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# School Enrollment in Afghanistan

## *Article Forty-Three, Constitution of Afghanistan*

Education is the right of all citizens of Afghanistan, which shall be offered up to the B.A. level in the state educational institutes free of charge by the state. To expand balanced education as well as to provide mandatory intermediate education throughout Afghanistan, the state shall design and implement effective programs and prepare the ground for teaching mother tongues in areas where they are spoken.

## *Article Forty-Four, Constitution of Afghanistan*

The state shall devise and implement effective programs to create and foster balanced education for women, improve education of nomads as well as eliminate illiteracy in the country.

Education is essential for the development of thought and identity, and especially for girls, it offers a sense of power and individuality. Enrollment rates at Afghan schools have been on a sharp increase since 2003, with more than eight million attending school in 2014, of which almost 40% are female students, in sharp contrast to when they were banned from schools under the Taliban government of 1996-2001. Yet, there remain many barriers to children's school attendance. These include insecurity in some parts of the country, a lack of education facilities and particularly, a lack of trained teachers, especially female teachers to meet the growing number of girls seeking education. These challenges have limited attempts to increase enrollment faster, so that a greater number of Afghan children can gain access to education. Currently, the Afghan Ministry of Education, their international donor partners, and

several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are working to address these challenges to increasing enrollment and school attendance. Yet the education sector needs more strategic and sustained commitment than it currently has in place.

Because of the huge spike in enrollment at the Grade 1 level in 2003, there is a large 'wave' of graduates rolling through the grades. This surge in pupils will need to be accommodated as they enter the secondary level, with a sufficient number of high schools, trained secondary teachers, secondary textbooks, and other resources to meet the larger number of incoming students and to curb the high drop-out rate between primary and secondary school. Further, when this group graduates, it will be critical that there are higher education, vocational training, and employment opportunities ready for them.

*One in four people [in Afghanistan] are between the ages of 15 and 19 years of age...The gender disparity in literacy rates is very high (50% of boys, 18% of girls)...Most of the girls and boys finishing the last grade of primary school transit successfully to the first grade of secondary school, however there are half as many girls compared to boys in secondary school. - UNICEF, 2013*

## **Background**

The path for education in Afghanistan has been a rocky one, especially for girls. Prior to the rise of Afghanistan as a nation-state, education was done mainly through religious schools. It was not until Amir Shir Alii Khan was in power (1863-66, 1868-79) that more formal education started, in the form of two schools located in Kabul that catered to the elite of society, and only to males. These schools combined traditional Qu'ranic education with Western style education.

### School Enrollment At a Glance:

- Over 8 million children are enrolled in schools
- This is up from 2.3 million in 2002
- Nearly 40% of students are girls
- Despite this progress, approximately 42% of school-age children still do not attend school (UNICEF 2014)
- The Gender Parity Index indicates that for every 100 boys attending primary school there are only 74 girls. This number drops to 49 at the secondary level.
- It is found that attendance begins to decrease by 12 years of age such that only 32% of secondary school age children are in school (Central Statistics Organization, AMICS 2010/2011)
- At 21%, the school net attendance rate for girls is less than half that of boys (43%) (Central Statistics Organization, AMICS 2010/2011)
- Only 29% of children whose mothers have no education completed primary school
- There are now approximately 16,000 schools in Afghanistan, up from only 3,400 in 2001
- Since 2008, 700 of the 1,150 schools closed due to insurgency have been reopened (2014)



*“In 1978, there were 3,352 primary schools with 1 million students and approximately 150,000 girls, but in 1990, there were only 586 primary schools with 630,000 students and an increase in girls to 215,000”*

– Craig Naumann, 2007

The push for greater education came when Amir Habibullah Khan ruled Afghanistan from 1901 until 1919. He pushed for educational reforms leading towards a more secular system and opened 11 primary schools in Kabul, with 140 students and 14 teachers. In 1903, he established a secondary school

for boys. In 1919, the Afghan throne was seized by Amanullah Khan. During his time in power, he opened the first primary school for girls, the Maktab-e Mastrat in Kabul in 1921. According to Craig Naumann, “by 1927, the public school system had expanded to 51,000 students (including only a few hundred girls) enrolled in 322 schools” (2007, p.20).

Unfortunately despite this expansion in education, Amanullah was overthrown and all public schools were closed down from 1929 until 1930. Girl’s education was not pursued again until 1933, when King Zahir Shah took power and was able to reestablish a few girls’ schools, yet despite this move towards educating girls, in 1940 out

of 58,000 students, only 900 female students were enrolled, all of them attending the Malalai Girls’ School in Kabul.

Following the Second World War, primary education was made compulsory for all Afghan children. With a new constitution promulgated in 1964, education became a right of all citizens and was entirely free and public. With this new right, the education sector exploded and from 1965-1970, enrollment in grades 1-12 had risen by more than 60% to almost 650,000, and the number of secondary schools had tripled.

Afghanistan was invaded by the Soviet Union in 1979, and schools changed to take on the purpose of spreading Communist Party ideology. As a result, schools became a target of the mujahideen (“freedom fighters”). In Pakistan, where refugees from Afghanistan were residing, schools had been set up by the mujahideen with the support of Western and Muslim NGOs, with the curriculum drawn from the pre-communist era. During this time,



*“In 1956, there were 762 primary and secondary schools in Afghanistan enrolling a total of 121,000 students”*

– Craig Naumann, formerly with Ministry of Education, Kabul

the educational infrastructure within Afghanistan suffered major damage. There was also an increase in female students due to many boys joining the mujahideen or Afghan army during the anti-communist resistance period.

Mujahideen forces entered Kabul in 1992, seizing power. This was the beginning of the decline in enrollment. In 1995, the Taliban started closing down girls' schools, bringing down female enrolment in Kabul from 103,256 girls in public school and 7,793 female teachers in May 1996 to none at all. The only area of education the Taliban did support was a strict brand of Islamic education. However, a very small number of girls were still able to access education through clandestine schools run by individuals or women's networks, and some went to small, discrete schools run by NGOs. It's estimated that more than 100,000 children accessed education this way, with 20% of them being girls.

When schools reopened in 2002-3, there was a massive surge of students as virtually no students had been in proper schools during Taliban rule. By 2007, 5.8 million students were enrolled in grades 1-12 with 2.2 million girls and 3.3 million boys in primary school and 550,000 boys and 270,000 girls in secondary schools. This trend has continued such that in 2014, over eight million students are now enrolled in schools.



*Access has increased significantly over the past decade, however around 4.2 million children are still out of school* - Save the Children, 2014

### **Goals for the future of education in Afghanistan, as set by the Ministry of Education:**

- That all children will have access to fair and equal education without discrimination;
- By 2014, to increase enrollment of students to 10 million (8.7 million in primary and 1.3 million in secondary), as well as create 4,690 new schools with attention to reducing disparity between provinces;
- Decrease the dropout rate to 3% and the repetition rate to 11%