Shattered Futures

The Oppression of Afghan Women Through the Ban on Education

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Table of contents

Introduction

Since the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in 2021, the erosion of women's rights has been relentless. Women have been systematically excluded from public life, barred from working outside their homes, and restricted from traveling without a male guardian.[1] They are also prohibited from visiting many public spaces, engaging in sports activities, and using their voice outside domestic environments.[2] One of the most devastating restrictions is the ban on education for girls and women beyond grade six; an act that not only creates short-term impacts on women but also threatens long-term repercussions for Afghan women and Afghan society.[3] Under international law, Afghanistan is obligated to uphold women's rights. As a member of the United Nations, it is bound by key resolutions promoting gender equality.[4] Furthermore, Afghanistan has ratified the 'Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women'.[5] Yet, these commitments stand in stark contrast to the policies enforced by the Taliban since 2021.

This thesis examines the ban on education as a tool of systemic oppression. Unlike more immediate restrictions, such as limits on freedom of movement or speech, the full impact of denying education will unfold over time, as a generation of women is left without basic literacy and opportunities for personal and professional growth. This ban on education issued by the Taliban, and its effect on Afghan women and the Afghan society, has so far not been researched from a social historical perspective. Although several scholars have paid attention to the economic and political implications of this ban, the social and cultural implications of the ban remain much overlooked. By

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[1] Amnesty International, "Afghanistan 2024," accessed 28 November 2024, https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/south-asia/afghanistan/report-afghanistan/; Nieuws en Co, "Taliban Beperken Vrouwenrechten Verder: Ramen Verboden En NGO's Onder Druk," 30 December 2024, https://www.nporadio1.nl/nieuws/buitenland/8cc271ff-36c8-45f9-a0a6-b4fe94b37664/taliban-beperken-vrouwenrechten-verder-ramen-verboden-en-ngos-onder-druk.

[2] Amnesty International, "Afghanistan 2024,"; Nieuws en Co, "Taliban Beperken Vrouwenrechten Verder: Ramen Verboden En NGO's Onder Druk."

[3] Amnesty International, "Afghanistan 2024."

[4] United Nations Development Fund for Women, "CEDAW and Security Council Resolution 1325: A Quick Guide," 2006, https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2006/1/cedaw-and-security-council-resolution-1325-a-quick-guide.

[5] NOS Nieuws, "Nederland Wil Afghanistan Vervolgen Voor Schending Vrouwenrechten Taliban," 25 September 2024, https://nos.nl/artikel/2538520-nederland-wil-afghanistan-vervolgen-voor-schending-vrouwenrechten-taliban; United Nations Human Rights Treaty Bodies, "Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women," accessed 28 November 2024, https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/cedaw.

analysing the perspectives of the Taliban and of Afghan women and by contextualising their voices, this thesis aims to shed light on these social and cultural short-term implications of the ban on education and also makes a prediction in regard to the long-term implications. In doing so, this thesis fills this literary gap and explores how this policy affects not only Afghan women but also the future of the nation as a whole.

The research question posed in this thesis is:

> *What are the implications of the use of a ban on education as a form of oppression of women in Afghanistan under Taliban rule between 1996 and 2025?*

This question will be analysed through the theoretical lens of feminism and draws from sources such as decrees of the Taliban, interviews with Taliban members, reports of human rights organisations, testimonies of Afghan girls and women and interviews with Afghan women. By using critical discourse analysis and narrative analysis as methodological tools, this study aims to give deeper insight into the social and cultural effects of the first and second Taliban rule, and the democratic period in between. It focuses in particular on how these shifts have impacted education and women's rights in Afghanistan.

This thesis has clear scientific relevance as it aims to address two significant research gaps. The first gap lies in the limited exploration of the social and cultural implications for Afghan women arising from the Taliban's ban on education. By placing the ban on education in a broader historical context and by analysing the implications of the ban through primary source material that highlights both the viewpoint of the Taliban and of Afghan women, this thesis seeks to add to the scholarship by studying the ban from a social historical perspective. In doing so, it aims to make the short- and long-term effects of the ban on social and cultural life in Afghanistan more visible. The second gap pertains to the insufficient application of a feminist lens to analyse this specific issue. Incorporating feminist theory into the examination of the Taliban's ban on education is insightful since it not only allows us to highlight the agency and experiences of Afghan women, but also because it illuminates how feminist rhetoric is often diplomatically misused by various actors to serve political agendas. In addition, the feminist framework highlights how the Taliban strategically creates a more

patriarchal society and uses the ban to enforce increasing control over women's lives and bodies. In short, this approach highlights the critical need to confront the misuses of the Taliban on women and advocate for genuine consideration of Afghan women's perspectives when formulating and discussing policies that profoundly impact their lives and livelihoods. In doing so, this research aspires to contribute meaningfully to both scholarly discourse and the broader understanding of the oppression faced by Afghan women.

The subject of this thesis is both timely and highly relevant, as it addresses a current issue that is only in its infancy in scientific literature and also deeply embedded in ongoing public debate. This research holds significant social relevance, not only because the Taliban's restrictions on women remain a critical topic in today's public debate, but also because these restrictions are still intensifying, leading to increasingly severe consequences for Afghan women. The urgency of this issue underscores the importance of this research in contributing to a deeper understanding of its implications.

Based on these observations, the central argument of this thesis is that the Taliban uses the ban on education not merely as a tool to suppress women, but more broadly as a politically strategic measure to exert control over the Afghan society as a whole. As such, this thesis advocates for the need for scholars and policy makers to understand the ban on education in Afghanistan not just as one of the many policies of the Taliban to control women, but rather as one of the most crucial policies implemented that will allow the Taliban to control Afghan society to the fullest.

This thesis is structured into three chapters, each addressing a key aspect of the research topic. The first chapter provides a contextual overview of the past and current situation in Afghanistan, focusing on the rights of Afghan women. It examines the impact of the first and second Taliban regimes (1996-2001 and 2001-2025) and the democratic period in between (2001-2021). The subquestion guiding this chapter is: *How did the regimes of the Taliban (1996-2001 and 2021-2025), and the democratic period (2001-2021), influence the position and the rights of Afghan women?* The second chapter is an analytical chapter that explores how the Taliban uses the ban on education as a tool of oppression. Through an examination of official Taliban statements and decrees, analysed through a feminist lens, this chapter investigates how this specific restriction functions as a mechanism of control. The subquestion for this chapter is: *How does the Taliban use the ban on education to oppress Afghan*

women? The third and final chapter shifts focus to Afghan women themselves, exploring their lived experiences under the severe restrictions imposed by the Taliban. It examines the immediate effects of the education ban on their lives while also considering the broader, long-term implications for Afghan women and the country as a whole. The third subquestion is: *What are the short-term and potential long-term implications of the ban on education from the perspective of Afghan women?* By addressing these three subquestions, this thesis aims to provide a comprehensive and well-supported answer to the main research question, offering a nuanced understanding of the interplay between oppression and the lived experiences of Afghan women.

Chapter 1

1.1 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework used for this thesis is feminist theory. This theory is used to analyse the interconnection of education and gender oppression. Feminist theory emphasizes the fluid evolution of nature and societal structures, challenging the static, patriarchal ideologies that have historically defined fixed roles for women.[6] Focusing on changing dynamics and relationships, feminist theory opposes systems of oppression and advocates for a more equal, just, and inclusive society.[7] A prominent thinker in feminist theories, Bell Hooks, was one of the first to articulate the idea of a fluid and evolving nature of societal structures. She argues that radical change is less effective, as society is more open to gradual requests that do not demand immediate transformation of the way of life.[8] Additionally, Hooks calls for a clearer consensus on what feminism truly represents.[9] She contends that because women from different societal groups have different experiences, their interpretations of feminism often vary. However, she offers an overarching definition that unites various feminist ideologies: "Feminism is a struggle to end sexist oppression." [10] She further emphasizes that feminism should not aim to gain power over men, but should focus on achieving greater equality, creating positive changes for both women and men.[11]

This thesis adopts Hooks' definition of feminism to examine, first of all, the restrictive policies imposed by the Taliban that disproportionally target women, and secondly, to underscore the importance of striving for greater equality within Afghan society. While the livelihoods of women has been explored analytically before through a feminist lens, this was primarily done in the context of peace negotiations or with a focus on women's roles in business and governance prior to the Taliban's return to power in 2021.[12] The social and cultural short-term and long-term impacts of this

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[6] Kathy E. Ferguson, "Feminist Theory Today," *Annual Review of Political Science* 20, no. 1 (11 May 2017): 269–86, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-052715-111648, 271.
[7] Ferguson, "Feminist Theory Today," 271-72.
[8] Bell Hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 1984, 21.
[9] Hooks, *Feminist Theory,* 17.
[10] Hooks, *Feminist Theory,* 24.
[11] Hooks, *Feminist Theory,* 26.
[12]Krista Hunt, ""Embedded Feminism" and the War on Terror," in *(En)Gendering the War on Terror*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2008), 51–72; Shefali Milczarek-Desai, "Hearing Afghan Women's Voices: Feminist Theory's Re-Conceptualization of Women's Human Rights," *Arizona Journal of International and Comparative Law* 16, no. 3 (Fall 1999): 805–43; Sima Samar, "Feminism, Peace, and Afghanistan," *Journal of International Affairs* 72, no. 2 (2019): 145-59, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26760839.

specific ban on women's education not only remains under researched, is has also not been analysed before from a feminist perspective. As a result, the voices of Afghan women on the effects of this ban remain hidden, which, in turn, leaves our understanding of the implications of this ban on Afghan society inaccurate, exclusive, and incomplete. As such, this constitutes a gap in the existing literature that this thesis aims to fill. Furthermore, feminist theory can shed light on how these measures are strategically in kept place by men to keep women small.

By using feminist theory to analyse the ban on education as a form of oppression, it is possible to analyse how this ban specifically targets women, their livelihoods, and their futures, and how this ban will indirectly target men and Afghanistan as a whole as well. It is clear that the Taliban holds patriarchal ideas about society and women, by giving these women a myriad of restrictions and rules to undermine women and their capabilities. This thesis will, among other sources, use testimonies, statements, and interviews from Afghan women, who have experienced the ban firsthand, ensuring their voices are central to the analysis. By making their voices matter, feminist theory makes sure that the ones who have been affected the most by these restrictive measures gain agency again. Ultimately, feminist theory underscores the oppressive nature of the ban on education and its role in the preservation of gender inequality.

This thesis applies two practical approaches to using a feminist lens in analysing sources and structuring the research. First, it focuses on the power structures in Afghanistan, where the all-male ruling Taliban use their authority to oppress women. This thesis examines how the established gender apartheid impacts both men and women within Afghan society. Second, the primary focus of this thesis is on the experiences of women. Rather than concentrating solely on how the Taliban function or formulate their policies, the emphasis is placed on understanding the implications of these policies for women by revealing their firsthand experiences.

1.2 Historiography

The primary focus of this thesis, looking at the ban on education for women installed by the Taliban through a feminist lens, has received limited attention within academic discourse; it is under explored in historiographical, sociological, and educational literature. To address this gap, this thesis engages with three scholarly debates: the implications of gender discrimination in education, the oppression of women in Afghanistan, and the education of Muslim women in the Middle East.

1.2.1 Implications of gender discrimination in education

The scholarship on the implications of gender discrimination in education is vast and has grown significantly over the years. “More than any other form of discrimination, discrimination in education on the ground of sex is affected by customs, traditions, and prejudices,” was the concluding remark of Charles D. Ammoun in his 1957 Study of Discrimination in Education for the United Nations.[13] While this formed one of the first extensive reports of gender discrimination in the twentieth century, this study remained largely superficial. It was not until the late 20th and early 21st centuries that scientific studies began to delve into the reasons for implementing sex-based discrimination in education and its implications, particularly in regions other than the West. This research has been done within different disciplinary fields.

Overall, within these studies, there is a notable consensus surrounding the theme of equal education, particularly emphasizing its critical importance for societal development.[14] Various studies demonstrate that, while women often bear the brunt of discrimination in education, they play an indispensable role in fostering societal progress.[15] Isobel Coleman, a former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, has long been an advocate for equal education in the Middle East. She states that educated women tend to have fewer children, maintain healthier families through improved nutrition and healthcare, and experience lower child mortality rates due to their

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[13] Charles D. Ammoun, *Study of Discrimination in Education*, *United Nations eBooks*, 1957, 44, http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA64892370.

[14] Isobel Coleman, “The Payoff from Women’s Rights,” *Foreign Affairs* 83, no. 3 (2004): 80-95 https://doi.org/10.2307/20033977; Jody Heymann et al., “The Right to Education: A Foundation for Equal Opportunities,” in *Advancing Equality: How Constitutional Rights Can Make a Difference Worldwide* (University of California Press, 2020), 199-224, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1f8854w.13; Martha C. Nussbaum, “Women’s Education: A Global Challenge,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29, no. 2 (January 2004): 325-55, https://doi.org/10.1086/378571.

[15] Coleman, “The Payoff from Women’s Rights,” 82.

knowledge of health and wellbeing.[16] Coleman also explains the possible reasoning of why education might be restricted for women, noting that educated women are more likely to critique governments, potentially spark protests, and drive societal change.[17] Jody Heymann, Aleta Sprague, and Amy Raub, who are all scholars in the policy field, reinforce these findings with research conducted fifteen years later. They demonstrate that providing women with access to education benefits both their husbands and children. Their study discovered that children and husbands of educated women face lower mortality risks.[18] Furthermore, educating women positively impacts society by reducing unemployment rates and enhancing agricultural productivity. [19] Other research indeed demonstrates that societies with high dropout rates among girls experience a significant decline in economic growth, underlining the transformative power of education for women.[20]

Martha Nussbaum looks at gendered education discrimination from a philosophical perspective. Just as Ammoun concluded in 1957, Nussbaum argues that women's education is most at risk in countries where tradition and long-standing social hierarchies are deeply valued.[21] She adds that in such societies, especially where these traditions are upheld by those in power, external nations have limited capacity to effect meaningful change.[22] Nussbaum highlights the challenges of interference in national affairs, citing Afghanistan under Taliban rule as an example. Efforts to impose Western ideals in such contexts often backfire, as regimes actively resist external influence, an issue that will be explored later in this historiography.

By building on the works mentioned above, this thesis contributes a historical perspective and specifically adds Afghan women's perspectives and experiences of being banned from education. For this study in particular, understanding these broader implications of banning women from education is crucial, as it underscores the long-term challenges Afghanistan is likely to face if such restrictions persist. Educational discrimination not only affects the individuals; it directly targets and also inflicts profound and enduring harm on society. While the immediate effects may not be

[16] Coleman, "The Payoff from Women's Rights," 83.
[17] Coleman, "The Payoff from Women's Rights," 92.
[18] Heymann et al., "The Right to Education," 206.
[19] Heymann et al., "The Right to Education," 205.
[20] Heymann et al., "The Right to Education," 207.
[21] Ammoun, *Study of Discrimination in Education*, 44; Nussbaum, "Women's Education," 327.
[22] Nussbaum, "Women's Education," 327.

evident, the societal repercussions will become increasingly apparent in the years to come.

