

Challenges for Progressive Education in Afghanistan: A History of Oppression and the Rising Threat of ISIS

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Abstract

Afghanistan's public education system has been victimized by the brutal oppression of the Taliban Regime. Schools were destroyed, teachers were executed, and women were prevented from receiving an education. However, the situation has improved in recent years. Public school enrollment rates and educational access for females have substantially increased since the fall of the Taliban Regime. A resurgence of learning is happening throughout the country. Although this resurgence is welcome, it faces unique challenges. This article examines Afghanistan's history of educational oppression, describes post-Taliban educational trends, examines modern challenges facing public education, and provides recommendations for fostering a new hope for educational attainment among the citizens of Afghanistan.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Education, Rising, Oppression, ISIS

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Introduction

The modern era of reconstruction within Afghanistan has been plagued by efforts to thwart progressive advancements in education. Canadians built the Pir Mohammed School in 2005 but Taliban forces ensured its destruction. “They closed the school in 2007, breaking all the windows and furniture, booby-trapping the place, lacing the surrounding area with improvised explosive devices (IEDs), daring the Canadians to reopen it” (Klein, 2010, p. 22). Recently, militants associated with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (often referred to as ISIS, ISIL, Daesh, IS, or the Islamic State) have begun to exert influence within Afghanistan as evidenced by the forced closing of dozens of schools (Beck, 2015). These stories are all too common within Afghanistan. Few educational systems throughout the world have experienced the severity of educational oppression seen in Afghanistan. Militant forces used violence, intimidation, murder, and radical religious interpretations to bring the educational system to a grinding halt. Schools were burnt, teachers were killed, and virtually all women were denied access to a basic education. However, an enormous resurgence of educational opportunities has emerged after the fall of the Taliban Regime. New schools are being built, literacy rates have improved, and access for women has increased. However, public education is positioned in the center of a storm of daunting challenges to include attempts for the Taliban and ISIS to secure power. To understand these challenges, some researchers have risked their lives to advocate for education within Afghanistan (Azizi, 2008; Benard, 2002; Klein, 2010; Mashriqi, 2016). This essay seeks to paint a vivid picture of Afghanistan’s public education history and explore the modern challenges facing progressive education.

The Historical Context

The 1960’s and 1970’s were the most socially progressive time period within Afghanistan’s history. Vorgetts (2002) noted that women were allowed to pursue education, vote, hold public office, and become legal equals to their male counterparts. Indeed, this era was promising for all fields of education. The leadership within the country was increasingly aware of the importance of education for modernizing the country and all levels of school enrollment were expanding. However, the sociopolitical and educational landscapes changed as a result of the Communist coup in 1978 (Glad, 2009). Afghan nationals, known as the Mujahideen, formed an armed resistance movement against the communists, fighting spread throughout much of the country, and it was largely funded by the United States. The warfare between the Soviets and the Mujahideen resulted in the collapse of the Afghan government, as well as the institutional infrastructures for public education. Some educators were executed by the Mujahideen because the educators were believed to be communist sympathizers. Schools that were suspected of disseminating communist propaganda were often set ablaze. In 1983 the Afghan Foreign Minister notified the U.N. that 50% of the schools in Afghanistan had been destroyed (Glad, 2009). The United States, satisfied with the outcome of the proxy war with the Soviet Union, turned a blind eye to the catastrophic destruction of public education within Afghanistan.

In the mid 1990’s, the Taliban regime secured control of the education sector and imposed a strict interpretation of Islamic law (Matinuddin, 1999). This effort manifested in a violent subjugation of women, especially those who wanted to pursue basic educational opportunities (Glad, 2009; Griffin, 2001; Pont, 2001; Skaine, 2002; Vorgetts, 2002). Virtually every school was affected by Taliban’s oppression with women suffering the most. The Taliban fundamentalist perspective was “premised on the clear supremacy of male over female, and education is one of the means for achieving and demonstrating that superiority” (Benard, 2002, p. 125). The Taliban rewrote basic educational curricula in an effort to focus on the Qur’an, promote their propaganda, and exclude women from the educational system. Skaine (2002) noted “one of the Taliban’s first rulings prohibited girls and women from attending school” (p. 65). Efforts of Afghan women to resist the Taliban were met with unrelenting hostility. “Among the atrocities women have experienced are abduction, rape, being sold into prostitution, taken as wives and being stoned” (Skaine, 2002, p. 85).

