space. Such assistance from the US would have made the Pakistani regime look bad.

The general triumphal tone of the US government is exemplified in a White House press release of 19 May 2003 entitled 'Rebuilding Afghanistan', claiming the following points:

- 'Coalition Partners have created an environment of stability and success'.
- 'The US has contributed over \$900 million in assistance to the people of Afghanistan since 2001'.
- 'Afghanistan has made great strides in revitalizing the education system. Recent successes include: four million children are now enrolled in school; six students completed the first module of a six-month radio journalism program offered by Radio Free Europe/Radio Free Liberty in Kabul; eleven men and six women graduated from the University of Kabul's new Cisco Networking Academy; Afghan staff were hired and trained to work at Radio Arman, Afghanistan's new independent radio station'. (White House 2003)

Meanwhile, UNICEF reports that the secondary school enrolment ratio for girls is only 5 per cent (2007, figures are for 2000–2005). According to the *CIA World Fact Book*, the total Afghan population as of March 2006 was 31 million. Of this population, females aged 0–14 numbered 6.7 million, with males of the same age range numbering seven million. A January 2004 CBC news report indicated that: 'Only three percent of all Afghanistan's girls have enrolled and 39 percent of its boys' (Off 2004). Three per cent of 6.7 million girls is about 201,000, and 39 per cent of 7 million boys is about 2,730,000. The White House's claim that '4 million children are now enrolled in school' does not include a specification of the age groups that are being tallied, but even so this is a miscalculation and an exaggeration, to say the least. Based on the calculations above, the total (for ages 0–14) is 2,931,000. It is not four million.

Immediately after the fall of the Taliban regime, the priority in 'reconstruction' efforts was makeup, hair salons, and beauty, supplied by top Western cosmetic multinational corporations like Revlon, L'Oreal, Clairol, and Vogue in an effort to implant free market capitalism in post-Taliban Afghanistan. The NGO Beauty without Borders as one example has offered training courses in the beauty salon

business. These have helped train Afghan women to earn a living, but they have also introduced Western hyper-capitalism and consumption into impoverished Afghan society. Consider that a Coca-Cola bottling factory has opened in Afghanistan, but that most Afghans cannot afford even one bottle of Coke (on the latter, see Rubin 2007).

Many NGOs operating in Afghanistan are being criticized because, out of the 330 to 350 foreign NGOs operating in the country (with the number proliferating monthly), some have workers who live very lavishly. The statement of one senior journalist posted in Kabul in 2003 is typical: 'A look at their offices and their houses, the way they are furnished, the air-conditioned cars they drive, all add to the resentment of the people, as it all comes out of the aid being pumped into the country' (cited in Herold 2004). Moreover, under Hamid Karzai's administration, numerous government ministers are siphoning off money for personal aggrandizement. And while ministers are building opulent mansions with swimming pools, according to the *Economist* (2004), 'The marble mansions of drug-dealers have mushroomed among the mud-brick houses'. Barnett Rubin describes the problem in the following terms:

While foreigners and wealthy Afghans power air conditioners, hot-water heaters, computers, and satellite televisions with private generators, average Kabulis suffered a summer without fans and face a winter without heaters. Kabul got through the past two winters with generators powered by diesel fuel purchased by the United States; this year the United States made no such allocation.

In 2005 and 2006, the government spent only 44 per cent of the money it received for development projects. Meanwhile, according to the Ministry of Finance, donor countries spent about \$500 million on poorly designed and uncoordinated technical assistance.

Washington must double the resources it devotes to Afghanistan. Major needs include accelerated road building, the purchase of diesel for immediate power production, the expansion of cross-border electricity purchases, investment in water projects to improve the productivity of agriculture, the development of infrastructure for mineral exploitation, and a massive program of skill building for the public and private sectors. (Rubin 2007)

Such developments have undermined the reconstruction process as well as the allocation of scarce resources to the education system. There are literally hundreds of NGOs and development projects directly and indirectly related to education (including infrastructure development, without which the education system cannot function). Determining a total number is a task in itself, as more are proliferating as I write. Many are functioning simply as image promoters—that is, are more concerned with their own image than with the altruistic work of furthering women's education.

By way of example, six NGOs have been working in collaboration with the US Fund for UNICEF for girls' education projects in Afghanistan. These are:

- The Delta Kappa Gamma Society, which helps fund the UNICEF Teacher Training Program.

- Developments in Literacy, that helps eradicate illiteracy.
- Girls Learn International, Inc, helping middle and high school girls in urban, suburban, and rural communities.
- Girl Scouts of the USA, which provides scouting for young girls in order to promote values, social conscience, and self-esteem.
- Women's National Book Association, promoting reading and literacy.
- Westchester Women's Bar Association, promoting justice for all.