1.2.2 Oppression of women in Afghanistan

"What does oppression truly entail in relation to the way women are oppressed in Afghanistan?" To understand the term 'oppression' better in relation to the political context in Afghanistan, it is helpful to build on the explanation proposed by philosopher Ann Cudd. She defines oppression as "a social injustice, which is perpetrated through social institutions, practices and norms on social groups, by social groups." [23] Cudd emphasizes that, although individuals suffer, oppression affects entire groups within society. [24] This oppression is both psychological and material, with these two dimensions often reinforcing each other.[25] This dynamic is evident in Afghanistan, where societal beliefs about gender equality are manipulated and women are systematically excluded from work, social participation, and education. However, Cudd also notes that being part of the oppressor group, or, as she calls it, the privileged group, does not automatically make one an oppressor.[26]

In order to understand the oppression of Afghan women, it is necessary to understand the oppressor, in this case the Taliban. Philosopher Jean-Paul Gagnon suggests that the radical and extremist nature of the Taliban can be traced back to Western imperialism.[27] He argues that radicalism often emerges from the poorest parts of civilization that have suffered the most brutal injustices. The rise of the Taliban, he claims, can be seen as a reaction to Western imperialism, particularly during the colonial era, which left these parts of civilization with nothing and therefore resulted in them reacting violently.[28] More recent scholarly work shifts the focus attribution from the Taliban's extremism to the influence of neighbouring countries. Former Afghan minister of Women's Affairs Sima Samar, for example, claims that one of the main actors influencing the Taliban's ideology was Saudi Arabia.[29] During the Afghan war

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[23] Ann E. Cudd, "How to Explain Oppression: Criteria of Adequacy for Normative Explanatory Theories," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 35, no. 1 (March 2005): 21, https://doi.org/10.1177/0048393104271923.
[24] Cudd, "How to Explain Oppression," 21.
[25] Cudd, "How to Explain Oppression," 22.
[26] Cudd, "How to Explain Oppression," 22.
[27] Jean-Paul Gagnon, "The Taliban Did Not Create the Taliban, Imperialism Did," *Journal of South Asian Development* 7, no. 1 (April 2012): 24, https://doi.org/10.1177/097317411200700102.
[28] Gagnon, "The Taliban Did Not Create the Taliban," 25.
[29] Sima Samar, "Feminism, Peace, and Afghanistan," *Journal of International Affairs* 72, no. 2 (2019): 149, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26760839.

against the Soviet Union, Saudi Arabia not only supported the *mujahideen*[30] financially, but also reinforced their Islamic ideology with Wahhabism, a radically conservative Islamic doctrine prevalent in Saudi Arabia at that time.[31] Another former Afghan minister, Nargis Nehan, on the other hand, claims that Iran and Pakistan can be the blame for the Taliban's extreme ideologies.[32] Both nations benefit from instability in Afghanistan and have actively intervened in its governance. Over the years, they have supported the Taliban, training young Afghan boys in the most conservative interpretations of Sharia law, which has fuelled extreme fundamentalist beliefs among Taliban leaders, especially in their views on gender equality and women.[33] All of these studies provide important insight into the ideology and practice of the Taliban, which is crucial to acknowledge if we want to understand their oppression of Afghan women.

The oppression of women due to extreme fundamentalist beliefs, however, cannot be solely attributed as the main reason for the Taliban's violent actions against women in Afghanistan. Samar argues that both the Taliban and the United States (U.S.) have used women's rights as a tool of power.[34] She explains that the U.S. leveraged women's rights as a means to legitimize their intervention in Afghanistan to overthrow the Taliban. In her article, Samar discusses how the Taliban has used women's rights as a tool of power. She does not address, however, why they gradually began stripping away women's rights. This gap is better addressed in an article by Farkhondeh Akbari and Jacqui True, a researcher in diplomatic studies and a political scientist respectively, who highlight how gender has become deeply intertwined with the Taliban's policies of power.[35] They identify several reasons why the Taliban, especially after regaining power in 2021, continue to use women's rights as a political instrument. Akbari and True first argue that both the Taliban and the U.S. have used women's rights as a primary tool to legitimize their political actions against one another.[36] Secondly, they claim that the Taliban strives for adhering to a pure interpretation of Islam, which aligns with their previously mentioned conservative interpretations of the Sharia law.[37] Thirdly,

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[30] The precursor to the Taliban
[31] Samar, "Feminism, Peace, and Afghanistan," 151.
[32] Nargis Nehan, "The Rise and Fall of Women's Rights in Afghanistan," in *Afghanistan: Long War, Forgotten Peace*, ed. Michael Cox (LSE Press, 2022), 128, https://doi.org/10.31389/lsepress.afg.
[33] Nehan, "The Rise and Fall of Women's Rights in Afghanistan," 128–29.
[34] Samar, "Feminism, Peace, and Afghanistan," 153.
[35] Farkhondeh Akbari and Jacqui True, "One Year on from the Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan: Re-Instituting Gender Apartheid," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 76, no. 6 (30 July 2022): 624–33, https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2022.2107172.
[36] Akbari and True, "One Year on from the Taliban Takeover," 627-28.
[37] Akbari and True, "One Year on from the Taliban Takeover," 628-29.

the extreme restrictions on women serve as a domestic power strategy to maintain a cohesive state, demonstrating the Taliban's authority to the population.[38] Lastly, Akbari and True contend that the Taliban claim to empower men within Afghan society by granting them authority over the women in the families, presenting this as a form of respect for women. However, this practice primarily serves as a mechanism to reinforce their own power and control.[39]

In their article, Akbari and True describe the Taliban's use of women's rights as a political instrument as a form of 'gender apartheid'.[40] They argue that the reinforcement of male dominance over women in Afghan society reflects this system of oppression.[41] Similarly, Anastasia Telesetsky, writing during the first Taliban regime, distinguishes between the private and public spheres in Afghan society.[42] She explains how the Taliban issued a growing number of decrees aimed at removing women from the public sphere, confining them solely to private life and denying them meaningful participation in society.[43] During the Taliban's second rule, human rights activist Metra Mehran also called for recognition of Afghanistan's situation as gender apartheid.[44] She defines this as 'gender-based discrimination and segregation,' and highlights how Taliban-imposed rules systematically strip women of "basic rights, dignity, and freedoms necessary for their well-being, autonomy and personal fulfilment."[45] Mehran urges the international community to acknowledge gender apartheid in order to establish a legal structure to hold the Taliban accountable.[46] As both Telesetsky and Mehran emphasize, women in Afghanistan are not arbitrarily excluded; they are systematically denied their rights and access to the public sphere. Understanding that the education ban is part of a broader agenda to suppress women reveals the full gravity of the Taliban's policies.

To fully comprehend the actions and ideology of the Taliban, it is essential not only to examine the forces that shaped their extremist views but also to understand why particularly women's rights are used as political tools. By uncovering the

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[38] Akbari and True, "One Year on from the Taliban Takeover," 629.
[39] Akbari and True, "One Year on from the Taliban Takeover," 630.
[40] Akbari and True, "One Year on from the Taliban Takeover," 624.
[41] Akbari and True, "One Year on from the Taliban Takeover," 624.
[42] Anastasia Telesetsky, "In the Shadows and Behind the Veil: Women in Afghanistan Under Taliban Rule," *Berkeley Women's Law Journal* 13, no. 1 (1998): 296.
[43] Telesetsky, "In the Shadows and Behind the Veil," 296.
[44] Metra Mehran, "Recognition of Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan Justified," Afghanistan Research Network, June 2023, 1–31, https://doi.org/10.7488/ERA/5231.
[45] Mehran, "Recognition of Gender Apartheid," 1-2.
[46] Mehran, "Recognition of Gender Apartheid," 2.

underlying forces that have led to these restrictions on women, it becomes clearer how such measures function as a means of oppressing Afghan women. Given that this thesis explores how the ban on education is used as a tool of oppression, it is crucial to analyse not only what oppression entails, but also the origins of the tendencies to oppress. This thesis does so by building on the works mentioned above and extending the insights of these scholars.

1.2.3 The education of Muslim women in the Middle East

While the overall gender gap in primary education has decreased, a closer examination of Muslim women reveals that, on average, they are less educated and face wider gender disparities compared to women of other religions.[47] However, a study by McClendon et al. indicates that these disparities are most visible in countries with strict traditional interpretations of Islam, particularly regarding gender equality and family roles, which often limit educational opportunities for women.[48] Despite this, the research also suggests that religion is becoming a less significant factor in education gaps over time.[49] This thesis, however, challenges that conclusion, arguing that in Islamic fundamentalist countries like Afghanistan, larger educational gaps persist *precisely* because of the continued influence of religion on educational access.

To understand not only how religion affects education in countries such as Afghanistan, but also how to avoid adding a Western perspective on Muslim societies, this thesis builds further on the works of sociologist Mansoor Moaddel and professor of international and multicultural education Ayesha Khurshid. Moaddel, first of all underscores the stark differences between Islamic fundamentalist societies, generally stricter Sharia-governed states, and Islamic modernist societies.[50] He contends that more pluralistic societies tend to adopt modernist approaches to governance, fostering more progressive and open policies on education and gender equality.[51] In contrast, uniform and monolithic societies often feature bureaucratic and authoritarian governments with Islamic fundamentalist ideals.[52] These governments tend to

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[47] David McClendon et al., "Women's Education in the Muslim World," *Population and Development Review* 44, no. 2 (June 2018): 333, https://doi.org/10.1111/padr.12142.
[48] McClendon et al., "Women's Education in the Muslim World," 334.
[49] McClendon et al., "Women's Education in the Muslim World," 336.
[50] Mansoor Moaddel, "Religion and Women: Islamic Modernism versus Fundamentalism," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37, no. 1 (March 1998): 108, https://doi.org/10.2307/1388032.
[51] Moaddel, "Religion and Women," 108.
[52] Moaddel, "Religion and Women," 108.

implement conservative policies, resulting in limited gender equality and reduced educational opportunities for women.[53] This distinction between pluralistic and monolithic societies provides valuable context for this thesis in understanding how different interpretations of Islam severely influence education and gender equality ideas.

Ayesha Khurshid echoes a critique raised by Moaddel regarding the Western perspective on Islam and Muslim societies. Moaddel argues that Western scholars often adopt a narrow and Westernized view of what they perceive as 'oppression'.[54] He cautions against imposing Western ideals on Islamic cultures, because such interference can provoke stricter measures of oppression by Islamic fundamentalists who view these liberal ideas as a threat.[55] Similarly, Khurshid warns against this pattern, arguing that Western literature frequently portrays Muslim women as the 'other', positioning them as individuals who need to be 'rescued' by Western societies.[56] She critiques the tendency of the West to view Islam as outdated and to frame education for women as a tool to modernize Muslim women.[57] However, when examining the current situation in Afghanistan, where countless women's rights have been revoked, this thesis asserts that these actions can not merely be dismissed as human right abuses from a Western perspective. They are justifiable from multiple viewpoints, including those of Afghan women themselves.[58] Carol Riphenburg, a political scientist, further critiques the Western approach to rescuing 'oppressed' Muslim women, arguing that such efforts often fall short of their promises. For instance, by 2004, three years after the U.S. took control in Afghanistan, there had been little tangible change for Afghan women.[59] While the U.S. had pledged to help women regain independence, their early interventions were largely symbolic and short-lived, distracting from deeper systemic issues.[60] Riphenburg points out that the U.S. failed to enable women to

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[53] Moaddel, "Religion and Women," 108-09.
[54] Moaddel, "Religion and Women," 128.
[55] Moaddel, "Religion and Women," 108.
[56] Ayesha Khurshid, "Islamic Traditions of Modernity: Gender, Class, and Islam in a Transnational Women's Education Project," *Gender & Society* 29, no. 1 (February 2015): 117, https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243214549193.
[57] Khurshid, "Islamic Traditions of Modernity," 117.
[58] This week I saw a poignant video on social media of Afghan women singing and crying over the fact that they are also banned from studies for nurses and midwives (03/12/2024)
https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cwy3l1035nlo
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V6MV87vj1gQ
[59] Carol J. Riphenburg, "Post-Taliban Afghanistan: Changed Outlook for Women?," *Asian Survey* 44, no. 3 (1 June 2004): 401, https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2004.44.3.401.
[60] Riphenburg, "Post-Taliban Afghanistan," 401.

participate in meaningful ways in policy and decision-making processes, an essential step for long-term progress.[61] Although some progress was achieved in later years, these gains are now being systematically eroded under Taliban rule. Given that this thesis is written from a Western perspective, it is crucial to avoid 'othering' Muslim women or Islamic societies to maintain a broad and open-minded approach.

What remains insufficiently addressed in the scholarly debate is the social and cultural impact of the ban on women's education. Perhaps, this is due to the problem being a recent one. While the effects of the Taliban's first regime are somewhat evident by now, there is a notable lack of (historical) academic work examining these outcomes. This gap underscores the importance of understanding the enduring consequences of educational discrimination, both for Afghan women and for the broader society.

1.2.4 Conclusion

Building further on these three intersecting historiographies –the implications of gender discrimination in education, the oppression of women in Afghanistan, and the education of Muslim women in the Middle East– this thesis aims to offer a deeper understanding of the underlying short and long-term implications of using the education ban as a tool oppression; a perspective that has not been sufficiently examined before, especially not from a social historical point of view. Adding a historical perspective to this issue is important for three reasons. First, it helps to contextualise the present situation of the issue, which is crucial due to the ban only being re-implemented recently. Second, it provides a complete and broader narrative of the social and cultural short- and long-term implications of this ban due to multi-perspectivity, as this study examines both the perspectives of the Taliban and that of Afghan women. Third, it gives a deeper understanding of the cause and effect of this oppression of women by highlighting the structures of power over time in Afghanistan.

Overall, by extending the insights of previous scholars, this study argues that this ban is a tool used by the Taliban to exert their power and credibility over Afghanistan. Against that backdrop, the ban not only worsens the situation for Afghan women but also deteriorates the broader Afghan society. Both the social and cultural short- and long-term consequences of this ban, which become evident in the analysis of primary source material, are concerning, as it will eventually lead to a lack of women

[61] Riphenburg, "Post-Taliban Afghanistan," 421.

in the workforce, particularly in roles traditionally designated for women, creating a lost generation with limited opportunities. Even though this problem is recent, it is going to have severe implications and therefore needs to be researched. Given that this issue is highly relevant today, this study provides a timely and critical analysis of how such policies affect not only the Afghan women directly involved but also the Afghan society and economy as a whole.

1.3 Primary sources and method

This thesis uses digitalised sources, which can be categorized into three subgroups. The first category of sources used in this thesis consists of testimonies and interviews with Afghan women about the ban on education. These sources provide firsthand insight into the experiences of Afghan women regarding the restrictions posed by the Taliban. These sources cannot be found in a single archive but are spread across the internet. They include, among other things, interviews with Afghan women in news outlets, TED talks by women who have fled Afghanistan, and testimonies of Afghan girls and women. All of these sources qualify as primary sources, as they provide firsthand accounts of women discussing their personal experiences with the Taliban's restrictions. This thesis also takes into account that, depending on the outlet publishing the interview, these interviews may be edited and could therefore be incomplete.

The second category includes interviews with Taliban leaders and official Taliban decrees and statements. From their first period in power, official decrees and statements of the Taliban are used. However, due to the lack of official governmental documents from the Taliban explaining their decisions and policies since their second time in power, interviews with Taliban leaders and spokesmen offer a unique glimpse into their way of thinking. These interviews are also found across the internet, often conducted by various news outlets, such as the BBC and Al Jazeera. Again, this thesis takes into account that these interviews are often used as propaganda aimed at the West, they may not fully represent the true position of the Taliban.