This oppression was not received passively. A small number of home schools for girls emerged and received support from Non-Government Organizations (NGO's) and UN agencies (Glad, 2009). Benard (2002) described an underground resistance movement known as the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA). Their mission was directed toward promoting education for women. The movement remained clandestine during the Taliban rule. The RAWA operated secret schools for women and promoted the transmission of literacy within the confines of their homes. In effect, these schools functioned like the Underground Railroad in the US during the Civil War. Students pursued education in great secrecy and they remained painfully aware of the potential consequences.

The oppression of the Taliban Regime took a large toll on the Afghan education system. Most of the school buildings had been ruined and many of the best qualified teachers fled the country (Ewans, 2002). Only 33% of all Afghan children were attending public school by 2001 and no girls were allowed to attend the existing schools (Ministry of Education, 2004). Most of the existing schools focused on a madrasa type of curricula in which students were indoctrinated and socialized into the Taliban belief system by exposure to propaganda.

The United States launched a military offensive in Afghanistan in 2001. This action was in response to the imminent threat posed by terrorists within the country (Woodward, 2002). The U.S. strategy has been to eradicate Al-Qaeda, dismantle the Taliban, rebuild public infrastructure systems, and provide humanitarian relief. Part of the humanitarian relief mission included building schools, providing access to education, and establishing an environment in which women can attend school without fear of reprisal (Klein, 2010). The U.S. and allied forces are using Provincial Reconstruction Teams to establish security and build schools. Substantial progress has been made in recent years because the Taliban regime has been overthrown and their political power has declined. However, the Taliban still remains a direct threat to Afghan national security and to the education system. Schools are still attacked on a regular basis. The continued violence caused hundreds of schools to close (Glad, 2009). Students remain traumatized by past acts of violence and they remain fearful of future attacks and oppression. Indeed, the decades of violence have manifested within the educational system as evidenced by high instances of mental illness, to include post-traumatic stress disorder, associated with victims of violence (Babury & Hayward, 2013). The country has been war-ravaged to the extent that educational programs have emerged to provide guidance to children on ways to properly deal with land mines (Horsley, 2015).

Post Taliban Educational Trends

Foreign aid, support from non-government organizations, and the efforts of the Ministry of Education have had a positive impact on educational opportunities in Afghanistan. "The main international aid agencies involved in the education sector in the country are Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), BRAC, CARE, Catholic Relief Service (CRS), International Rescue Committee (IRC), Save the Children Alliance Sweden-Norway, Swedish Committee for Afghanistan and UNICEF" (Glad, 2009, p. 24). The actions of these organizations and many others have substantially increased access, enrollment, and literacy.

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) serves as the chief U.S. government organization responsible for distributing funding and providing resources for educational advancements within Afghanistan. The U.S. has used monetary funding for education as part of the overall strategy directed toward winning the hearts and minds of Afghan nationals (U.S. Army, 2009) by contributing millions of dollars in support of educational projects in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban regime.

Non-government organizations (NGO's) also have provided substantial educational assistance. The key to succeeding in these efforts is to garner support at the community level for any given project. It is important to bring local elders and tribal leaders onboard with projects spearheaded by outside actors. Indeed, schools that are developed with local community support are attacked less frequently when compared to their national level government-sponsored counterparts (Glad, 2009).