And still, according to UNICEF, the demand for education is very high, and this has placed 'enormous pressures on school systems for physical access, school supplies, and the shortage of qualified teachers' (Afghan Education Alliance 2006). There remains a disconnect between life-wide learning and other informal education on the one hand, and the formal primary and secondary sectors on the other, which require a complete overhaul. In the pre-Taliban past, a majority of teachers were women (Alvi-Aziz 2003: 14), but under the Taliban most education occurred in male-run *madrassas*—clerical institutions. During this period, women (including teachers) and girls were pulled and/or banned from schools, and males, educated in the *madrassas*, were educated in fundamentalist principles in which patriarchal values and rote memorization were emphasized over analytic skills. Worse, recent figures after US occupation show a *decrease* in the percentage of female teachers, from 24 per cent in 2000 to 22 in 2004 (World Bank 2007c). Such an educational reality has tremendous implications for the freedoms and rights of women (see Alvi-Aziz 2003: 26–27).

It is not simply quantity that is needed for girls' schools in Afghanistan—in terms of curricula, textbooks, teachers and teaching skills, technology, health education, and human rights education—but also *quality*. Consider these sobering statistics: overall literacy for 2007 for those aged 15 or higher is 29 per cent, with a further breakdown between males and females aged 15 to 24 in 2004 as 50.8 and 18.4 per cent respectively (World Bank 2007c)—and primary enrolment figures are not provided (World Bank 2007a). Overall Afghan female literacy is only 3 to 4 per cent, while male literacy is a mere 28 per cent (see Alvi-Aziz 2003: 15, citing US Congress figures). Another World Bank instrument reporting the duration of primary education in years shows a decrease from 1985's 8 per cent to 6 per cent in 2005 (World Bank 2007b). The same report shows an 'improvement' in the primary completion rate from 25.3 per cent in 1995 to 32.3 per cent in 2005, but tertiary enrolment has *decreased* from 2 per cent in 1990 to 1.1 per cent in 2005. The gross enrolment ratio in primary and secondary schooling according to the gender parity index (GPI) has increased by *only one percentage point*, from 0.5 in 1985 to 0.6 in 2005 (World Bank 2007b). With all this in mind, it is clear that the education system in Afghanistan, and within its refugee population, may require decades for improvement to occur. Life-wide education is a particular challenge, since the educational basis upon which to build is so weak.

The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) has been the exception to the self-aggrandizing approach of the capitalistic NGOs and has remained steadfastly committed to helping the post-war reconstruction process, and particularly women, in Afghanistan and in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region. Against tremendous odds, RAWA ran underground 'home-based' schools and literacy courses during the Taliban era. A June 2001 statement from RAWA remarked that:

The Taliban are the champions of illiteracy and [are the] highest incarnations of ignorant arrogance. RAWA believes that despite manifold impediments and meager resources, one of its duties is to carry the torch of literacy and knowledge among women in defiance of the Taliban and enlightenment-hating fundamentalists. All the classes are run secretly in some cities. (RAWA 2001)

RAWA has been running 15 primary and secondary schools for refugee boys and girls and many literacy courses for women in Pakistan. The organization has started hundreds of literacy courses for Afghan girls and women in all twelve provinces in Afghanistan and in refugee camps in Pakistan (RAWA 2007). Thus, one must not forget that the substantial refugee populations also need literacy skills and schooling. RAWA has provided these and other vital services for both refugee and settled populations.

One of the very active and seemingly effective non-profit organizations working for Afghanistan's reconstruction is the Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan (W4WAfghan), which operates with various project partners. For example, W4WAfghan works together with:

- Afghan Women's Resource Center (AWRC): This organization is 'designed to improve Afghan women's right to security, equal access to education and employment' (Reicher 2003). Some of the projects involve literacy and basic health services training.
- PARSA: This organization mainly works with the needy, especially widows, to help generate income opportunities.
- Shuhada Organization: This is a non-profit NGO working for the empowerment of Afghan women and children that includes the operation of home-based schools and mobile health clinics supported by the W4WAfghan (for more information, see Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan 2007).

According to Carolyn Reicher of W4WAfghan, 'Afghan women's greatest need is that of security and the protection of their universal human rights' (2003). The overthrow of the Taliban regime has yet to ensure these, despite claims by the Bush administration to the contrary.