The third category of sources used in this thesis help overcome the shortcomings of the first two categories. This category includes reports published by human rights organisations such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch. These sources are not primary sources, but these reports provide valuable overviews of specific themes researched in Afghanistan. The research conducted by these organisations is highly reliable, as they often maintain direct contact with individuals in the areas they study, ensuring that their reports offer accurate insights into the current situation. Additionally, these reports benefit from a broad historical perspective, as they are typically produced by experts in the field. Furthermore, they give oppressed individuals a voice by advocating for their rights. Moreover, these reports are aimed at a broad audience, making them easy to access on the official websites of human rights organizations. However, it is crucial to cross-reference the findings of these reports with scholarly literature and news articles, as the focus of the reports may be influenced

by the specific mission or agenda of the organisation. Most importantly, these reports are mainly used in this thesis to cross-reference statements made by individuals such as Taliban members or Afghan women, to check if their claims are true or false.

The method used to analyse these sources is a mixed-method approach, incorporating two distinct methods. The first method is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This method consists of: (1) critique, which involves having a critical stance when reading and interpretating sources; (2) ideology, which focusses on deconstructing the established discourses that often serve oppressive agendas; and (3) power, which examines how dominant discourses legitimise or de-legitimise power and how power influences discourses.[62] Ultimately, CDA aims to place the collected data within broader social, historical, and political contexts.[63] By applying CDA, the collected sources will not only be interpreted through a feminist lens but will also be analysed within their social, cultural, and political contexts. The second method used is Narrative Analysis. This method focuses on personal stories and narratives, as these play a significant role in the establishment and preservation of culture and social norms.[64] When analysing interviews with both Taliban leaders and Afghan women, the stories they share provide unique insights into existing social norms and reveal the desired cultural and social norms of these respective groups. Overall, Narrative Analysis is especially important in underscoring the experiences of the central individuals in this thesis and placing these experiences within a broader (historical) context of the ban on education. A potential limitation of both methods is that narratives and discourse can be reinterpreted by different scholars, leading to varying scientific outcomes.[65] However, by consistently applying the feminist lens, the interpretations of the sources remain coherent. This limitation can also be mitigated by using triangulation, which is incorporating sources from different actors, and by clearly defining the researcher's own position within the analysis.[66]

For example, in an interview with Yogita Limaye, a correspondent for the BBC, Hamdullah Fitrat, a deputy spokesperson for the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, was

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[62] Ruth Emily Wodak and Michael Meyer, *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies*, 2015, 24-26.
[63] Wodak and Meyer, *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies*, 24-30.
[64] Martin Cortazzi, "Narrative Analysis," *Language Teaching* 27, no. 3 (July 1994): 157-65, https://www.cambridge.org/core/product/identifier/S0261444800007801/type/journal_article.
[65] Wodak and Meyer, *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies*, 27.
[66] Wodak and Meyer, Methods of Critical Discourse Studies, 24-30.

asked about education for women.[67] He responded by stating that the government is working on it and quickly brushed over de topic by instead highlighting that more women have received permits to open businesses under Taliban rule. When applying CDA to this segment of the interview, this claim appears dubious, especially when cross-referenced with other news reports. These sources reveal that, just one month prior to the interview's broadcast, the Taliban had shut down beauty salons, one of the last public spaces available to women and one of the few businesses women could still own and operate.[68] This contradiction underscores that Fitrat's statements in the interview are misleading. It suggests that the Taliban presents one narrative to Western media, portraying itself as a regime working to empower Afghan women in line with Western expectations, while in reality, it continues to erode women's rights. Thus, by cross-referencing this interview with other sources and situating the spokesperson's statements within broader social and political contexts, it becomes evident that his answers are unreliable. Nonetheless, they provide valuable insight into the Taliban's strategy for engaging with Western audiences.

[67] BBC News, "Taliban Defend Changes in Afghanistan in BBC Interview." YouTube, 13 September 2024, 1:45, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qj_ysX3V8M0.
[68] BBC News, "Taliban Defend Changes in Afghanistan," 1:45-2:51.

Chapter 2: Afghanistan from 1996 until now

Over the past century, the rights of women in Afghanistan have been subjected to a constant flux, shifting with each change in governance.[69] The position of women has alternated between periods of progress and strict conservatism, influenced by the ideologies of those in power. Under the banner of Islam, women's rights have been restricted to varying degrees, while under the guise of modernization, they have at times been expanded. This recurring pattern remains evident today. Since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, the rights and opportunities gained in the preceding years have been systematically dismantled.[70] This chapter provides the necessary background and context to understand how the Taliban rose to power and how Afghanistan's political landscape has shaped the position of women from 1996 to the present day, guided by the subquestion: *How did the regimes of the Taliban (1996-2001 and 2021-2025), and the democratic period (2001-2021), influence the position and the rights of Afghan women?* By examining shifting dynamics of power and governance, this chapter explores the extent to which these changes have directly influenced Afghan women's rights and their place in society.

2.1 Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan 1996-2001

To understand why the Taliban rose to power in 1996 and Afghanistan's history regarding women's education, it is necessary to look back to 1919, immediately following the last Anglo-Afghan war. In 1919, Amanullah Khan became the ruler of Afghanistan. He was the first leader to advocate for equal educational opportunities for women and supported a modern approach to women's rights, aiming to steer Afghanistan towards modernization.[71] His wife was appointed head of national education for women and established the first all-girls school in 1920. However, these actions were criticized as un-Islamic by his opponents leading to Amanullah Khan's overthrow in 1929.[72] Following Khan's removal, Afghanistan descended into chaos for

[69] Arezou Nooristani, "State Building in Talibanized Afghanistan: Lessons From History," in *Afghanistan in Transition: From Taliban to Taliban*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2025), 81–106, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429281631.
[70] Amnesty International, "Death in Slow Motion: Women and Girls Under Taliban Rule" (London: Amnesty International, July 2022), https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa11/5685/2022/en/.
[71] Nooristani, "State Building in Talibanized Afghanistan," 87.
[72] Nooristani, "State Building in Talibanized Afghanistan," 87.

the next seventy years. This period was marked by a series of leaders, some more progressive than others, numerous coups, and, in the 1980s, a brutal war between the Afghan military and the Soviet Union against the Mujahideen.[73] The Mujahideen, an Afghan rebel group funded by the United States, emerged victorious in the war against the Soviet Union and the Afghan government in 1992.[74] However, after this victory, the U.S. withdrew its support, creating chaos and a power vacuum that further destabilized Afghanistan.[75]

This chaos created the perfect environment for the emergence of the Taliban. In the southern city of Kandahar, rival tribes caused significant unrest, which the mujahideen leaders were unable to control.[76] During this period, students from the madrassas, Islamic theology schools, began to develop new ideas about how Afghanistan should be ruled.[77] Led by Mullah Omar, these students[78] initiated a movement, not primarily to seize power in Kandahar, but more to restore what they saw as a purely Islamic society.[79] This group quickly gained support in Kandahar, where, as one scholar highlights, they perceived themselves as Robin Hood figures, defending the poor and the weak against the Mujahideen.[80] As the Taliban's influence expanded, they began to capture more territories in Afghanistan, eventually seizing control of Kabul.[81] The Taliban governed through fear, to legitimize and maintain their power over the Afghan people.[82] They viewed themselves as the rightful servants of Allah, responsible for enforcing what they believed to be the purest form of Islam and Sharia laws in Afghanistan.[83] One of these laws included a total ban on women's employment and education.[84]

That these strict laws were implemented without any opposition within the Taliban is due to three main reasons. First, the Taliban consisted primarily of students

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[73] Nooristani, "State Building in Talibanized Afghanistan," 87-89.
[74] Nooristani, "State Building in Talibanized Afghanistan," 89.
[75] Rajen Harshé and Dhananjay Tripathi, "Introduction," in *Afghanistan in Transition: From Taliban to Taliban*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2025), 5, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429281631.
[76] Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, 2nd ed. (Yale University Press, 2010), 22.
[77] Rashid, *Taliban,* 22-23.
[78] Talib means Islamic student, the plural of Talib is Taliban
[79] Rashid, *Taliban,* 23.
[80] Rashid, *Taliban,* 25.
[81] Rashid, *Taliban,* 50.
[82] Rashid, *Taliban,* 50.
[83] Ahmed Sahal K.P., "Through the Lens of Belief," in *Afghanistan in Transition: From Taliban to Taliban*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2025), 65, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429281631.
[84] Rashid, *Taliban,* 50.

who had been educated in refugee camps in Afghanistan during the Afghan war with the Soviet Union. So, the strict madrassa education they received was the only form of education they had ever known.[85] Second, the leaders of the Taliban were often Madrassa teachers, who held significant influence over these young students. As a result, the Taliban members never questioned their leaders, as they had never known any other form of leadership.[86] Finally, because most Taliban members grew up in refugee camps where men and women were strictly separated, they were accustomed to a society without women. For them, banning women from public life was not seen as a significant change.[87]

2.2 Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2001-2021

Under the Taliban's rule, Afghanistan's economic and social conditions did not stabilize; instead, they continued to deteriorate further.[88] The country was plagued by hunger, poverty, a lack of basic healthcare services, and overall extreme oppression.[89] Additionally, Afghanistan became a safe haven for terrorists, with Al-Qaeda closely collaborating with the Taliban and Osama Bin Laden finding refuge there.[90] Following the terrorist attack on the United States on September 11, 2001, the American government launched its War on Terror in Afghanistan, knowing that Bin Laden was residing there.[91] Within two months, the Northern Alliance, the main opposition to the Taliban in Afghanistan, supported by the United States, regained control over significant parts of the country.[92] However, the U.S. never deployed ground troops, relying solely on airstrikes. This approach allowed a large number of Taliban and Al-Qaeda fighters to escape to an ally of the Taliban; Pakistan.[93] As a consequence of the War on Terror, the United Nations expanded its support in Afghanistan. This included overseeing the Afghan interim government and training the Afghan National Security Forces to facilitate the country's transition to democracy and protect it from threats posed by the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, with which U.S. troops and European

[85] Rashid, *Taliban,* 32-33.
[86] Angelo Rasanayagam, *Afghanistan: A Modern History*, 2nd ed. (I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2005), 177.
[87] Rashid, *Taliban,* 32-33.
[88] Rashid, *Taliban,* 217.
[89] Nooristani, "State Building in Talibanized Afghanistan," 91.
[90] Nooristani, "State Building in Talibanized Afghanistan," 91; Rashid, *Taliban,* 217-18.
[91] Nooristani, "State Building in Talibanized Afghanistan," 91.
[92] Rashid, *Taliban,* 220.
[93] Rashid, *Taliban,* 220.

peacekeeping forces were involved.[94] As a result, some progress was made towards establishing a more democratic and modern society during the UN intervention. For instance, presidential elections were held in 2004, which saw a high voter turnout of about 73% of the eligible population.[95] Efforts were also made to reintegrate women into society, with women participating in parliamentary elections in 2005 and taking up positions in both governmental and non-governmental institutions.[96]

In 2003, the Taliban had regrouped and reorganized themselves in Pakistan, launching guerrilla attacks in Afghanistan.[97] While the Taliban held little power or popularity during the 2004 elections, by 2009, they had regained significant influence. The presidential elections of 2009 were marred by violence and disruptions of democracy caused by the Taliban, leading to a very low voter turnout.[98] In response to the Taliban's guerilla attacks, the UN's peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan expanded, increasing its manpower. However, this escalation only provoked more attacks by the Taliban.[99] This cycle of violence led to further U.S. involvement under the Obama administration.[100] Consequently, the Taliban claimed that any government in power at that time was not a legitimate Islamic Afghan government but merely a puppet regime controlled by foreign powers.[101] Despite the U.S.'s efforts, the Taliban continued to gain ground, and by 2017, they controlled more than half of Afghanistan.[102] During Trump's administration, the United States started peace negotiations with the Taliban to address the pressing situation in Afghanistan.[103] These negotiations resulted in an agreement that led to the withdrawal of all foreign troops from the country. However, this withdrawal also allowed the Taliban to strengthen their position as representing the rightful Islamic leaders of Afghanistan. After capturing Kabul, the Taliban once again assumed complete control of the country.[104]

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[94] Rajen Harshé, "Situating Afghanistan in a Globalising World," in *Afghanistan in Transition: From Taliban to Taliban*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2025), 19, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429281631.
[95] Rashid, *Taliban,* 227.
[96] Nooristani, "State Building in Talibanized Afghanistan," 92.
[97] Rashid, *Taliban,* 225.
[98] Rashid, *Taliban,* 234-35.
[99] Rashid, *Taliban,* 229.
[100] Rashid, *Taliban,* 233.
[101] Harshé and Tripathi, "Introduction," 6.
[102] Harshé, "Situating Afghanistan in a Globalising World," 20.
[103] Harshé, "Situating Afghanistan in a Globalising World," 22.
[104] Nooristani, "State Building in Talibanized Afghanistan," 93.

2.3 Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan 2021- Now

It is evident that the UN mission in Afghanistan failed. Due to the combination of allowing most of the Taliban to escape to Pakistan, inconsistent approaches to state-building, and unreliable peace negotiations contributed to the swift takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban once UN forces withdrew.[105] Additionally, scholars have criticized the exclusion of women from the peace negotiations between the U.S. and the Taliban, since this meant that their voices were not heard, and their concerns were not taken seriously.[106] Despite clear evidence that the Taliban could not be trusted during peace talks, given that they carried out multiple attacks on public spaces such as schools and maternity hospitals at the time, the U.S. continued with the negotiations.[107] The Taliban successfully whitewashed their organization, their actions, and their vision for the future of Afghanistan, and the West was too quick to believe in their supposed transformation.[108] Following the Taliban's takeover of Kabul and control of the government, Afghanistan's economy collapsed once again.[109] This decline was not only due to the Taliban's governance but also to the exodus of educated professionals fleeing the country and the economic sanctions imposed by the West on the Taliban regime.[110] These sanctions remain the only leverage the West and the U.S. have to pressure the Taliban over their human rights violations and oppression of women, as the withdrawal of UN troops occurred as part of the peace agreement rather than through violent conflict.[111]

Unlike their previous rule, this time the Taliban did not immediately impose strict Sharia laws but instead gradually tightened restrictions on women.[112] Over the span of a few months, the small amount of progress made in the past twenty years towards more rights and opportunities for Afghan women was systematically revoked.[113] Their

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[105] Chayanika Saxena, "Pieced Peace in Afghanistan: Evaluating the Peace Processes for Ending the Conflict in Afghanistan Post-2014," in *Afghanistan in Transition: From Taliban to Taliban*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2025), 66, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429281631.
[106] Farkhondeh Akbari and Jacqui True, "Bargaining with Patriarchy in Peacemaking: The Failure of Women, Peace, and Security in Afghanistan," *Global Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (2024): 2, https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksae004; Samar, "Feminism, Peace, and Afghanistan," 146.
[107] Akbari and True, "One Year on from the Taliban Takeover," 628.
[108] Akbari and True, "One Year on from the Taliban Takeover," 627-28.
[109] Aamir Khan and Aqsa Durrani, "The Future of Afghanistan under Taliban-Led Regime: Challenges and Likely Scenarios," *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal (LASSIJ)* 8, no. 1 (6 April 2024): 6, https://doi.org/10.47264/idea.lassij/8.1.1.
[110] Khan and Durrani, "The Future of Afghanistan," 2-5.
[111] Khan and Durrani, "The Future of Afghanistan," 6.
[112] Akbari and True, "One Year on from the Taliban Takeover," 625.
[113] Akbari and True, "One Year on from the Taliban Takeover," 625.

opportunity to participate in parliament and to take on roles in both governmental and non-governmental institutions was swiftly taken away.[114] Since then, women have been confined to their homes, girls have been banned from attending secondary school and university, and their fundamental rights have been systematically denied.[115] The Taliban justifies these restrictions by portraying women's rights as an agenda imposed by Western occupiers that clashes with Afghan and Islamic values.[116] Afghanistan's long history of conflict, along with the persistent violence during periods of relative peace, has shaped a deeply masculine society.[117] This explains how the Taliban has been able to enforce conservative and patriarchal laws with little resistance. Almost four years into Taliban rule, women's rights continue to be eroded, with no significant opposition emerging to challenge their authority or to destabilise their regime.