Grass-roots progress has also been made. The formerly clandestine RAWA is now a NGO that is promoting education openly (Brodsky, Portnoy, Scheibler, Welsh, & Talwar, 2012). The ousting of the Taliban regime allowed the RAWA to intensify their educational efforts. Benard (2002) concluded that the RAWA's modern challenge "lies in meeting the demand" (p. 50). Indeed, educational access for women has skyrocketed since the Taliban's fall from power. The Ministry of Education (MoE) did not operate schools for girls during 2001. However, 42% of all MoE schools provided access for girls by 2004 (Ministry of Education, 2004). The situation has improved in recent years but women remain disproportionately illiterate when compared to their male counterparts. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization Institute for Statistics (2014) reported that 18% of adult women can read and write, compared to 45% for adult men.

The combined efforts of educational and humanitarian support has dramatically increased enrollment for both girls and boys. Schools under the control of the Ministry of Education have increased enrollment from 900,000 in 2001 to more than 6 million by 2008 (Glad, 2009) and efforts to increase enrollment are ongoing. The percentage of female students enrolled in primary education has also dramatically increased. The Afghan educational system is recovering with the assistance of foreign aid, support from non-government organizations, the efforts of the Ministry of Education, and through the unrelenting determination of the Afghan people.

It is important to be mindful that the Afghan educational system is under construction. Educational institutions are reemerging, expanding, and developing in the wake of the Taliban's oppression. The overarching goal of new educational initiatives is to establish basic literacy skills for the new generations of Afghan citizens. Few opportunities exist or students to engage in more comprehensive literacy studies. The Afghan system has adopted a 9-3 model. Primary education encompasses grades 1 through 9 and secondary education includes grades 10 through 12. Virtually all Afghan classes are gender segregated. Most Afghan school buildings house a broad range of grade levels. The schools within rural areas are comparable to the one-room schoolhouses that once dotted the U.S. Tents serve as school structures when buildings are not available. These remote Afghan schools often host students of every grade level within a single classroom. Although many of the educational conditions are not ideal, the overall increase in opportunities represent a progressive step forward when compared to the conditions experienced during the peak of Taliban power.

Modern Challenges for Afghan Education

Afghan students are positioned in the middle of a violent war and they are victims of outside influences. Their security is constantly threatened and they are faced with a wide array of challenges. Some of the most significant challenges include providing universal access, preventing drop outs, increasing enrollment for women, and attacks on schools. The recent emergence of ISIS also threatens the future and stability of public education in Afghanistan. These challenges warrant attention from the international community.

Providing Access

The Afghan government currently lacks the ability to provide universal access to all prospective students. Many school-aged children living in rural areas simply don't have access to any organized educational programs or facilities. Many of the existing schools do not have suitable buildings, safe drinking water, or sanitation facilities. The existing facilities are mostly available to able-bodied individuals. Educational opportunities for individuals with disabilities are virtually non-existent (Trani, Bakhshi, & Nandipati, 2012). The key factor inhibiting the growth of educational infrastructure is funding. The Afghanistan government lacks an effective tax system and the nation is largely impoverished. Internal funding is simply not available for a widespread educational reconstruction effort. However, these challenges should be considered within the broader history and context that is unique to Afghanistan. The public education system is in a state of recovery and substantial progress has been made since the fall of the Taliban Regime. Conditions cannot improve overnight but the recovery effort is on the right track.

The Dropout Phenomena

The drop out rate is a formidable problem for all levels of Afghan education. Students drop out of school for a wide variety of reasons. Some students want to pursue work, avoid attack, get married, or simply become too old to attend school. Mansory (2007) interviewed Afghan students and educators in a study focused on drop out rates. The study examined 72 schools. Fifty percent of male students and 26% of female students indicated they dropped out because they were needed for work at home (Mansory, 2007). Three percent of male students and 15% of female students indicated they dropped out due to lack of family support, early marriage, being overage, security problems, or other reasons (Mansory, 2007). It was reported that some Afghan parents, especially fathers, were still reluctant to send their daughters to school due to the social pressure and threat of violence exerted by the Taliban. Female students must typically secure permission from their fathers to attend school and such permission is subject to change at the whim of the parent. Maintaining permission from parental figures for educational endeavors can be a formidable challenge within Afghanistan's sociopolitical landscape (Glad, 2009; Mashriqi, 2016).