### **Main impediments to female education**

The main impediments to female education in Afghanistan and among Afghan refugee populations are related to security and safety. The primary security and safety problems in the post-Taliban era include the following:

- Criminal acts and behaviour: general lawlessness, warlordism, drug trafficking, and extortion.
- Gender-specific violence, such as rapes, gang-rapes, murders, kidnapping, forced marriages.
- Threats to girls and women from fundamentalists including the Taliban, Mujaheddin, al Qaeda members, and various Mullahs.

- Terrorism (including suicide attacks) and firebombing of schools (especially girls' schools), the presence of foreign troops battling against the Taliban and al Qaeda, and a generally increasing level of violence.
- Landmines and unexploded ordnances (UXOs), dangerous roads, and poor infrastructure.
- The targeting of ethnic Pashtuns since the fall of the Taliban by the Taliban's non-Pashtun enemies, especially through sexual violence against Pashtun women, with such violence primarily occurring in the cities of Kandahar and Mazar (for detailed accounts, see the Human Rights Watch web site).

The last point bears emphasizing, as this is exactly a core issue for girls' and women's education in Afghanistan regardless of such education's status as formal, non-formal, or life-wide. As I wrote some years ago, a 'strong educational base' is desperately required on which to construct 'an intellectual and scientific barrier to the proliferation of ultra-extremist ideologies' (Alvi-Aziz 2003: 25) predicated upon tribal notions of honour, hospitality and revenge—inclusive of rape as a weapon of such revenge (2003: 17). These words remain true. As of 2006, there are still reports of Taliban members placing bombs and landmines in girls' schools: Sometimes the Taliban post written notes, or so-called 'night letters', in villages, warning girls' schools to close or else face the wrath of their 'military operations' (Coursen-Neff 2006). In fact, schools are considered by the Taliban to be soft targets. Within the last year in Helmand province alone, 'almost half the schools have either been burned down, or the teachers have been intimidated into closing' (BBC News 2006a). In Kandahar, 'all schools are now closed in five districts. Attackers have thrown hand grenades through school windows and threatened to throw acid on girls who attend school' (Constable 2006: A10). In September 2006, President Karzai announced that about 200,000 Afghan children 'had been forced out of school this year by threats and physical attacks' (Constable 2006: A10).

It is exactly this context which lies behind the triumphalism of US discourse and international agencies' report statistics. According to Zama Coursen-Neff, a senior researcher of the Children's Rights Division of Human Rights Watch (HRW), the US:

... trumpeted its role in putting Afghan girls back in school as one of the most positive developments since it toppled the Taliban in 2001. On International Women's Day, March 8, President Bush declared: 'Today in Afghanistan, girls are attending school. That speaks well for Afghanistan's future' ... but... most Afghan girls are still fighting for that future. (Coursen-Neff 2006)

Yet, it is not only the Taliban who are attacking girls' schools. Local warlords involved in the narcotics trade are also bombing schools (Coursen-Neff 2006). One of the major problems inherent to this scenario is that the Bush administration struck a deal with the so-called Northern Alliance (NA), which consists of many of these warlords, for power-sharing in the post-Taliban government under Karzai's leadership. This alliance was created in order to use the NA as proxies in the successful effort to overthrow the Taliban, only to result in the replacement of the Taliban by equally atrocious villains, some of whom have committed war crimes. Consider these descriptions:

Over just four days in December, armed men shot and killed a teacher, a school gatekeeper and a male student in Helmand province. An instructor had been warned to stop teaching girls and boys in the same classroom. In January, armed men in Zabul province beheaded a high school headmaster in front of his children. By March, half of the schools in the province had closed. Afghan education officials say that attacks now average one school a day. (Coursen-Neff 2006)

Due to these stark realities and the real dangers of simply attending school, according to Human Rights Watch, hundreds and possibly thousands of students are no longer attending, especially in the south and southeast of the country. This situation is complicated by the *madrassas* of the religious variety (for more on this, see Alvi-Aziz 2003).

Other major impediments to female literacy and education are not directly related to security and safety issues per se. Some stem from economic survival strategies in an impoverished, war-torn country. These economic realities have precipitated the following realities: the selling of children, both girls and boys, to pay off debts; pulling children from school to help with household income; and a severe lack of funding to rebuild the Afghan school system. In addition, traditional practices such as the *baad*—‘in which women are exchanged like objects in tribal disputes’, including the giving of females as recompense for debts of so-called ‘honour’; and child marriages are continuing (Walter 2006). Suicide among Afghan women is growing at an alarming rate. The Afghan Human Rights Commission ‘recently began to document the numbers of Afghan women who are burning themselves to death because they cannot escape abuse in their families’ (Walter 2006). In the provinces of Helmand, Kandahar, and Uruzgan, between 80,000 and 90,000 people have been displaced, bringing the total of the number of displaced residing in these areas to roughly 200,000, according to the UNHCR (BBC News 2006b). These renewed conflicts have caused further hardships in the region. Rahmatullah Safi of the Afghan Department of Refugees and Repatriation said, ‘People have lost everything—their vineyards, orchards, schools and clinics’ (BBC News 2006b).