2.4 Rights for women in Afghanistan

The status of women's rights in Afghanistan fluctuated depending on which group or leader was in power and their views on women and gender equality, education, and Islam. Due to the decades of war and violence that preceded the Taliban's rise to power in 1996, the situation for women was already dire, with female illiteracy rates approximately around 90%.[118] Thus, the Taliban only worsened the already poor situation.[119] Education was already under attack by the Taliban even before official decrees were issued, because women were banned from the workforce. Before 1996, women made up the majority of teachers. By excluding them from employment, it became nearly impossible for girls, and also harder for boys, to receive an education.[120] The Taliban's primary justification for restricting women's education at the time was that they were working on establishing proper educational opportunities for girls but faced security issues, such as the lack of separate transportation and school buildings to prevent boys and girls from studying together.[121] This will be further elaborated in the next chapter. However, they contradicted their claim by shutting down alternative schools for girls, including those run by volunteer teachers in private homes,

[114] Akbari and True, "One Year on from the Taliban Takeover," 626.
[115] Akbari and True, "One Year on from the Taliban Takeover," 626-27.
[116] Nehan, "The Rise and Fall of Women's Rights in Afghanistan," 114.
[117] Nehan, "The Rise and Fall of Women's Rights in Afghanistan," 129.
[118] Rashid, *Taliban,* 107.
[119] Rashid, *Taliban,* 108.
[120] Rasanayagam, *Afghanistan,* 193.
[121] Rashid, *Taliban,* 106.

as well as already established all-girls' schools.[122] Overall, women's rights deteriorated significantly under Taliban rule, as they were increasingly confined to their homes and denied access to basic healthcare.[123]

After the Taliban was overthrown in 2001, Afghan women's rights began to improve. With financial aid from the international community, the new government adopted a more modern approach to women's rights.[124] Women were employed across various government sectors, and a special ministry for women's rights was established.[125] However, many of these opportunities were primarily available to Afghan women who had lived abroad and returned after the fall of the Taliban. These women were often fluent in English, and familiar with international organisations, which created a divide between them and local Afghan women.[126] This, in turn, sparked resistance from more conservative Afghans who opposed what they saw as the enforcement of Western ideals on Afghanistan.[127] Despite this, Afghanistan made economic and social developments towards greater gender equality, particularly from 2014 onward, under a more progressive president.[128] Education improved and became more accessible for both girls and boys after the Taliban regime.[129] However, at the same time, the more conservative elites, supported by Iran and Pakistan, began opening new madrassas to educate young boys and girls in strict Islamic values, something that the Taliban welcomed.[130] A 2017 Human Rights Watch report highlighted that, even under the new Afghan government, patriarchal attitudes toward education persisted, and both external and internal barriers continued to prevent many girls from accessing proper schooling.[131] Furthermore, the report noted that the initial progress made after the Taliban's fall began to decline as the country's security situation worsened, disproportionately affecting girls' access to education.[132] Ultimately, after the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan, the small steps toward gender equality and girls' education were reversed entirely.

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[122] Rasanayagam, *Afghanistan,* 198; Rashid, *Taliban,* 113.
[123] Rashid, *Taliban,* 91.
[124] Nehan, "The Rise and Fall of Women's Rights in Afghanistan," 117.
[125] Nehan, "The Rise and Fall of Women's Rights in Afghanistan," 118.
[126] Nehan, "The Rise and Fall of Women's Rights in Afghanistan," 119.
[127] Nehan, "The Rise and Fall of Women's Rights in Afghanistan," 119.
[128] Nehan, "The Rise and Fall of Women's Rights in Afghanistan," 122.
[129] Nehan, "The Rise and Fall of Women's Rights in Afghanistan," 123.
[130] Nehan, "The Rise and Fall of Women's Rights in Afghanistan," 120.
[131] Human Rights Watch, ""I Won't Be a Doctor, and One Day You'll Be Sick": Girl's Access to Education in Afghanistan' (Human Rights Watch, October 2017), 4-8.
[132] Human Rights Watch, "I Won't Be a Doctor, and One Day You'll Be Sick," 2.

2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, the following question is answered: *How did the regimes of the Taliban (1996-2001 and 2021-2025), and the democratic period (2001-2021), influence the position and the rights of Afghan women?* As outlined in this chapter, it is evident that the type of government has a profound impact on the position of women in Afghanistan. After decades of war and instability, insufficient state-building efforts have prevented the development of a democratic society in which both men and women can actively participate in shaping the country's future. As a result, deep-rooted patriarchal structures have repeatedly resurfaced whenever the opportunity arose, most notably in 1996 and again in 2021 due to the Taliban. In 1996, following decades of conflict, chaos and a resulting power vacuum, the Taliban seized the moment to present themselves as the true servants of Islam and, therefore, the only legitimate rulers of Afghanistan. By governing through fear and imposing rigid interpretations of Sharia law, they worsened the already critical situation, with women being impacted the most, with their rights systematically revoked. The War on Terror in 2001 temporarily reversed this course when U.S.-backed Northern Alliance forces overthrew the Taliban, and a UN peacekeeping mission was established. This period saw some improvement in women's rights, albeit small. Women were allowed to work again, gained seats in parliament, and girls had access to schools and universities. However, the Taliban actively tried to undermine the progress that was being made by violent attacks on, amongst others, schools for girls and hospitals. After two decades, the Taliban once again had an opportunity to seize the power they wanted. Since their return in 2021, they have gradually reinstalled their oppressive policies and have been systematically dismantling the progress made on women's rights. Over the past four years, Afghan women have been reduced to less than second-class citizens. To this day, the Taliban continues, to introduce new laws and decrees that further strip down their rights and freedoms.

Chapter 3: The Taliban

As seen in the previous chapter, from the years before 1996 up until now, the Taliban always had severe influence over Afghanistan. By governing through terror, both during their time in power and during their time as an insurgency group, they have had a significant impact on Afghanistan, its people, and its safety. Because of this power and influence, the women in Afghanistan bore the heaviest brunt. Their rights, as stated in the previous chapter, were constantly a point of conflict. Moreover, under the Taliban rule, their rights have only further deteriorated. As soon as the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in 1996, women were not allowed to work anymore, which disrupted the whole healthcare and educational system. Additionally, the free movement of women was restricted; women had to be veiled completely, and their right to education was taken away.[133] The same happened in 2021, when the Taliban rose to power again. Since then, women are not allowed to go outside anymore without the company of a male chaperone, they are not allowed to work, and again, they are not allowed to go to school and attend education beyond the sixth grade.[134] By specifically imposing these strict rules on women and girls, and therefore severely targeting them, it becomes clear that the Taliban want to exert their power over Afghan women. This thesis primarily focuses on the ban on education; however, this issue cannot be fully understood without considering the broader context of other restrictions imposed on women from the perspective of the Taliban.

This chapter will dive more deeply into the Taliban. It explores how they use the ban on education as a form of oppression. By analysing their explanation for this specific ban and their overall restrictions on women, this chapter focuses on the rhetoric used by the Taliban. Specifically, by applying a feminist framework to this rhetoric, this chapter analyses the deeper layer of how this particular discourse can be perceived as oppression. As seen in the historiography, Farkhondeh Akbari and Jacqui True conclude that, according to the Taliban, these restrictions on women's rights are in place because the Taliban claim to follow the pure interpretation of Islam and Sharia.[135] Consequently, by having control over women and their rights, the Taliban

[133] Rashid, *Taliban,* 50.
[134] Iva Venneman, "Afghaanse vrouwen zijn op geen enkele school meer welkom: "We mogen helemaal niets meer"", *de Volkskrant*, 5 January 2025.
[135] Akbari and True, "One Year on from the Taliban Takeover," 627-30.

fortify their authority through power and fear.[136] To make this argument, this chapter shows how the Taliban use certain rhetoric to legitimise their power over women. Additionally, this chapter follows Ann Cudd's definition of oppression[137], which she defines as "social injustice that is perpetrated through social institutions, practices, and norms on social groups." [138] Based on the analysis in this chapter, this seems to be exactly what the Taliban does. The Taliban use women as scapegoats to enforce their power over Afghanistan. They do so by putting social injustices, such as taking away the right to work, the right to education, and even the right to go outside, on women to keep them small.[139] The idea of oppression as a social injustice will be used in this chapter, because it can shed new light on not only the question of why but more specifically also *how* the Taliban oppresses women in Afghanistan. By combining both the ideas of enforcing power and oppression, this chapter builds further on the work done by scholars mentioned in the historiography.

The question of this chapter seeks to answer is: *How does the Taliban use the ban on education to oppress Afghan women?* This question will be answered by applying the lens of feminism to the analysis. This chapter builds on Bell Hooks' definition of feminism, which she defines as "a struggle to end sexist oppression."[140] As this chapter demonstrates, by specifically targeting women, the Taliban engages in sexist oppression. Applying the feminist lens as defined by Hook is useful because it sheds light on the male domination and sexism of the Taliban and their patriarchal way of rule. Additionally, it highlights how Afghan women become victims of male domination.

3.1 Sharia law

During the time that the Taliban was emerging as a group, Taliban officials already started to establish guidelines in which the Taliban ideology was thoroughly explained. A book, *The Taliban Reader*[141], provides great insight into the shifting ideas of the

[136] Akbari and True, "One Year on from the Taliban Takeover," 627-30.
[137] As mentioned in the historiography in the introduction of this thesis
[138] Cudd, "How to Explain Oppression," 21.
[139] Venneman, "Afghaanse vrouwen zijn op geen enkele school meer welkom".
[140] Hooks, *Feminist Theory,* 24.
[141] The Taliban Reader is a book with "a collection of statements by those associated with the Taliban movement." It consists of documents that were published by the Taliban. These documents consist of statements from Taliban controlled newspapers and websites. This book is composed by Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn. Through their work on a different book in Afghanistan, they had access to primary source materials. Together with translators, they collected sources from all over

Taliban from 1995 until 2017. This book is “a collection of statements by those associated with the Taliban movement,” consisting of documents published by the Taliban.[142] Whilst researching these documents and statements, it becomes clear that the prime recurring argument for the Taliban to ban education for women is that they see it as the right interpretation of Sharia law.[143] According to their own constitution, the Taliban states that the Hanafi school of thought is the only right religious guideline, and that interpretation of Sharia is the only law that should be adhered to in Afghanistan.[144] This is underpinned in a statement made after the Taliban conquered Kabul and took over the whole country in 1996. This statement posits that the reason the Taliban immediately implemented stricter rules, particularly for women, was because the laws of the previous government were not in line with the right Islamic values.[145] Ultimately, this means that the Taliban does not see that there could be different interpretations of Sharia law, because the one they adhere to is the only right one.

Interestingly, in the same statement, the Taliban determined that they were the ones to end oppression within Afghanistan.[146] However, by giving women restrictions that severely impact the freedom of their livelihoods, the Taliban is oppressing women under the guise of freeing them from previous oppression. According to the Taliban, the restriction on education for women is nothing more than logic according to their Islamic beliefs. Statements in a Taliban article of 1995, such as “we have given women all the rights which are given to them by the Islamic faith,” and in article 39 of their established constitution which states that “the education of women is regulated within the limits of the Islamic Sharia,” indicate that the Taliban does not see their ban on education as a form of oppression but as rightful implementation of Sharia.[147] Additionally, when a UN secretary asked the Taliban in 1996 to lift the ban on education

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Afghanistan, connected to the Taliban. All the primary sources they collected for other books are now bundled in this book, translated to English from Arabic, Dari and Pashto. For more information about the establishment of this book, see the introduction.

[142] Alex Strick Van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader: War, Islam and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 15-18.
NB: an online version of the book was used for this thesis. However, in this version the page numbers are not visible. The referenced page numbers in this thesis therefore correspond to the pdf numbers and not to the page numbers of the tangible book.

[143] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 168, 201, 303, 308.

[144] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 303.

[145] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 199.

[146] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 199.

[147] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 168, 308.

for women, the Taliban answered that such ideas would be “one hundred percent against Islamic principles” and against the beliefs of the Afghan society.[148] This argumentation was not only used during the first governing period of the Taliban. During their second time in power since 2021, the Taliban has again used Sharia law as the justification for the ban on education. In the first press conference of the Taliban after their takeover, the chief spokesperson stated that women will not be discriminated against and are going to be active in Afghan society, yet again within the framework of Islam.[149]

It is, however, striking that the Taliban is contradicting itself. In a speech by Mohammad Omar[150] in the late nineties, it is argued that they are “determined to provide educational opportunities for all Afghans irrespective of gender.” [151] Additionally, in a commentary article in 2012, they stated that according to the Holy Prophet of Islam, it is the task of all Muslims to “seek knowledge” and that the “Islamic Emirate in general does not resist education in the country.”[152] Since Islam mentions ‘all Muslims’ it should therefore mean that this includes women as well. Furthermore, in their constitution, the Taliban state that all people have equal rights.[153] Moreover, in all three previously mentioned statements, it is argued that, because of the writings in the Quran and the holy teachings of the Islam, education is important for all Afghan citizens.[154] In conclusion, the argument used by the Taliban, that education for women should be banned due to Sharia laws, does not hold any real ground. The Taliban is highly focused on being the rightful Islamic leaders, which results in them not critically assessing their interpretations of the Quran. By banning women from education, they do not see that they contradict themselves with what is written in the Quran. The Taliban, therefore, by firmly holding onto their own beliefs and ideologies, actively oppress women without any viable foundation. They oppress women under the guise of Sharia and Islam. From a feminist perspective, it is clear that equality between men and women in Afghanistan only deteriorates further, even though according to the Quran the Taliban should strive for equal rights.

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[148] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 201.
[149] Al Jazeera, “Taliban Spokesperson Hosts First News Conference in Kabul,” YouTube, 17 August 2021, 0:50, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yc_Rre_IPto.
[150] The then leader of the Taliban
[151] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 207.
[152] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 567.
[153] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 305.
[154] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 279, 305, 567.

