

## **Alternative educational activities and programs for female students banned from formal education in Afghanistan**

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Our descriptive survey assesses the possible alternative educational opportunities for female students deprived of formal education in Afghanistan. Our sample comprised 94 female participants, with 36 (38.3%) being high school students, 32 (34%) being high school graduates, and 26 (27.7%) being university students. Based on the results, the great majority, 89 (87.2%) were participating in at least one alternative educational program; seven of these were already married and involved in their married life; and five others could not participate because of financial problems. Islamic religious schools, tailoring training, English language courses, and some free online educational programs were the main alternative educational activities and programs that participants were involved in. These alternative educational programs are provided by the private sector, with participants required to pay a monthly fee. The Taliban did not provide any alternative educational programs for female students in Afghanistan. Based on the results, more than half (58) of the participants participated in more than one alternative educational program. Their participation in alternative educational programs helped them to be connected with other female students, escape from loneliness, and improve their overall wellbeing. However, in 2024 the Taliban banned female students above 12 years old from going to English language and modern sciences courses. Currently the only options for them are religious courses and Internet-mediated online programs.

### **Introduction**

Education is an essential right and requirement of human life, and both men and women need to learn how to live effectively and how to be effective in their societies. Education, as an essential requirement of human life, enables all human beings (men and women) to learn, gain knowledge, and be active and helpful in their societies. Based on some scholars (e.g., Sedere, 2005; Freire, 1973), we cannot find any other alternative to education. Education helps human beings (male and female) know how to contribute to the development of their societies. Education has no alternative and enables human beings (male and female) to deal with reality critically and find out how to partake in the process of transformation of the globe (Freire, 1973). As stated by Sedere (2005), education, as the main dominant means of change, enables individuals to adjust.

Moreover, education, as an essential life requirement of any human being, helps individuals reduce inequalities and improves human development opportunities (Engida, 2021). Reshdi et al. (2022) argued that education, as the main requirement for women's empowerment, enables them to have full participation in social, political, and economic affairs in their societies. According to Psaki et al., 2022 gender inequalities undermine girls' chances in some low-income countries. Whereas, according to some works and scholars (e.g., Atkinson et al., 2019; Sarwari et al., 2016; Sarwari & Abdul Wahab, 2017), in those countries, including some that are Muslim-dominated, where girls can aspire to

learn, work, and actively participate in social, academic, economic and political life, they will make valuable contributions to their societies.

The main religious sources of Islam, such as the *Holy Qur'an* and the *Prophetic Hadith* (words of the Prophet), without any discrimination, ask and encourage all human beings to read, learn, think, and seek knowledge. In the first verses of the Holy Qur'an revealed to the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH), Allah (SWT) orders the Prophet and, through him, orders all human beings to read. Allah (SWT) says in Sura Al-Alaq of the *Holy Qur'an*, "Read in the name of your Lord who created; created man from a clinging substance" (*The Qur'an*, 96:1-2). Allah says in Sura Az-Zumar "Say: 'are they equal, those who know and those who do not know?' Only those with minds remember" (*The Qur'an*, 39:9). Also says in Sura An-Nahl, "So ask those who possess knowledge if you do not know" (An-Nahl, 43). Based on *Sunan Ibn Majah* (one of the most prestigious books of Prophetic words among Muslims), Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) said, "Seeking knowledge is a duty upon every Muslim" (*Sunan Ibn Maja*, The Book of the Sunnah, Hadith Number 224).

However, the Taliban did not consider the importance of education and deprived women of education in Afghanistan. According to some news articles published in some international media, for example "Taliban's higher education" (Euro News, 2022); "Taliban says women banned" (Al Jazeera, 2022), the Taliban banned female students from attending high schools and universities in Afghanistan and ordered all high schools and universities to be open only for male students. Moreover, female students in Afghanistan were deprived of education, and the Taliban's higher education minister focused on suspending female students' access to universities, for example "Taliban minister defends" (*The Guardian*, 2022). According to Sarwari and Mohd Adnan (2023), when the Taliban returned to power in 2021, despite numerous national and international reactions and condemnations, they banned women's education in the country. By the return of the Taliban to power, women were deprived of education and work (McQuinn et al., 2022). Other commentary in international media observed that "The ban stands against the core principles of Islam and hinders Taliban's efforts to gain international recognition" (Barakat, 2024). In a brief commentary upon the history of girls' education in Afghanistan, Nasir (2024) feared that "A whole generation of uneducated women are more likely to face marginalization, abuse and violence."