*Newsweek* reports that ‘Taliban guerrillas have filled a power vacuum that had been created by the relatively light NATO and US military footprint of some 40,000 soldiers, and by the weakness of Afghan President Hamid Karzai’s administration’ (Moreau et al. 2006). In the no-man’s land of the Afghan–Pakistan border region, mainly Waziristan province, where the arm of the Pakistani government cannot (or will not) reach, a renewed uprising of the ‘Pakistani Taliban’ is taking place. Indeed, US Army Lt. General Karl Eikenberry says that ‘not enough money is being invested in creating a new Afghanistan’. He adds, ‘Where the roads end, the Taliban begin’ (Moreau et al. 2006). This spells disaster for the countless Afghan refugees fleeing into this area. Indeed, the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan and the border region in particular have been reorganizing. Suicide bombings and attacks have been rising in frequency and intensity, and there has been a huge upsurge in violence in general. The re-emergence of the Taliban after their fall was not anticipated by the US, but the Pakistani government of President Musharraf has played a major role in this comeback. (For more information about the rise of the Taliban and the Pakistani role in facilitating its rise and empowerment, see the Frontline PBS documentary ‘Return of the Taliban’; Smith 2006.)

## Conclusion

As long as serious security problems persist, the rebuilding and reconstruction processes in all sectors of the Afghan economy and society, let alone the education sector, will remain hijacked and arrested. While some NGOs and government ministries have been trying to revive the education system, especially for girls who had suffered the most during the Taliban era, there are many deficiencies in their agendas, activities, and resources. In the case of some NGOs and individuals, personal gain and egotism have overridden the job of rebuilding a nation. In the case of some government ministers, who moonlight as drug dealers, materialism and corruption have determined their motives outright, of course at the expense of the masses.

The weakest elements within the Afghan government today are the judiciary and the Ministry of the Interior:

... both are deeply corrupt and plagued by a lack of basic skills, equipment, and resources. Without effective and honest administrators, police, and judges, the state can do little to provide internal security—and if the government does not provide security, people will not recognize it as a government. (Rubin 2007)

Both official and unofficial reports indicate that crime is rising sharply, and that 'the police are the main criminals'. According to Barnett Rubin, 'many report that kidnappers and robbers wear police uniforms' (2007). External powers, like the US, the NATO-led forces, and neighbouring countries, have also made costly policy errors and miscalculations, often displaying their lack of vision and sometimes even their insincerity in dealing with Afghanistan's reconstruction. Despite the Bush administration's self-praise for its accomplishments in removing the Taliban and rebuilding Afghanistan, peace, stability, security, and progress in the country remain elusive.

Personal safety and security are the main points of concern for all Afghans. This is so crucial that it comprises the core of the curricula in schools. It is absolutely imperative to teach students landmine and UXO safety alongside the alphabet. Sadly, attending school in Afghanistan remains a life-threatening experience.

Overall, the progress report on women's education in post-Taliban Afghanistan contains very limited progress, although the potentials could have been much stronger had it not been for the miscalculations and errors in formulating security policies and financial assistance. This applies to the entire range of educational possibilities, from primary education through non-formal and life-wide learning. What I wrote as a priority for Afghani education just after the fall of the Taliban still holds true today: The fostering of more equal and progressive gender relations in order to root out misogynistic and chauvinistic attitudes and tendencies among Afghan men requires a reconstructed education system that purges these attitudes and tendencies from educational, political, and social institutions entirely (Alvi-Aziz 2003: 23). And yet, the US-led reconstruction campaign and its host of attendant NGOs continue to promote state agendas and the aggrandizement of the latter organizations (and compare El-Kassem, this volume). From the outset, the US-led campaign was meant to capitalize on the post-conflict reconstruction opportunities for fulfilling perceived narrow national interests, which were designed to be carried out with the least opportunity costs in all aspects. Small organizations like RAWA face huge obstacles in educating women; such odds can only be lowered within a context of gender security and equality within reoriented state and NGO practice and policies. The paucity of

resources that have been allocated to post-conflict Afghanistan alone illustrates such parsimony at all levels and in all sectors. The Afghan people—women in particular—have paid the highest costs as a result of these myopic policies.

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