3.2 Issues to be resolved

Another often-recurring argument of the Taliban, used to explain why women are not allowed to go to school under their rule, is that there are 'issues that need to be resolved'. This argument was first used in 1996, right after the Taliban started their first rule in Afghanistan. In this statement, it is explained that "limitations on the education of women are imposed because of improper conditions in the country."[155] In the same sentence, there is a promise that once these conditions are improved, the decision made in relation to this ban will be revised.[156] In later statements, the Taliban explain that these conditions are mostly in regard to financial and material limitations.[157] Due to years of war, the majority of school buildings were destroyed, and there was no money to renew the curriculum and provide learning materials, as well as no money to secure certified teachers.[158] The reason that primarily women and girls are hit by these problems is that, according to the Taliban, their schools need extra security to create a safe learning environment. Consequently, this means that more money is required.[159] Even though this reasoning unequally hits women harder, it is an explanation that can be understood when used in 1996. The country had indeed been at war for decades. Building up a country and providing suitable learning environments for children can take time. However, after five years of being in charge, in 2001, the situation for girls and women had not improved yet. This can indicate that the Taliban did not see this problem as an urgent one that had to be resolved quickly.[160]

The same argument has been used during the second government by the Taliban since 2021. Whereas in 1996, the reasoning behind the argument that learning facilities were destroyed during the years of war had some substance to it, in their second time as a government, this became an empty argument. Between 2001 and 2021, the international community had invested largely into the education of both men and women in Afghanistan, and the numbers of children and adolescents in schools had increased significantly.[161] This means that the institutions necessary for providing education were developed and were still useful after 2021. In the first months after regaining control in Afghanistan, the Taliban remained ambiguous about their stance

[155] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 201.
[156] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 201.
[157] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 271.
[158] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 271.
[159] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 271.
[160] UNESCO, "The Right to Education: What's at Stake in Afghanistan" (UNESCO, 2021), 5.
[161] UNESCO, "The Right to Education," 5-7.

on women's education, allowing some schools for women to stay open.[162] However, in March 2022 schools definitively closed for girls above grade 6.[163] Additionally, in December 2022 all universities closed for women.[164] In the time of definitively banning all education for women above grade 6, the argument for explaining this decision as 'issues that need to be resolved' was reused. For instance, in an interview of BBC News with a Taliban spokesperson in august 2022. In this interview, when the interviewer asked when all secondary schools will open again, the spokesperson answered that the Taliban is facing some problems and that they are trying to solve them.[165] Furthermore, in another interview in August 2024, a Taliban spokesperson gave the same argument for banning education. He explains that there are issues, other than logistics, finances, and budgets, that need to be resolved, and that the government will give a resolution for this situation as they believe right for Afghanistan.[166] Strikingly, he does not explain what these issues exactly entail.

Where in 1996 the argument of unresolved issues being the reason for specifically banning education for women had some ground to it, from 2021 until now, this argument lacks logic. When the Taliban took over the government in 2021, education was arranged to such an extent that most children and adolescents had access to education. Additionally, this education system was already arranged upon Islamic ideology, with segregation between boys and girls. That is why this system could have been used by the Taliban as well.[167] The Taliban's argument lacks credibility and suggests that the ban on women's education is not rooted in genuine issues that need to be resolved. The supposed issues are largely non-existent, especially when comparing them to the circumstances of 1996, when this justification was initially used. The use of this argument suggests that the Taliban is using it as a facade to not disclose the true motivation behind specifically targeting women with a ban on education. This shows that this argument is used strategically to not have to explain the real reasoning for banning education. Applying a feminist framework to this argument from the Taliban

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[162] Amnesty International, "Death in Slow Motion," 19.
[163] UNAMA, "Update on the Human Rights Situation in Afghanistan: October - December 2024" (UNAMA, December 2024), 9
[164] Amnesty International, "Death in Slow Motion," 19; UNAMA, "Update on the Human Rights Situation in Afghanistan," 9.
[165] BBC News, "Taliban: Religious Leaders Have Issues with Girls Schools - BBC News," YouTube, 15 August 2022, 0:10-0:25, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n34UK0sfzzc.
[166] 5Pillars, "Abdul Qahar Balkhi | Liberation, Girls" Education & Relations With Pakistan," YouTube, *Blood Brothers Podcast*, 15 August 2024, 09:00-11:10, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=185pJTN61Ik.
[167] BBC News, "Taliban: Religious Leaders Have Issues with Girls Schools," 0:25-0:35.

brings to light that this vagueness is used deliberately to undermine women, as the Taliban misuse their power to deliberately oppress women.

3.3 Protecting women

A third argument that is often used by the Taliban to legitimize the ban on education for women is that this ban is supposedly needed to protect them. Within feminism, physical differences between men and women are not denied.[168] This means that, in some situations, the one holding less physical power –often the woman– might indeed need more protection.[169] However, this idea also includes a contradiction, since the people women need protection from are often men, the ones with more physical power.[170] In that sense, the Taliban's reasoning seems flawed, as it uses the idea of protection not to empower or safeguard women, but to justify taking their rights away. The argument of banning education to protect women is used both in 1996 and in 2021. It does not only regard the ban on education, but also the other restrictions imposed on women. For instance, written in a newspaper article by the Taliban in 1995, they state that wearing a *niqab*[171] is not a limitation of women's rights. [172] They explain that this rule only protects these rights, and with that, protects the dignity of a woman. When the Taliban conquered Kabul in 1996, they implemented many limitations for women, arguing that they did so to make the living conditions of women better.[173] The reason why they put these limitations in place was, according to them, to protect women from others who might want to harm them.[174] In a statement on their official website in 2012, the Taliban expanded this argument even more by claiming that "women are held in very high regard by Afghan society and family life," and because of that they deserve the protection the Taliban offers.[175] In the same article they also justify their strict rules for women about wearing a *hijab*.[176] They explain that wearing a *hijab* is to protect a woman from "immodest, unreligious, and harmful people."[177] From a feminist viewpoint,

[168] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014), 8.
[169] Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists*, 8.
[170] Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists*, 8.
[171] A face covering veil.
[172] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 115.
[173] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 269.
[174] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 269.
[175] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 573.
[176] Islamic headscarf
[177] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 574.

this clearly highlights how the Taliban are creating a patriarchal society by enforcing control over women's bodies.

During the second Taliban government, the same argument was used to justify the ban on education. When asked in 2022 by the BBC why the schools are closed for girls, a Taliban spokesperson answered that it has to do with not being able to ensure the safety of girls traveling to school.[178] Additionally, in a statement on the website of the Afghan 'Ministry of propagation of virtue, prevention of vice and hearing complaints', the Taliban makes a stance against a report published by the United Nations Assistance Mission In Afghanistan (UNAMA) issued in January 2025. This report, "Update on the human rights situation in Afghanistan," targeted this specific ministry and called them out on installing laws and regulations that helped crumble down women's rights.[179] The reaction from the Afghan ministry was clear. They stated that the Taliban have not imposed any restrictions on women's rights, but they merely ensured the protection of the rights of girls and women within the framework of Islam and according to Afghan values.[180] This reaction shows that even though the Taliban is called out on their severe limitations on women's rights, they justify implementing these restrictions by saying that they installed them to protect women. Even though protecting Afghan women is a noble strive, protecting them through oppression is, of course, contradictory. Again, this clearly reveals how, along patriarchal lines, the Taliban use policies such as the ban on education to gain control over women's lives, with the strategic aim to increase their political power.

Moreover, the Taliban fails to clarify what specific threats they claim to be protecting Afghan women from by restricting their access to education. One argument they use is that the traveling to and from schools by girls is too dangerous.[181] Even though this argument holds some truth to it, since areas in Afghanistan can be dangerous for girls to move around, this argument is also hypocritical. Between 2001 and 2021, when the Taliban was not in power but operated as an insurgency movement, the Taliban and other insurgency groups actively targeted and harassed girls' schools

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[178] BBC News, "Taliban: Religious Leaders Have Issues with Girls Schools," 0:35-0:40.
[179] UNAMA, "Update on the Human Rights Situation in Afghanistan," 2-4.
[180] Ministry of propagation of virtue, prevention of vice and hearing complaints, "The Recent Concern of UNAMA Regarding Women's Rights And Freedom Of Expression Are Unfounded And We Strongly Reject Them!," 28 January 2025, https://mopvpe.gov.af/en/recent-concern-unama-regarding-women%E2%80%99s-rights-and-freedom-expressions-are-unfounded-and-we-strongly.
NB: This is from the official website of an Afghan ministry. However, his website gets taken offline quite often. Screenshots of the statement can be found under appendixes.
[181] BBC News, "Taliban: Religious Leaders Have Issues with Girls Schools," 0:35-0:40.

and female teachers specifically. [182] These attacks were carried out to destroy schools and intimidate girls and their parents, discouraging them from sending their daughter to school.[183] These attacks consisted of "the bombing of schools, acid attacks against female students, and threats towards teachers."[184] These threats included, among other things, threat letters to teachers to prevent them from going to school.[185] With violent physical threats, such as "We warn you to leave your job as a teacher as soon as possible otherwise we will cut the heads off you children and will set light to your daughter," the Taliban again clearly reveal that they aim to have control over women's lives and bodies.[186]

Additionally, since 2021, during the second period of governance, the Taliban have also been actively harassing girls and teachers attempting to attend school.[187] For this reason, the argument used by the Taliban, that the ban on education is used to protect women, constitutes a fallacy. The Taliban are the ones who have been actively threatening girls and women. Because of their threats it is unsafe to go to school for girls and women. Ultimately, girls and women should, therefore, be protected against the Taliban. The reasoning behind this argumentation does not hold much ground or credibility and can be interpreted as a way to oppress women, again under the guise of false reasoning. From a feminist framework, it becomes clear that this so-called protection is in fact intended as a form of oppression. Moreover, decisions about women are being made without involving them clearly shows how the Taliban is deliberately enforcing their power under patriarchy.

3.4 International community

Both in 1996 and 2021, the Taliban have been pointing fingers at others to justify their ban on education. In an article about the accomplishments of the Taliban movement in the late 1990s, the Taliban made statements about their reasoning for banning education for women in Afghanistan.[188] In this article, the Taliban claim that they are "determined to provide educational opportunities for all Afghans irrespective of gender,

[182] Human Rights Watch, "I Won't Be a Doctor, and One Day You'll Be Sick," 17.
[183] Human Rights Watch, "I Won't Be a Doctor, and One Day You'll Be Sick," 17.
[184] Human Rights Watch, "I Won't Be a Doctor, and One Day You'll Be Sick," 17.
[185] Human Rights Watch, "The "Ten-Dollar Talib" and Women's Rights: Afghan Women and the Risks of Reintegration and Reconciliation" (Human Rights Watch, July 2010), 4-13.
[186] Human Rights Watch, "The " Ten-Dollar Talib" and Women's Rights," 12.
[187] Amnesty International, "Death in Slow Motion," 24-25.
[188] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 262.

race, tribe, language or regional affiliations."[189] But they explain that they have not been able to lift the ban on education because of the "past abuses of the educational system for the purpose of propagating atheist ideology and ideas."[190] With this, they are referring to the Soviet Union's influence over Afghanistan in the previous decades. The same argument is used in an article from 2008, in which the Taliban reflect on their governance between 1996 and 2001.[191] The Taliban argue in this article that the reason they were unable to ensure education for women was because of the many problems the government was facing. The main problem they mentioned was the lack of help from the international community, since they only imposed more economic blockades to worsen the situation.[192] Additionally, because of these blockades, and therefore a lack of basic facilities, teachers who left the country did not want to return. This especially targeted education for women.[193] It is, however, remarkable that these blockades by the international community do not target education for men. Additionally, what the Taliban misses within this argumentation, is that the main reason for not having teachers for girls' schools is that women were not allowed to work anymore under Taliban rule.[194]

On the 'Question and Answer' page of the Taliban's official website, a person asked a critical question regarding education for women to a Taliban spokesperson in 2012.[195] This person states that during the first Taliban rule, the Taliban mentioned that they did not have enough money to finance girls' schools, and he asked why the Taliban turned down foreign NGOs that wanted to help fill this financial gap.[196] The Taliban spokesperson answered that the Taliban tried to attract foreign NGOs for funding, but that these organisations "deliberately left the issue of girls' education unsolved in order to use it as a pressure tactic."[197] This is, however, not true according to a U.S. Department of State report on human rights in Afghanistan in 1996.[198] In this report, it is stated that NGOs related to education could not do their work properly due to the

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[189] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 270.
[190] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 271.
[191] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 365-66.
[192] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 366.
[193] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 366.
[194] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "Afghanistan Report on Human Rights Practices for 1996" (U.S. Department of State, 30 January 1997), https://1997-2001.state.gov/global/human_rights/1996_hrp_report/afghanis.html.
[195] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 569.
[196] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 569.
[197] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 570.
[198] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "Afghanistan Report on Human Rights Practices."

strict ban on education issued by the Taliban.[199] Additionally, the severe restrictions on women in general interfered with the capability of NGOs and UN agencies to do their work, since they often employed local women.[200] Lastly, this report stated that the Taliban also harassed various NGOs, especially threatening or detaining their national staff.[201] This thus indicates that the statement of the Taliban spokesperson is not true. It is evident that foreign organisations did want to help with the issues regarding girls' education. However, they could not do their jobs thoroughly due to the severe restrictions. It is, however, understandable that in 2012, a Taliban spokesperson would say that the issue of education for girls is used as a pressure tactic, since the U.S. used women's rights as a key component to interfere with Afghanistan's governance after 2001.[202]

Since 2021, during the Taliban's second period of governance, blaming external factors for their inability to provide education for women remains a tactic they continue to use. In an interview with Sky News at the beginning of 2022, a Taliban spokesperson accused the international community of imposing economic restrictions on Afghanistan as a way of retribution for their failed mission between 2001 and 2021.[203] He also states that these restrictions now result in a "collective punishment and starvation" for the Afghan people.[204] The same argumentation is presented in an interview a few months later, where the interviewer questions whether the Taliban respect women.[205] She highlights that restrictions on work and education for women have resulted in difficult economic situations, forcing many women to beg for food and money in the streets.[206] In response, the Taliban spokesperson dismisses this claim, stating that these women are not begging due to the ban on work but rather "because the Western nations have sanctioned us, and the economic situation has deteriorated."[207] All in all, he denies that women being poor and having to beg has anything to do with the Taliban restriction on those women. He accuses the West of being the source of this economic issue. Blaming others for the problems in a country under your leadership makes it

[199] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "Afghanistan Report on Human Rights Practices."
[200] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "Afghanistan Report on Human Rights Practices."
[201] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "Afghanistan Report on Human Rights Practices."
[202] Coleman, "The Payoff from Women's Rights," 82.
[203] Sky News, ""We Do Not Threaten Women Ever," Says Senior Taliban Spokesman," YouTube, 24 January 2022, 00:00-00:15, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ghL-BZFmtwo.
[204] Sky News, ""We Do Not Threaten Women Ever,"" 00:00-00:15.
[205] RTÉ News, "Interview: Abdul Qahar Balkhis, Talib Spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs," YouTube, 11 March 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aj-6J-a3Wz4&t=74s.
[206] RTÉ News, "Interview: Abdul Qahar Balkhis," 26:00-26:15.
[207] RTÉ News, "Interview: Abdul Qahar Balkhis," 26:00-26:50.

easier to avoid accountability for the consequences of your own decisions. As a result, the Taliban can continue oppressing women because, according to this argument, they are not the ones capable of resolving this issue.

3.5 Women's rights are not a priority

The Taliban often portrays women, and especially their rights, as not as important as other issues in the country. In an article issued by the Taliban, shortly after their taking over of Kabul in 1996, they state that the decisions made about the restrictions for women are mostly an indication of the respect they have for human rights.[208] They explain that regarding rights for women, they see the protection of the dignity and virtue of women as more important than providing them with education.[209] Besides that, they consider that solving other social problems like safety and fighting corruption in Afghanistan as having a "higher priority than having education for women."[210] This shows that the Taliban acts as if they do not see women and their education as important issues, which can become problematic. Because systematically depriving half of the country's population of education will only economically and socially deteriorate the country further.[211] When the Taliban came to power again in 2021, they did not immediately ban education for women. For instance, the ban on universities for women happened over a year later, in December 2022.[212] According to Amnesty International, this ban was implemented gradually in smaller phases over the course of the year prior to the official enforcement.[213] During this year, women were not allowed to use phones or laptops, and they were not allowed to use their voice during classes, and therefore could not ask questions or give presentations.[214] Even though women were still formally allowed to go to school, their education was consistently undermined by the Taliban. While the Taliban claim that education is not a priority, the effort they put into restricting and sabotaging it suggests otherwise. Their actions reveal that they do, in fact, recognise the power of education and see it as a threat to their authority. By imposing these limitations, the Taliban not only undermine women's education but also openly violate their educational rights.