No one can find any logical and religious support for women's education ban, and in countries, including Islamic countries, where women are allowed to learn and demonstrate their skills and abilities, they gain remarkable academic and educational achievements and contribute to different aspects of public services in their countries. According to Atkinson et al. (2019), evidence shows that women are making remarkable academic contributions in a diverse range of countries and regions. In Iran, Foomani (2024) investigated the role of women English teachers in a patriarchal society, showing how their identities were shaped by English language learning and teaching experiences. She advanced the proposition that "Access to the English language and the implications that arise from knowing and teaching it, can bring about liberating experiences for women in patriarchal societies" (Foomani, 2024). Moreover, some studies among public university students in a Muslim-dominated country (e.g., Sarwari et al., 2016; Sarwari & Abdul Wahab, 2017;

Sarwari et al., 2023), have shown that female students are very active and eager to learn. Isabelle Zhu-Maguire at Monash University recorded being "... constantly in awe of their passion and intelligence. They understand the privilege that education is, and therefore work tirelessly to seek it." (Zhu-Maguire, 2023).

When people, especially women lose their formal educational opportunities, they may try to find some alternative ways to learn and gain some essential skills to use in their personal and social lives. According to Aron (2006), alternatives to traditional educational achievements are needed at different levels, from early preparations to good-quality multidisciplinary options. Alternative education includes all educational programs and activities that happen outside of the traditional schooling system, such as homeschooling (Aron, 2006).

Moreover, as a type of alternative education, short-term and therapeutic programs can be arranged for students who face academic and educational barriers and suffer from emotional and social problems (Raywid, 1994). The application of alternative programs for youth development can include academic progress programs, employment programs, and even particular programs that cover older youth deprived of education (Hair, 2003; Jekielek, 2002; Redd 2002). As stated by Aron (2006), evidence is supportive of the effectiveness of alternative education on different aspects of youth development, such as emotional and social well-being, self-sufficiency, and safety. It may be helpful to know that when the Taliban banned women's education in Afghanistan, which kinds of alternative educational programs were and are available for female students to gain some essential information and skills. Thus, our study assessed the possible alternative educational opportunities for female students in Afghanistan, who were deprived of formal education by the Taliban's decision to ban women's education.

## **Method**

On a limited level, both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to conduct this study. The main method was a quantitative descriptive survey and qualitative data was used to support the quantitative dataset. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2007), researchers use both the quantitative and the qualitative methods as mixed methods to well answer their research questions. Based on the aim and scope of our study, a short and limited questionnaire, which included a few demographic and alternative education-related items was used to collect data. At the end of the questionnaire, the participants were asked to share their written and detailed points of view regarding the related issues. The questionnaire was in the Farsi/ Dari language, which is the main means of education and communication among the participants, and translations into English for illustrative quotations were made by the first author. The participants of this study were 94 high school, graduated high school, and university students, who were deprived of formal education by the Taliban's women education ban decision in Afghanistan. Of all 94 participants, 82 (87.2%) of them were studying in four religious, tailoring training, and English language courses. The age range of the participants was from 16 to 23 with an average age of 19.4 years when surveyed. Of the 94 participants, 36 (38.3%) were high school students, 32 (34.0%) had graduated from high school, and 26 (27.7%) were

university students, but currently, all of them were banned from going to schools and universities and were participating in some private alternative educational programs and courses.

As the researcher was not allowed to collect data from females owing to the current rule of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the data were collected by three female volunteers who were participating in the mentioned courses and alternative educational programs as well. Using convenience sampling, data collection was conducted during the first week of January 2024. The data were collected by the mentioned volunteers from four courses and also some female students, former classmates of the volunteer data collectors, who had married and were not currently participating in any alternative educational programs or courses. For qualitative data, 37 (39.4%) of the participants provided their written responses in the last item of the questionnaire. The quantitative data were analysed using *SPSS* and the qualitative interviews were transcribed and categorised based on the research themes.