Many girls marry at a very early age. Afghan women can marry during the onset of puberty and most young married women do not attend school. Thus, early marriage is responsible for a portion of female dropouts (Shayan, 2015). Additionally, some students reach adulthood before completing the primary or secondary education levels. This is especially a problem for students who began primary education at an older age. Many students enter the system for the first time at a very late age. It is not uncommon for an 11-year-old student, with no prior educational experience, to enroll in first grade. This causes a substantial age variation throughout the primary and secondary grade levels.

Access for Women

Females face 2 main barriers to accessing basic educational opportunities. First, schools simply don't exist in many rural areas. Second, many of the existing schools do not allow female students to attend classes. Equal access to education between males and females is a progressive idea in modern Afghanistan. Women have been historically marginalized since the Taliban secured power and this marginalization has evolved into a social norm. However, progressive educational efforts are beginning to challenge the status quo. Most of the existing primary and secondary schools that do allow females to attend courses are geared toward establishing basic literacy skills. Indeed, only 8% of adult women can read and write, compared to 45% of adult men (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization Institute for Statistics. (2014).

It is important to consider the context of women's education in Afghanistan A study by Brodsky, Portnoy, Scheibler, Welsh, and Talwar (2012) found the meaning associated with Afghan education is "qualitatively different from that in the United States, where, for example, children are required to attend formal classes and laws and standardized tests mandate specific content outcomes in specific subjects at specific ages" (p. 176). The industrialized educational models associated with developed nations are rarely adopted in Afghanistan and such models would not serve the needs of the people. The ages of students attending any given class or students in any given grade level will vary and public education is not directed toward building competency for future employment. Afghanistan is an impoverished nation undergoing reconstruction while simultaneously undergoing a cultural transformation of women's rights. Although little social mobility and few employment opportunities exist for women in Afghanistan, the educational opportunities afforded to women are directed toward progressive social changes. Women's education in Afghanistan is "not focused solely on individual learners or their credentials, but on the needs of the organization, society, and their vision for social change" (Brodsky, Portnoy, Scheibler, Welsh, & Talwar, 2012, p. 176). Therefore, women who participate in educational initiatives find themselves positioned on the front lines of progressive social transformation and they remain susceptible to violent attempts to thwart their progress.

Attacks on Schools

Progressive educational efforts are consistently challenged by violence against the educational system. Schools, educators, and students are attacked on a regular basis. The primary attack methods

include arson, armed assault, and the use of improvised explosive devices. “Grenades have been thrown in school windows and rockets fired at schools. Tents used for classes have been burnt down and children have been killed on their way home from school” (Glad, 2009, p. 2). Members of the Taliban or other criminal elements perpetrate these attacks. A total of 1,153 attacks were carried out against schools, educators, and students between January of 2006 and December of 2008 (Glad, 2009, p. 2). Hundreds of people have died and many others were injured as a result of these violent acts. Students facing such threats often believe that the risk of attending school is too great. This factor is responsible for many of the dropouts across the educational spectrum (Mansory, 2007). Security is a major concern for all students. However, female students have suffered the most. Girls’ schools account for 40% of all schools attacks, mixed schools account for 32% and boys’ schools account for 28% (Glad, 2009). “There are, however, less than half the number of girls’ schools than boys’ schools in the country which clearly signals a gender bias in the attacks” (Glad, 2009, p. 2).