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[208] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 201.
[209] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 202.
[210] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 202.
[211] Heymann et al., "The Right to Education," 207.
[212] UNAMA, "Update on the Human Rights Situation in Afghanistan," 9.
[213] Amnesty International, "Death in Slow Motion," 22.
[214] Amnesty International, "Death in Slow Motion," 22.

When critically looking at interviews with Taliban leaders and spokespersons about women in Afghanistan, it becomes evident that, in general, the Taliban does not take women too seriously. In 2001, the Taliban minister of education, for instance, compared a woman to a flower that a man should keep at home, to water and smell it, but not to take out of the house.[215] This ties in with the argument of Telesetsky mentioned in the historiography, where she explains that in Afghanistan, the society is divided between the public and private spheres, with the Taliban isolating women solely to the private sphere.[216] When portraying women as a flower, she is metaphorically reduced to an object of beauty or fragility rather than recognized as a human being. This dehumanisation can serve to legitimise oppression, as it takes away her agency and individuality. Additionally, in a voice memo used in a BBC podcast in 2024, a Taliban spokesperson talks about women in a very condescending way.[217] In this specific quote he says: "women, women, women… [sly laugh], women are not a complete part of our economy."[218] The tone and laughter of this Taliban member when saying the word 'women' come across as deeply patronizing. This behaviour can be interpreted as a clear sign of undermining the seriousness of women and their rights. It reflects a lack of respect for women. Additionally, in a statement on the website of the Ministry of Propagation of Virtue, prevention of Vice and Hearing Complaints in 2025, the Taliban argued the claim made by others that women are not allowed to go outside to buy groceries without a male chaperone.[219] The Taliban stated that this claim is untrue since a male chaperone is only needed on journeys above 72 kilometres.[220] By framing this policy as generous rather than oppressive, the Taliban appear to overlook the implications of restricting women's freedom of movement. Especially in combination with the numerous other limitations women have to endure.

Furthermore, a different indication of the Taliban not taking women seriously is when they lie about the number of women going to school. This indicates that education is not important enough for them to have the correct numbers present. In an

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[215] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, "Quotes By and About Women in Afghanistan" (U.S. Department of State, 17 November 2001), https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/6186.htm.
[216] Telesetsky, "In the Shadows and Behind the Veil," 296.
[217] The Global Jigsaw podcast, "The Taliban's War on Afghanistan's Women," 12 September 2024, 18.03, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MXhqCjv71fM.
[218] The Global Jigsaw podcast, "The Taliban's War on Afghanistan's Women," 18:03.
[219] Ministry of propagation of virtue, prevention of vice and hearing complaints, "The Recent Concern of UNAMA."
[220] Ministry of propagation of virtue, prevention of vice and hearing complaints, "The Recent Concern of UNAMA."

interview in August of 2024, when education above grade 6 was completely banned for women for quite some time, a Taliban spokesperson claimed that access for women to education has increased since 2021.[221] However, due to the ban on education and on work for women, their access to education has not increased but has drastically decreased since the Taliban takeover.[222] Even though the Taliban claim to have respect for women, and even use this claim to justify severe restrictions (as highlighted in paragraph 3.3), they often reveal a disregard for women. The Taliban might not always blatantly state that they do not take women seriously, but between the lines of their statements, it can easily be detected that they see women as less important than men. Additionally, it becomes clear that the Taliban deliberately downplay the importance of women's education. While they openly admitted in 1996 that it was not a priority, their current strategy is more calculated. Rather than explicitly rejecting women's right to education, they frame their restrictions using different arguments, such as the need to protect women or shifting the blame onto external factors. This rhetorical shift suggests a growing awareness of international scrutiny, yet it also reinforces their underlying goal to limit women's access to education, while avoiding direct accountability. Interpreted through a feminist lens, it becomes clear that the Taliban's actions do not reflect any respect for women, but they only reflect a deliberate reinforcement and deepening of the patriarchal structures in Afghan society. Additionally, the Taliban put in extreme effort into limiting women's access to education, which indicates that they do understand its importance and the transformative power education hold. By actively restricting women's education, while pretending not to take women seriously, they ultimately secure their own authority and credibility over Afghanistan.

3.6 Islam on education for women

"The path we are on is not one dictated by Sharia, it is our personal attitude," were the words spoken by the Taliban deputy minister of foreign affairs, Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, in a graduation ceremony speech in January 2025.[223] In this speech, he was very vocal about the restrictions the Taliban has imposed on women since 2021,

[221] 5Pillars, "Liberation, Girls" Education & Relations With Pakistan," 12.10.
[222] Amnesty International, "Death in Slow Motion," 18.
[223] TOLOnews, "The Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, Urged the Leaders of the Islamic Emirate to Open the Doors of Education for Everyone," Instagram, 19 January 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DE_oSDYNthC/.

especially the restrictions towards education.[224] This indicates that there are Taliban members who are against the restrictions imposed on women by the Taliban leaders. In an article in the Dutch newspaper *Trouw*, it is claimed that there are many Taliban members who do not agree with these restrictions but are afraid to openly oppose them.[225] This indicates that not everyone in the Taliban supports the ideology of only one way to interpret the Islam. Additionally, in his speech, Abbas Stanikzai noted that during the time of The Prophet, both men and women were allowed to go to school.[226] Thereafter, he continued to state words of praise about a famous female Islamic scholar, Aisha. With this, he underscored that women have previously been an important part of society, often teaching men and "imparting invaluable knowledge to them."[227] By making these statements, Abbas Stanikzai makes arguments against the restrictions imposed by the Taliban and endangers his own life by going against the ruling of the supreme leader of Afghanistan.

However, Abbas Stanekzai merely confirmed what was previously described about women's rights. For instance, in an article on the official Taliban website in 2012, it is stated that according to The Prophet, fathers who have a girl should "educate her with the best of education," otherwise, they will burn in hell.[228] Later, it was stated that anyone who oppresses women will face severe consequences in line with the Islamic Sharia.[229] Interestingly, with these statements, the Taliban contradict their own rules and restrictions for women. Both a decree issued by the supreme leader in 2021 regarding women's rights and Abbas Stanekzai in his speech quote The Prophet who said that those with multiple wives should maintain justice among them.[230] Abbas Stanekzai reflects on that, and states that since 2021 the Taliban has been unjust to 20 million women in a society with 40 million people.[231] He continues by stating that The Prophet was clear about the consequences of being unjust. When being unjust, you will face severe implications on judgment day.[232] However, it seems like the Taliban

[224] TOLOnews, "The Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs."
[225] Aletta André, "Veel Taliban willen best meisjesonderwijs, maar ja, de leider oordeelt anders," *Trouw*, 18 February 2025.
[226] TOLOnews, "The Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs."
[227] TOLOnews, "The Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs."
[228] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 574.
[229] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 574.
[230] Afghanistan Analysts Network, "Decrees, Orders And Instructions of His Excellency, Amir Al-Mu'Minin" (Official Gazette, July 2023), 30.
[231] TOLOnews, "The Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs."
[232] Strick Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Taliban Reader*, 574; TOLOnews, "The Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs".

do not see their actions as injustices against women. They use various arguments to actively avoid seeing the restrictions on women as a form of oppression. Even though these arguments lack validity, both within society and within Islamic principles.

3.7 Conclusion

Both in 1996 and from 2021 onward, when the Taliban held power in Afghanistan, they have severely targeted women by enforcing extremely restrictive rules on their lives and bodies. To justify these restrictions, the Taliban relied on a range of explanations. The first recurring argument used to legitimise the ban on education for girls and women is its mandate by Sharia law. The Taliban claims that their interpretation of Islam is the only valid one. A second justification often presented concerns the Taliban's claims of 'unresolved issues', meaning that logistics or security issues prevent girls from attending schools. Yet, what these issues specifically involve, and why they remain unaddressed, remains unclear. The third argument is that, according to the Taliban, the education ban is inherently installed with the intention to 'protect' women.

Significantly, all claims presented by the Taliban lack solid foundations. Regarding the first argument, the Quran does not prohibit women from accessing education. This is reinforced by both the Taliban's own publications and the speech of Abbas Stanekzai, who openly criticised them for not governing according to The Prophet's teachings. The second argument also lacks credibility, especially given that the Taliban could have simply taken over the educational infrastructure built by the democratic government between 2001 and 2021. The main threat Afghan women face comes, in fact, from the Taliban themselves, who routinely intimidate or target girls and women who attempt to pursue education. In other instances, the Taliban shifted blame to the international community to avoid taking responsibility. Altogether, the fact that all claims lack solid foundations makes it clear that the Taliban use the education ban as a strategic way to secure and legitimize their own power and rule.

The answer to the subquestion for this chapter, *How does the Taliban use the ban on education to oppress Afghan women?,* is therefore that the Taliban deliberately oppress women by exercising control and power over their lives. Although the Taliban have the authority to restore access to education for women, they deliberately choose not to. They have offered a wide range of arguments to justify the education ban, but none of these hold up under scrutiny. The sheer number and inconsistency of these justifications already suggest that their reasoning is not credible. It becomes clear that

the Taliban simply do not want women to attend school. By restricting women's lives and targeting them without valid justification, the Taliban enforce a system of increasing patriarchal rule and oppression. The education ban is used as a deliberate tool to oppress women and control their lives and bodies, backed by numerous weak and unfounded arguments to give it a false sense of legitimacy. The next chapter will shift focus to the perspective of Afghan women themselves, examining the impact of this ban and the broader consequences of this Taliban imposed oppression.

Chapter 4: Afghan Women

In the previous chapter, the arguments used by the Taliban to legitimize the ban on education for women were analysed. However, that chapter focused primarily on the Taliban's perspective and reasoning. This chapter shifts the focus from the viewpoint of the Taliban to that of Afghan women themselves. This chapter draws on sources in which women are given the opportunity to share their experiences and opinions regarding the education ban. By including their voices and perspectives, this thesis introduces a female lens, thereby giving the feminist analysis greater depth and nuance. Furthermore, listening to women's experiences helps illuminate the direct and personal consequences of the Taliban's policies. While the Taliban emphasize their own ideological interpretations of Islam and sharia, this chapter highlights the real-life effects of those interpretations on women's everyday lives. Since women in Afghan society are often deliberately silenced, amplifying their voices is essential. Doing so not only brings their lived experiences to the forefront but also challenges the Taliban's claim to speak on behalf of the entire Afghan society. Highlighting the experiences of women demonstrates that many within Afghan society, especially women, strongly oppose the views of the Taliban.

This chapter is structured as follows. It begins with a brief discussion of the education ban during the Taliban's first regime and the improvements in access to education for women after 2001. However, there are few available sources in which Afghan women reflect on their educational experiences during that earlier period. Due to the limited communication tools and restricted media access at the time, their voices were largely undocumented. With the rise of internet access and digital communication platforms, more sources have become available in which Afghan women directly share their perspectives on the current situation. Because the conditions in Afghanistan today closely resemble those of 1996 to 2001, the experiences of women under the Taliban regime since 2021 strongly echo those of the earlier period. Therefore, although this chapter primarily focuses on the testimonies of girls and women since 2021, due to the availability of firsthand accounts, it also indirectly reflects the experiences of women during the first Taliban rule. Following the analysis of recent experiences, this chapter will lastly explore the possible long-term consequences of the education ban. By answering the question: *What are the short-term and potential long-term implications*

of the ban on education from the perspective of Afghan women?, this chapter highlights the far-reaching effects of this restriction on their lives and futures.

Between 1996 and 2001, and again from 2021 onward, women in Afghanistan have experienced, and continue to experience, severe oppression based solely on their gender. This form of systemic discrimination can also be described as gender apartheid.[233] The implications of this oppression will be explored throughout this chapter. Central to this discussion is Bell Hook's definition of feminism: "feminism is a struggle to end sexist oppression."[234] This concept remains a guiding principle for the analysis in this chapter. However, the chapter also incorporates and important addition from Hooks: that feminism is not about gaining power over men, but rather about achieving greater equality.[235] This equality fosters positive change for both women and men alike. Using this framework, this chapter will examine the testimonies, interviews, and written letters of Afghan women through a lens of independence, equality, and the potential for societal transformation in Afghanistan as a whole.

4.1 Stories from 1996 until 2021

As mentioned before, during the period between 1996 and 2021, there are significantly fewer sources in which Afghan women share their experiences of living under Taliban rule and insurgency. However, some testimonies can be found. One in particular is the autobiography of Fawzia Koofi.[236] Koofi is a former politician of Afghanistan who was a member of the Afghan parliament between 2005 and 2021. In this autobiography, she talks about her experiences of growing up as a woman in Afghanistan. This autobiography, which means that only the experiences of one specific woman are described, can still give some insight into the lives of women in Afghanistan. One key aspect that stands out in the biography is the fact that regardless of who was in power in Afghanistan, Afghanistan has been a masochistic society for a long time. This is visible in the passages in which Koofi tells that when she was born, her parents were extremely disappointed that they had birthed a daughter instead of a son. This disappointment was underpinned by the fact that she was initially left to die right after she was born.[237] These patriarchal sentiments in Afghan society are also visible two

[233] Mehran, "Recognition of Gender Apartheid," 1-2.
[234] Hooks, *Feminist Theory,* 24.
[235] Hooks, *Feminist Theory,* 26.
[236] Fawzia Koofi, *Brieven Aan Mijn Dochters*, 2nd ed. (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Balans, 2011).
[237] Koofi, *Brieven Aan Mijn Dochters*, 15-26.

decades later, when Koofi gave birth to her second child, again a daughter. She explains that, even though her then-husband was a progressive man and therefore happy with their first daughter, he still could not hide his disappointment when his second child was yet another daughter.[238] This demonstrates that patriarchal attitudes existed among both supporters and opponents of the Taliban. Because those who oppose the Taliban are often seen as progressive. However, the aversion of Koofi's husband to having another daughter suggests that viewing women as inferior is not solely a trait of the Taliban, but is also consciously, or perhaps even subconsciously, embedded in broader segments of Afghan society.

This particular autobiography also shows that, despite the widespread perception of women as inferior in Afghan society, many people did not support the repressive measures imposed by the Taliban on women. She describes instances between 1996 and 2001 in which men risked their own lives to help her, a female stranger.[239] In one instance, she writes about a Taliban member who selflessly helped her.[240] She reflects on that by realising that because of the bad economy in Afghanistan at that time, a lot of men joined the Taliban because that would ensure a fixed income, even though they did not support the Taliban ideology.[241] Ultimately, this underpins the argument made in the previous chapter, which stated that there are many Taliban members who do not support the Taliban's ideology. With the explanation that, due to the bad economy, becoming a member of the Taliban was one of the few options to get an income and support your family. The period of the first Taliban regime was difficult for women. As Koofi states, during this time, a lot of women unnecessarily died.[242] Due to the severe restrictions imposed by the Taliban, it was forbidden for male doctors to treat women.[243] Therefore, problems that could have easily been treated, such as the flue, fever, or pregnancy complications, now lead to the deaths of hundreds of women.[244] As Koofi stated, women did not die due to a clear cause; they died because the people in power deemed the lives of women worthless.[245] Overall, these reflections

[238] Koofi, *Brieven Aan Mijn Dochters*, 224-25.
[239] Koofi, *Brieven Aan Mijn Dochters*, 168.
[240] Koofi, *Brieven Aan Mijn Dochters*, 175.
[241] Koofi, *Brieven Aan Mijn Dochters*, 175.
[242] Koofi, *Brieven Aan Mijn Dochters*, 181.
[243] Koofi, *Brieven Aan Mijn Dochters*, 181.
[244] Koofi, *Brieven Aan Mijn Dochters*, 181.
[245] Koofi, *Brieven Aan Mijn Dochters*, 181.

on how women were perceived in Afghan society help us to better understand the impact of the education ban on Afghan women.