The three volunteers who collected the data, because of concerns for their safety, did not use any medium, such as *WhatsApp*, for their data collection procedures. They physically collected the data from courses and centres where they were able to visit easily to find potential participants. Up-to-date research is severely constrained by the risk of retribution from the Taliban Government, and it is difficult to find participants for any study without personal relationships. People worry about the Taliban, and they do not participate readily in any study related to the Taliban's agendas and policies in Afghanistan.

## Findings

### Survey findings

Of 94 participants, 36 (38.3%) were high school students, 32 (34%) were high school graduates, and 26 (27.7%) were university students. Eighty-two (87.2%) were participating in at least one alternative educational program, seven (7.4%) were married and were busy in their married life, and five (5.3%) could not participate because of financial problems. Fifty-eight were participating in more than one program, and 24 (24.5%) were participating in only one alternative education program. Of the 82 participants who were involved in some alternative educational program, 21 (22.3%) were participating in religious schools and tailoring training courses, 17 (18.1%) were participating in tailoring training and English language courses, 11 (11.7%) were participating in religious, tailoring training, and English language courses, and nine (9.6%), who were mostly university students, were participating in English courses and some online educational programs. Also, 12 (12.8%) were participating in religious schools and courses only, seven (7.4%) were participating only in tailoring training courses, and five were participating only in some free online educational programs only. All alternative programs and courses were private, and the participants had to pay some monthly fee, such as 250 Afghanis (about 3.5 US\$) for religious courses, 350 (about 5 US\$) for English language courses, and 500 Afghanis (about 7 US\$) for tailoring training courses. Table 1 shows the descriptive results.

Table 1: Descriptive results (N=94)

Item	No.	Percent
High school students	36	38.3
Graduated from high school	32	34.0
University students	26	27.7
Participating in at least one alternative program	82	87.2
Already married and could not participate in alternative programs	7	7.4
Could not participate in alternative programs because of financial problems	5	5.3
Participating in more than one alternative program	58	61.7
Participating in only one alternative program	24	25.5
Participants participating in religious schools and tailoring training courses	21	22.3
Participating in tailoring training and English language courses	17	18.0
Participating in religious, tailoring training, and English language courses	11	11.7
Participating in English courses and some online educational programs	9	9.6
Participating in religious schools and courses only	12	12.8
Participating in tailoring training courses only	7	7.4
Participating in some free online educational programs only	5	5.3

### Qualitative findings

The participants were asked to write down and share their detailed points of view regarding the issues in the questionnaire. Thirty-seven of the 94 participants, 37 (39.4%) provided written comments and answers. Their points of view are similar, focusing mostly on the negative effects on their overall well-being of the Taliban's decision to ban women's education, the Taliban's flexibility regarding private course activities since mid-2023, and the positive effects of their participation in some alternative educational programs on their personal and social well-being. Participation helped to overcome loneliness through their contacts with their former and new classmates in an ongoing alternative educational program, and their financial problems in paying fees for such programs.

For example, one participant was a 19 year old female student who was graduated from high school without participation in 12th grade, based on the Taliban allowing a graduation for girls in their final year of high school, after they were deprived of attendance. She reported,

When I was in the middle of my 11th class, the Taliban took power and banned girls' schools, and we could not join our schools and classes to continue our education. We lost hope, but without going to school and learning anything, the Taliban promoted us and considered us as graduated from high school. Now, I participate in an English language course and tailoring training courses to learn a foreign language, and also to gain some essential work skills for my personal life.

Another participant, who was a university student, but deprived of continuing her university education and currently participating in a tailoring training course, said,

I was a university student and I had some dreams to finish my studies, work and support my family. However, with the return of the Taliban, we (myself, my classmates, and all female students) lost our educational chance, and as my father lost his job as well, now I am participating in the tailoring training course to become a tailor to work and have some incomes to support myself and my family.

A participant who was a high school student and now participating in religious and English courses, said,

When I lost my chance to go to school, I got some depression and my family found different anti-depression medicine for me. But, when I started participating in religious and English language courses, besides learning some new things, I started contact with many other students, my mental and emotional health improved, and I stopped taking anti-depression medicine.

Another participant, who was just graduated from high school and could not start her university education because of the women's education ban, and got married, said,

I had good scores and records during my high school education, and I wanted to continue my university studies, but by the return of the Taliban and their decision on women education ban, I lost my hope and because of losing my educational right and not being active, I got married, and I think the ongoing courses cannot replace formal education; thus I prefer to stay at home.