The Rise of ISIS

ISIS has emerged as a new threat within Afghanistan and the public education system is ground-zero for radical indoctrination processes. Members of ISIS have closed a large number of schools (Beck, 2015) and established control of key areas within the Nangarhar and Kunar provinces (Quraishi, 2015). This group operates with a radical goal of apocalyptic Jihad aimed at converting all of humanity into followers of their particular brand of religion. Members of ISIS have entered Afghanistan, began to seize power, and launched aggressive recruiting efforts. They have employed a variety of tactics to facilitate their goals. Sometimes they fight the Taliban, sometimes they assassinate key leaders, and sometimes they partner with the Taliban to secure power. This situation is a disaster for progressive educational efforts within Afghanistan. History is beginning to repeat itself through the ISIS subjugation of women, education, and freedom. Armed ISIS militates have begun to operate their own schools where young children are educated on topics ranging from the principles of jihad to operating firearms (Quraishi, 2015). Such educational initiatives threaten to reverse the progress made during the last decade.

The rise of ISIS as an international terrorist organization has resulted in a multinational military response to include an array of bombing missions and special operations activities aimed at containing the threat. The series of coordinated attacks by ISIS in Paris, France on November 13, 2015 and the subsequent ISIS inspired attacks perpetrated by a married couple in San Bernardino, California on December 2, 2015 have increased the multinational resolve to combat ISIS. This resolve has the potential to affect the Afghanistan educational system in negative ways. As the public sentiment against Islamic militants grows, there is a potential for a reduced funding of educational projects. Foreign governments and non-government organizations exert considerable influence within Afghanistan. The aid from these entities has shaped the educational landscape by providing funding and material resources for rebuilding the educational infrastructure. This type of aid is welcome but it is delivered with moral, financial, and logistical support of entities outside of Afghanistan and the recent series of terrorist attacks may sway public opinion away from supporting future educational initiatives.

Recommendations for Future Research

Media outlets frequently report the progress and challenges associated with new school construction, women being allowed to attend school, and attacks on schools. However, there is a growing need for data that is more in-depth than basic media coverage. Traditional quantitative studies have been conducted with varied degrees of success. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Culture Organization Institute for Statistics (2014) provides some data regarding the literacy rates for the Afghan population. Their data are derived largely from self-reporting by the Afghan government. However, there are some gaps in the information reported. This is due, in part, to the difficulty of gathering such data especially in rural areas and places emerged in conflict. Researchers are left with a fragmented picture with an arguably low level of statistical validity. The greatest limitation for quantitative studies is that researchers do not have a way to get randomized samples that represent the Afghan population. Quantitative approaches are best suited for developed nations because of their ability to acquire random samples through the use of telephones, email, postal

mail, and other methods. However, Afghanistan is a developing nation without the technological infrastructure in place to facilitate the robust survey sampling associated with the developed nations. The efforts to gather statistical data in Afghanistan are laudable. Even though the sampling may not represent the country as a whole, it is the best quantitative information presently available.

Given the daunting challenges associated with gathering statistically valid data, researchers can turn to qualitative and ethnographic methods to gain a better understanding of public education within Afghanistan. Research methods aimed at developing an understanding of cultural phenomena are the best tools available to provide valuable insight that can inform foreign policy decisions. Moreover, information about how Afghans want to proceed should be considered. Additional research will be needed to address these concerns. When weighing the options for research methods, ethnographic and qualitative methods are best suited for gaining an understanding of public education within Afghanistan. These types of in-depth studies are needed to better understand what has happened, what is working, and what can be improved.

Conclusions

The Taliban have historically served as an oppressive force for education in Afghanistan. They have lost political control over the country but they are vehemently trying to regain it. Terrorists associated with ISIS have also launched a campaign to secure power. This is not simply a militant struggle. It is a violent ideological struggle with the educational system caught in the crossfire. Afghan schools are attacked on a regular basis and students continue to experience oppression. The international community should continue to work with the Afghan government to establish peace and security. Substantial improvements have been made for public education and a resurgence of learning is underway. Although the current situation remains extremely volatile, the future for public education in Afghanistan can be promising if the international community works with local Afghan leaders to fund and promote education. Moreover, the act of promoting progressive educational activities in Afghanistan can be understood as a weapon to fight terrorism. Education is a transformative process and individuals who gain literacy, multicultural understanding, and critical thinking skills will be better equipped to respond to the challenges of rebuilding Afghan society.

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