In various TED talks held by Afghan women, the problem of education for women in Afghanistan is discussed. In a TED talk in 2015, Fawzia Koofi states that when the Taliban came to power in 1996, all education opportunities for women were stopped, and due to being restricted to their homes, the world of women became very small.[246] Even though after 2001 these opportunities were increasingly available again for women, the Taliban still held influence over Afghanistan and mostly over Afghan women and girls, as could also be seen in the previous chapter. In reports of Human Rights Watch, it is stated that between 2001 and 2014, the number of girls enrolled in schools grew exponentially.[247] However, after 2014, the number of girls in schools in Afghanistan started to decline again, often due to factors such as increased insecurity or discrimination.[248] This increased insecurity largely came from the Taliban actively threatening and attacking girls' schools and their teachers.[249] In a TED talk in 2014 by Noorjahan Akbar, an Afghan writer and feminist, she states that "being educated makes women powerful." [250] Because the Taliban do not want powerful educated women, as stated in the previous chapter, it can explain why they actively continued to threaten women and girls who simply wanted education. However, between 2001 and 2021, it was not only the Taliban that posed obstacles to women's access to education. As Human Rights Watch noted, widespread discrimination also played a significant role in preventing girls from attending school.[251]

That this discrimination did not only come from the Taliban but also from within Afghan society is better explained by Shabana Basij-Rasikh, an Afghan teacher and women's rights activist. In a TED talk she provided in 2017, she argues that, regardless of the Taliban, Afghan girls and women face numerous obstacles they must overcome in order to attend school.[252] She explains that if an Afghan girl wants to go to school,

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[246] Fawzia Koofi, "When Women Are At The Table," YouTube, *TEDxPlaceDesNations*, 2 January 2015, 5:45, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CHKsV2_LXF4.
[247] Human Rights Watch, ""We Have the Promises of the World": Women's Rights In Afghanistan' (Human Rights Watch, October 2017), 77.
[248] Human Rights Watch, ""You Have No Right to Complain": Education, Social Restrictions, and Justice in Taliban-Held Afghanistan' (Human Rights Watch, June 2020), 3.
[249] Human Rights Watch, "I Won't Be a Doctor, and One Day You'll Be Sick." 17.
[250] Noorjahan Akbar, "Education and Empowerment in Afghanistan," YouTube, *TEDxLafayetteCollege*, 7 May 2014, 9:00. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hP3lRAe1Gp4.
[251] Human Rights Watch, "You Have No Right to Complain,' 3.
[252] Shabana Basij-Rasikh, "Educating Women in Afghanistan," YouTube, *TEDxInstitutLeRosey*, 22 November 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PgGNMeDt5pI.

she has to persuade all male relatives to approve of her going to school.[253] However, as mentioned before, in a society where women are often seen as inferior, it can be challenging to convince all male relatives to grant this approval of education. Basij-Rasikh explains that only a few girls will get this permission from their families.[254] Additionally, if a girl goes to school, there is a high possibility she will get verbally or physically harassed by men on the street who still believe in the conservative ideas that women should stay at home.[255] This indicates again that it is not just the Taliban that make it difficult for women and girls to access education, but that the conservative and patriarchal ideas persisting in the Afghan society also prevent women and girls from going to school. Even in a period where opportunities for girls and women to go to school had increased, they still had to overcome multiple obstacles to be able to access education. This was especially challenging for women from conservative families or women living in more conservative areas of the country. This shows that regardless of whether the Taliban is in power or not, education for women will continue to be a difficult problem to solve in Afghanistan.

During the time that the United States and the Taliban started their peace negotiations about the withdrawal of the U.S. from Afghanistan, women were invited to be a part of these negotiations. Fawzia Koofi shares in an interview with Inspire Us Podcast in February 2025 that she was a part of the negotiation team.[256] She explains that the negotiations were very stressful since the Taliban did not take it too seriously, and they especially did not take the women who were part of the negotiation team seriously.[257] She states that the Taliban neglected her and "did not believe in my presence." [258] However, she does underpin that having women at the negotiation table was a strong decision because most of the points negotiated were about women.[259] When looking back at the previous chapter, this behaviour of the Taliban members can be explained. The Taliban claim to hold women in high regard and insist that their decisions are made in the interest of protecting women. However, this is not reflected in their actions, as they failed to take the women at the negotiation table seriously and

[253] Basij-Rasikh, "Educating Women in Afghanistan," 1:50.
[254] Basij-Rasikh, "Educating Women in Afghanistan," 2:20.
[255] Basij-Rasikh, "Educating Women in Afghanistan," 2:40.
[256] Inspire Us Podcast, "Negotiating with Taliban, US Pullout Chaos & Women's Fight for Freedom," accessed 2 May 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7VXrAag-10.
[257] Inspire Us Podcast, "Negotiating with Taliban," 28:55.
[258] Inspire Us Podcast, "Negotiating with Taliban," 31:00.
[259] Inspire Us Podcast, "Negotiating with Taliban," 31:00.

ignored their presence, even during critical negotiations about Afghanistan's future. This underscores the findings of the previous chapter, that the arguments made by the Taliban regarding the legitimization of the ban on education –such as the protection of women– do not hold any real substance.

4.2 Stories from Schoolgirls

As previously mentioned, more testimonies, interviews, letters, and other sources documenting the experiences of Afghan girls and women with regard to education have become available in recent years. Especially since the Taliban took over in 2021. One useful source is the *IQRA*[260] campaign.[261] This campaign is a collaboration between Musawer, a non-profit organisation in Afghanistan focusing on education and literature for children, and Rawadari, an Afghan human rights organisation focused on the rights of Afghan women and girls.[262] The IQRA campaign was launched in June 2024, when the schools for girls had been closed for more than a thousand days.[263] This campaign aims to highlight the voices of Afghan schoolgirls from all over Afghanistan, by broadcasting their testimonies on different social media outlets to inform others about the pressing situation and to call for a reopening of the schools.[264] These testimonies offer a real time glimpse into the experiences and emotions of girls who, from one day to the next, were suddenly no longer allowed to attend school. Since these girls are all from different parts of Afghanistan, their testimonies give a good insight into the overall lived experiences among Afghan girls.

One of the main struggles these girls face is the heartbreak of shattered dreams and futures. Many of them speak about what they aspired to become and the hopes they held for their lives, yet they all do so with a tone of deep despair.[265] One girl talked about how she wanted to become a doctor, but that she does not have any good hopes

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[260] IQRA means read/recite

[261] Rawadari روادارى, "IQRA Campaign," LinkedIn, June 2024, https://www.linkedin.com/posts/rawadari-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C_IQRA-IQRA-letafghangirlslearn-activity-7206274848002617344-WUR6?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop&rcm=ACoAAEBbmzEB3EKWvTK4nbsA1r-eYAWNb0hmOyc.

[262] The websites of both organisations. Musawer: https://www.instagram.com/musawer_09/ . Rawadari: https://rawadari.org/about/.

[263] Rawadari روادارى, "IQRA Campaign."

[264] Rawadari روادارى, "IQRA Campaign."

[265] Rawadari روادارى, "IQRA Campaign."

for the future and that she will “carry this dream until I am buried under the dark soil.”[266] Another girl states that she wanted to study and become a teacher, but her only option for the future now is to become a housewife.[267] A girl living at an orphanage, explains that she wanted to study to become an independent woman to overcome her hardships, especially since she had a hard childhood without her parents.[268] One girl asks herself if she now will end up “like hundreds of mothers around me who unfortunately could not continue their education.”[269] With this statement she reflects on the implications of the first Taliban regime, during which women were unable to complete their education. Her words suggest that the lives of those women now represent, to her, a bleak and discouraging vision of the future. Considering the conservative and patriarchal nature of Afghan society, and the limited opportunities available to women without a diploma, it becomes understandable why this girl does not want such a future. This feeling is also supported by another girl who has written an open letter to Ms. Magazine, a feminist magazine, in august 2024.[270] In this letter she says that she now spends her days with “fear of an uncertain future, and anxiety that we may be never able to escape this cruel prison.”[271] This highlights that one of the implications of the ban on education is the fear these girls feel about their futures, as the lack of education leaves them facing uncertainty and limited prospects. This sense of seeing your future shattered can have a severe impact on the mental health of these girls.

Although the girls in these testimonies share different stories and experiences, the emotions they express consistently carry a negative tone.[272] One feeling that multiple girls describe in the *IQRA* campaign is the feeling of boredom.[273] One girl states that; “there is nothing to do, no work, we will remain illiterate, and we are

[266] Musawer, Rawadari, “IQRA Campaign,” Instagram, 14 June 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C8Lo_yZs2Mh/.
[267] Musawer, Rawadari, “IQRA Campaign,” Instagram, 14 June 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C8Lo_yZs2Mh/.
[268] Musawer, Rawadari, “IQRA Campaign,” Instagram, 2 August 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C-K4QO2st4p/.
[269] Musawer, Rawadari, “IQRA Campaign,” Instagram, 2 August 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C-K4QO2st4p/.
[270] Suraya Mohammadi, ““We Have No Rights”: An Open Letter from an Afghan Girls Living in Fear,” MS. Magazine, 15 August 2024, https://msmagazine.com/2024/08/15/afghanistan-women-girls-taliban-takeover-education/.
[271] Mohammadi, ““We Have No Rights.”
[272] Rawadari روادارى, “IQRA Campaign.”
[273] Rawadari روادارى, “IQRA Campaign.”

bored."[274] Another girl describes what her days look like since the schools were closed: she makes tea and prepares food for her brothers in the morning before they go to school, and once they leave, she cleans up their empty teacups.[275] She explains that there is nothing else to do, that this is her entire day.[276] This feeling of sitting at home with nothing to do, of boredom and stagnation, is a logical consequence of being denied access to education, compounded by the limitations on leaving the house. A second sentiment that is mentioned often as one of the effects of the ban on education on Afghan girls is sadness. One girl explains that when she sees her brother going to school, she gets very sad.[277] She states that it feels like she should be getting ready alongside her brother, but she has to stay at home which makes her feel upset.[278] Another girl shares that whenever she sees boys go to school, she feels deeply upset. She adds that it makes her feel inferior to them, as they enjoy rights that she believes girls should equally enjoy.[279]

Third, a feeling that is often mentioned as a result of not being able to go to school anymore is the feeling of depression. One girl explains that she and her friends became very depressed after the schools were closed.[280] As a result, she says she has lost interest in everything, and that her "day and night go by idly."[281] Another girl shares that right after the closing of the schools she felt disappointed, hopeless and humiliated.[282] But now, after a thousand days, she just feels depressed because there is no hope left, and living life without hope is a hard life to live.[283] A fourth sentiment that prevails among schoolgirls sitting at home is a feeling of hopelessness, a feeling that ties in with the sentiment of shattered dreams and depression. One girl talks about

[274] Musawer, Rawadari, "IQRA Campaign," Instagram, 15 June 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C8OMXz8M3-y/.
[275] Musawer, Rawadari, "IQRA Campaign," Instagram, 17 June 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C8UUt72supN/.
[276] Musawer, Rawadari, "IQRA Campaign - Post of 17 June 2024."
[277] Musawer, Rawadari, "IQRA Campaign," Instagram, 16 June 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C8QyYkGM_SP/.
[278] Musawer, Rawadari, "IQRA Campaign – Post of 16 June 2024."
[279] Musawer, Rawadari, "IQRA Campaign," Instagram, 19 June 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C8ZEy4rsYFz/.
[280] Musawer, Rawadari, "IQRA Campaign," Instagram, 18 June 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C8V7ygBuixI/.
[281] Musawer, Rawadari, "IQRA Campaign – Post of 18 June 2024."
[282] Musawer, Rawadari, "IQRA Campaign," Instagram, 20 June 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C8bL7afOsL8/.
[283] Musawer, Rawadari, "IQRA Campaign – Post of 20 June 2024."

how she feels very hopeless when she sees others going to school.[284] Another girl explains that, since she can not become a doctor like she wanted to, she has been feeling hopeless, especially since "it seems like the world is only for men."[285] From a feminist perspective, it is understandable that this girl feels like the world is only for men. The Taliban actively exacerbate inequality, which stands in stark contrast to the aim of feminism, which is to focus on achieving greater equality.

Lastly, a feeling that is shared among these girls is the feeling of anger. One girl explains that the years that should have been her best and most fun years have been taken away from her by the Taliban, and that her life feels like a movie that is stuck.[286] On the day the Taliban decided to close the schools for girls, she even got angry at one of the Taliban soldiers and called him out for it. He just responded that she is a girl and that she therefore should go home.[287] She explains that she experiences this severe anger because her mother went through the same pain in her youth the first time the Taliban were in power. She knows about her mother's pain, and she is angry that she faces the same scenario right now.[288]

All these emotions felt by girls above grade six in Afghanistan stem from being confined at home with nothing to occupy their time, combined with a sense of hopelessness about their futures. As previously mentioned, all these emotions carry a negative connotation, indicating that the direct implications of the ban on education for these girls are the emergence of negative feelings, which overshadow any positive emotions. This highlights how severe oppression places significant strain on women's mental health, reinforcing the importance of the feminist struggle to dismantle systems of oppression.

4.3 Stories of Suicide

These feelings of boredom, sadness, depression, hopelessness, and anger are, of course, all interconnected. They are logical consequences of suddenly witnessing the collapse of one's day-to-day life and future aspirations. It is clear that one of the primary

[284] Musawer, Rawadari, "IQRA Campaign," Instagram, 15 July 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C9bLLiqxn-b/.
[285] Musawer, Rawadari, "IQRA Campaign," Instagram, 19 August 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C-1sWiNus0J/.
[286] Musawer, Rawadari, "IQRA Campaign," Instagram, 4 September 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C_euVIlRKT5/.
[287] Musawer, Rawadari, "IQRA Campaign – Post of 4 September 2024."
[288] Musawer, Rawadari, "IQRA Campaign – Post of 4 September 2024."

implications of this ban on education is the emergence of these negative emotions. However, for some girls, these negative feelings do not remain isolated. If left unaddressed, they can escalate into serious mental health issues, to the point where some girls even contemplate suicide. In a short documentary by the BBC in August 2024, which focused on education for Afghan girls, several stories were shared about Afghan girls either contemplating or attempting suicide.[289] One girl shares how many of her former classmates and friends suffer from depression and anxiety, and that many of them have suicidal thoughts.[290] The reason for this, as she explains, is the lack of hope for the future.[291] Another story shared in the documentary is the story of a father who lost a daughter due to suicide.[292] He explains that his daughter took her own life because her hope that schools would eventually reopen was shattered, and she could not bear the reality of it.[293] Two other women share their experiences of attempting suicide, explaining that their inability to go to work and the complete destruction of their goals and dreams pushed them to the brink.[294] One of them pointed out that, although official records of suicides or suicide attempts are not permitted to be documented, it is rare to find a girl or women who is not struggling with mental health issues.[295] In short CNN reportage of 2024, about the life of women under the Taliban rule, they speak to a girl who is now doing well but attempted to commit suicide a year earlier.[296] This girl explains that due to the closing of the schools she has been feeling hopeless, and she says, "that is why I drank battery acid, convinced that it would end my life."[297] Considering the number of negative feelings these girls and women are experiencing due to the ban on education, it explainable that these feelings often develop into more serious mental health issues and can even develop into having suicidal thoughts.