A participant who was a university student enrolled in an English language course, said,

Nowadays, courses are everything for female students in Afghanistan, as they can go out of their homes, walk for a while, meet some other students, and learn some new things ... When the Taliban returned to power, they closed all female public and private educational institutions, courses, and programs, and we had no formal or informal educational opportunities in 2021, but at the beginning of 2022 some religious schools and courses started their activities for female students, in mid-2022, some tailoring training courses started activities for girls, and in mid-2023, besides religious and tailoring training courses, some language courses started their activities for females students as well, and now there are many courses active for female students in the Kabul city, but girls in other areas still deprived of going to such courses.

In the absence of formal education, the above-mentioned alternative educational programs and courses are very helpful for female students, even though they cannot replace formal education. However, such opportunities are limited to Kabul and some other major cities, and so far, girls in the countryside areas are deprived of such opportunities.

## **Discussion**

Education is an essential requirement and aspect of human life, for both men and women. However, upon their return to power, the Taliban banned women's education in Afghanistan and female students lost their opportunities to have formal and traditional education. Our study assessed and explored the main alternative education and

educational programs available for female students deprived from formal and traditional education in Afghanistan. We used a basic descriptive survey that obtained 94 female participants with an age range of 16 to 23 years. Thirty-six were high school students, 32 had graduated from high school, and 26 were university students, but all lost their opportunities to continue their formal high school and university education. After deprivation of both formal and informal education for about two years and suffering from hopelessness and depression during this period, the participants found some opportunities to engage in some alternative education and educational activities and programs. However, by their decision on banning women's education and some other restrictions, the Taliban has turned Afghanistan into one of the world's worst places for women.

Of 94 participants, 82 were participating in at least one alternative educational program, and 58 were participating in more than one alternative educational program. Religious schools, tailoring training, English language courses, and some online educational programs are the main alternative educational activities for girls deprived of formal education in Afghanistan. All alternative educational programs and activities we identified were started by the private sector and based on the needs of female students in alternative education to be active, to escape from loneliness, and learn something, some courses, and alternative educational programs have been started by the private sector. Our findings support Raywid's (1994) findings about the establishment of alternative educational programs for needy people who are deprived of formal and timely education. Our findings have many similarities to the interview observations recorded by Anisa Shaheed and Lutf Ali Sultani to commemorate *Women's History Month* (Shaheed & Sultani, 2024).

Our results show that taking part in some alternative educational programs and activities helped the participants to reduce feelings of loneliness and depression, and experience better personal and social well-being. The findings support the statement by Aron (2006) on the effectiveness of alternative education for the emotional and social well-being of individuals. However, marriage and financial problems prevented some of the respondents from participating in the available alternative educational programs. With a new policy in 2024, the Taliban banned female students above 12 years old from going to English language and modern sciences courses. For some, the only options are religious courses and Internet-mediated online programs.

## **Conclusion**

Our descriptive survey assessed the possible alternative educational opportunities for female students in Afghanistan, who were deprived of formal education by the Taliban's banning of women's education ban decision in the country. Our study had 94 participants responding to a basic survey questionnaire used to collect the data. Of the 94 participants, 36 were high school students, 32 had graduated from high school and 26 were university students. Eighty-two of our 94 participants were participating in at least one alternative educational program, and 58 were participating in more than one program. Of all 94 female participants, who were deprived of continuation of their formal education, seven of them were already married and involved in their marriage life, and five of them could not participate in any program because of their financial problems. Islamic religious

schools and courses, tailoring training, English language courses, and some free online educational programs were the main alternative education activities and programs that engaged participants. All alternative educational programs were provided by the private sector, the participants were required to pay some monthly fee, and the Taliban did not provide any alternative educational programs for female students. Participation and involvement in some alternative educational programs helped the participants to improve their overall well-being and be connected with some of their previous or new classmates, to overcome loneliness, to be active, and to learn some new things. But, in 2024 the Taliban banned female students above 12 years old from going to English language and modern sciences courses, and currently, the only options for them are the religious courses and the Internet-mediated online programs.

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Dr Sarwari designed and conducted the study and wrote the manuscript. Co-author Professor Dr Mohd Adnan contributed in language editing and technical issues.

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