This idea is supported by a Aghan female psychologist primarily treating women. In a BBC liveblog reporting about a day in the life of women in Afghanistan[298], a female psychologist called Zarina, talks about how she has seen a significant increase in the

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[289] BBC World Service, "Dars: The Fight For Afghan Girls' Education," YouTube, BBC World Service Documentaries, 15 August 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZDhoxdkgcA.
[290] BBC World Service, "Dars," 1:10.
[291] BBC World Service, "Dars," 1:10.
[292] BBC World Service, "Dars," 1:36.
[293] BBC World Service, "Dars," 1:36.
[294] BBC World Service, "Dars," 16:35, 20:28.
[295] BBC World Service, "Dars," 16:35.
[296] CNN, ""We Cannot Speak": Activist on Women's Lives Under Taliban Rule," YouTube, 30 August 2024, 4:50, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZTmL_diTRYE.
[297] CNN, ""We Cannot Speak",' 4:50.
[298] The day reported is March 7th, 2025.

number of girls and women that have sought professional mental health guidance.[299] She explains that the women who seek her help frequently show signs of depression. For young girls, the root cause is often a sense of hopelessness, while for adult women, it typically stems from the inability to earn a living.[300] This illustrates that the implications of the ban on education go beyond negative feelings, these emotions can worsen, leading to mental health issues and, in extreme cases, to suicidal thoughts and actions. As research in 2024 among girls and women in Afghanistan indicates, there is a high percentage that show signs of depression.[301] Almost 90 percent of the research group experienced aspects of depression, and almost half of the researched group had suicidal thoughts in the two weeks before the research.[302] These implications should not be taken light-heartedly since they have an extreme negative influence on the lives of Afghan women and girls. Already in the relatively short period since the Taliban regained power, young girls have experienced intense negative emotions, suggesting that if the ban on education continues, these problems will only deepen, and more girls and women will fall into depression. This further underscores the feminist urgency of dismantling structures of oppression, as they pose a direct threat to the livelihoods – and in some cases, the very lives – of women.

4.4 Stories of hope, resilience, and fighting spirits

Although the ban on education has disrupted the lives of Afghan women severely, it is noteworthy that many of them have shown strength and resilience, and some of them are not scared to resist the Taliban. Throughout this ban on education and the subsequent result of having to stay at home, girls and women have stayed hopeful. In an Al Jazeera reporting in August 2022, when only secondary schools were closed to girls yet, in interviews with some of these girls, they show how steadfast and resilient they are.[303] One girl said that the Taliban government has made her realise that the world is much bigger than just Afghanistan, and that she therefore should dream big.[304]

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[299] BBC News, "In Their Own Words: Spend a Day With Afghan Women Living Under Taliban Rule," 7 March 2025, 10:16, https://www.bbc.com/news/live/c0l16424w1pt.
[300] BBC News, "In Their Own Words,' 10:16.
[301] Abdul Qadim Mohammadi et al., "Female Education Ban by the Taliban: A Descriptive Survey Study on Suicidal Ideation, Mental Health, and Health-Related Quality of Life among Girls in Afghanistan," Journal of Public Health 46, no. 3 (27 June 2024): e441, https://doi.org/10.1093.
[302] Mohammadi et al., "Female Education Ban by the Taliban," e441.
[303] Al Jazeera English, 'What Women In Afghanistan Want You to Know," YouTube, 30 August 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o95Mt48xVgM.
[304] Al Jazeera English, "What Women In Afghanistan Want You to Know," 9:16.

She adds that all the hardships she had to go trough have only made her stronger.[305] At the end of the reporting, the girls are asked if there is anything that they want to share with the world, and the results are often very hopeful messages.[306] One girl states that you should not become hopeless whatever your situation, "because that is the biggest enemy of a person." [307] Another girl expresses that "being a women should not be a shame; it is a source of strength." [308] These messages show that even though these girls are still young they do not let themselves be pushed down by the severe restrictions put on them by the Taliban. It should be mentioned that these girls, in 2022 still had some opportunities to learn in an institution paid by a charity, which can explain their hopeful look onto the situation.[309] However, their usual day-to-day lives were also significantly impacted and changed, yet they have kept this hopeful and positive outlook.

Shabana Basij-Rasikh, as mentioned in the first paragraph, held TED talks regarding education for women in Afghanistan, both in 2017 and in December 2021, four months after the Taliban took control over Afghanistan again.[310] In the first TED talk she explains how she established a way for girls to overcome the obstacles and hardships in order to receive education.[311] Basij-Rasikh created an girls-only boarding school in Afghanistan, so that girls have a safe environment to study and learn.[312] In her latter TED talk she explains that her vision for this school is that over time these educated girls and women will have the knowledge and wisdom to help build up and transform Afghan society.[313] She additionally tells that once the Taliban took power again she made sure that all the girls in the boarding school were safely transferred to Rwanda, to be able to still have that safe environment to study and learn.[314] She explains that this was only possible with keeping hope and turning uncertainties into certainties.[315] This shows a lot of courage and resilience, not only on the part of Basij-

[305] Al Jazeera English, "What Women In Afghanistan Want You to Know," 9:16.
[306] Al Jazeera English, "What Women In Afghanistan Want You to Know," 11:15.
[307] Al Jazeera English, "What Women In Afghanistan Want You to Know," 11:15.
[308] Al Jazeera English, "What Women In Afghanistan Want You to Know," 11:15.
[309] Al Jazeera English, "What Women In Afghanistan Want You to Know," 8:55.
[310] Basij-Rasikh, "Educating Women in Afghanistan,'; Shabana Basij-Rasikh, "The Dream of Educating Afghan Girls Lives On," YouTube, *TED*, 3 December 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xy4iSaJOQQA.
[311] Basij-Rasikh, "Educating Women in Afghanistan."
[312] Basij-Rasikh, "Educating Women in Afghanistan."
[313] Basij-Rasikh, "The Dream of Educating," 2:45.
[314] Basij-Rasikh, "The Dream of Educating," 10:15.
[315] Basij-Rasikh, "The Dream of Educating," 11:00.

Rasikh, but also on the part of all the girls in the boarding school and their families. It shows that hope can make for new possibilities.

However, most girls in Afghanistan have not had this opportunity. They are now confined to their homes due to the ban on education. For some of them, as a way to bypass the Taliban's rules, there is the option of going to a secret school. In a podcast of the BBC about secret schools in Afghanistan of august 2023, the host, Sana Safi, talks about her own experiences of secret schools.[316] Sana Safi, born in Afghanistan, is now a reporter for the BBC.[317] She explains that when she was a young girl, the Taliban was in power for the first time, which prevented her from being able to go to school.[318] Luckily, she had supportive parents and they found a couple that had established a secret school in their private home.[319] She shares that this was a quite dangerous life, she abstained from having any relationships with her fellow students in case they would accidentally give information to the Taliban, and even one of the schools she went to was invaded by the Taliban and the couple was arrested and put in jail.[320]

For this podcast, Sana Safi interviews multiple students and teachers of secret schools that have been established in Afghanistan since the second governing period of the Taliban.[321] One female activist has established several secret schools across Afghanistan, driven by her belief that only education can offer girls a future, without it, they are highly likely to be married off.[322] She adds that, in comparison to 1996, there are now more possibilities thanks to improved internet access, as online classes offer a safer alternative for girls who can follow them from home.[323] Even though attending or teaching at these secret schools puts Afghan people's lives at serious risk, they continue to do so. This shows that both the students and the teachers involved deeply understand the importance of girls' education. They consider it so vital that they are willing to risk their own safety to make sure girls continue to learn. This resistance against the ban on education underscores the importance of approaching the issue

[316] Sana Safi, "Inside Afghanistan's Secret Schools," The Documentary, accessed 2 May 2025, https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/w3ct5j1t.
[317] Safi, "Inside Afghanistan's Secret Schools," 2:00.
[318] Safi, "Inside Afghanistan's Secret Schools," 3:59-8:00.
[319] Safi, "Inside Afghanistan's Secret Schools," 3:59-8:00.
[320] Safi, "Inside Afghanistan's Secret Schools," 3:59-8:00.
[321] Safi, "Inside Afghanistan's Secret Schools."
[322] Safi, "Inside Afghanistan's Secret Schools," 13:00.
[323] Safi, "Inside Afghanistan's Secret Schools," 15:20.

through a feminist lens. It demonstrates how women actively challenge the Taliban's oppression, often at great personal risk, in pursuit of greater equality. This embodies Bell Hooks' definition of feminism as "a struggle to end sexist oppression." [324]

Where on the one hand the implications of the ban on education issued by the Taliban have resulted in mental health issues, on the other hand it has sparked a fighting spirit among schoolgirls and their teachers. With teachers risking their lives to ensure the continuation of the education for their female students. However, it is important to note that these opportunities are only available to a small number of female students. Many other girls now find themselves with nothing meaningful to do. It is understandable that those without any opportunities under the Taliban rule, and without any hope for the future, are more likely to fall into negative emotions. In contrast, girls who still have some access to education may be able to hold on to a more hopeful outlook on life.

4.5 Long-term implications

While the negative emotions, increased risk of suicide, and the rise in hope and resistance are more immediate implications, the ban on education also carries long-term consequences for both Afghan women and Afghan society as a whole. One of the most pressing long-term implications of the ban on education is that increasingly more women will die because of it. This could be seen in the testimony of Fazia Koofi, about the first Taliban rule.[325] In her autobiography she explains that, due to the fact that female doctors were not allowed to work, and male doctors were not allowed to treat women, women died unnecessary.[326] This development is also already visible in the Afghan society since the second Taliban takeover. In the BBC liveblog about a day in the life of Afghan women, the experiences of a midwife working in hospital are shared.[327] She explains that in the hospital she used to educate groups of pregnant women about their pregnancies, their deliveries and other relevant healthcare issues for them or their children.[328] However, due to the restriction on hearing women's voices in public, she stopped giving these informational group sessions, which means that she now can no longer inform new moms as thoroughly about their pregnancy as is

[324] Hooks, *Feminist Theory,* 24.
[325] Fawzia Koofi, *Brieven Aan Mijn Dochters*, 181.
[326] Fawzia Koofi, *Brieven Aan Mijn Dochters*, 181.
[327] BBC News, "In Their Own Words.'
[328] BBC News, "In Their Own Words,' 12:13.

necessary.[329] Additionally, this midwife explains that in rural areas, midwifes often already work without having followed higher education. Thus, if a woman needs an emergency C-section it could mean that she will not survive her delivery.[330]

If increasingly less women are educated to become doctors, nurses, or midwives, the amount of knowledgeable female doctors in the workforce will dry up over the coming years and the problems of women dying without necessity will only increase. These problems not only affect to women, but also their children, since both the maternal mortality rates and the infant mortality rates in Afghanistan are amongst the highest in the world.[331] Some girls from the *IQRA* campaign express their fear for the future, as they wonder how they will receive medical treatment if they fall seriously ill, given the lack of female doctors.[332] Since the initial developments resulting from this implication have already begun, it is understandable that these girls fear the consequences as this implication continues to grow. Not only is this implication highly visible, but it also makes the futures of these girls even more unsure besides having their education taken away. Although these developments are already taking place, the Taliban shows no indication that the ban on education will be lifted anytime soon. This indicates that they do not take a women's health, and with that her life, as serious as a men's life. With this they thus contradict themselves by claiming that the ban on education protects women, even though women will have increasingly less chances of surviving illnesses.

The problem of girls and women having a higher chance of dying without education is an already visible implication of the ban on education. However, there are also implications that are not yet visible, but will become a problem over time if the ban on education remains unreversed. One of the long-term implications according to UNESCO is that without education for women, in the next thirty-five years there will not be any qualified replacement for the small group of women that is still active in the

[329] BBC News, "In Their Own Words,' 12:13.
[330] BBC News, "In Their Own Words,' 15:10.
[331] Khulud Qamar et al., "Infant and Child Mortality in Afghanistan: A Scoping Review," *Health Science Reports* 7, no. e224 (14 June 2024): 1–8, https://doi.org/10.1002/hsr2.2224.; Zoaib Habib Tharwani et al., "Maternal Mortality in Afghanistan: Challenges, Efforts, and Recommendations," *Clinical Epidemiology and Global Health* 15 (5 April 2022): 1, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cegh.2022.101038.
[332] Musawer, Rawadari, "IQRA Campaign – Post of 20 June 2024"; Musawar, Rawadari, "IQRA Campaign," Instagram, 4 July 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C8_ketnOaYp/ ; Musawer, Rawadari, "IQRA Campaign – Post of 19 August 2024."

workforce.[333] Since women are already almost excluded from working, this shortage will only become greater in the future with increasingly more pressure on for instance healthcare for women. Additionally, this will mean that in already five years time, there will not be replacement for over ten thousand female educators. This implies that if education would become available again to girls and women in the coming years, there are not enough female teachers to teach them all.[334] Furthermore, a brain drain, which is already happening, of high skilled female scientist will deteriorate the educational system for girls and woman even more.[335]

Another implication is that the growing educational gap between Afghan men and women, coupled with the resulting disparity in socioeconomic development, will further entrench the traditionally gendered structures already deeply embedded in the patriarchal fabric of Afghan society.[336] Additionally, according to UNESCO, this will lead to "increasing fertility and birth rates," which in return need better medial facilities and public welfare programs, which are already not sufficient right now in Afghanistan.[337] Even though these implications of the ban on education are not yet visible, they will become visible in the following years. By holding on to this ban, increasingly more women grow up uneducated. As seen in the historiography, this is detrimental for the whole society, since educating women will result in lower mortality risks for both women, their children, and their husbands.[338] Additionally, educating women will reduce unemployment rates. By banning education for women, the Taliban does not seem to think of the bigger picture and the repercussions of this ban in the long run.

Lastly, educated women will boost the economy. A significant implication of the ban on education that will only become more prominent over the years is the economic deterioration caused by the ban on education for women.[339] According to the World Bank Group, women have a big impact on the Afghan workforce sector, and them not working will have a significant impact on the economic development of Afghanistan.[340] The country will see a significant decline in economic growth due to keeping women

[333] UNESCO-Afghanistan, "Costs of Continued Suspension of Women's Access to Higher Education and Work in Afghanistan," 9 October 2024, 1.
[334] UNESCO-Afghanistan, "Costs of Continued Suspension," 1.
[335] UNESCO-Afghanistan, "Costs of Continued Suspension," 1.
[336] UNESCO-Afghanistan, "Costs of Continued Suspension," 1-1.
[337] UNESCO-Afghanistan, "Costs of Continued Suspension," 1.
[338] Coleman, "The Payoff from Women's Rights," 92; Heymann et al., "The Right to Education," 206.
[339] UNESCO-Afghanistan, "Costs of Continued Suspension," 1.
[340] Rafiuddin Najam, Harry Anthony Patrinos, and Raja Bentaouet Kattan, "The Miseducation of Women in Afghanistan," World *Bank Group - Education Global Practice*, September 2024, 13.

uneducated.[341] As reported by UNESCO, if this education ban stays in place, the GDP of Afghanistan will have dropped sixty percent by 2066.[342] In a country already facing a weak economy, increasing poverty, growing famine, and soaring food prices, these developments show that the Taliban's decisions harm not only women, but the entire Afghan population.[343] Moreover, according to the World Bank Group, education for girls and women will have a positive impact on future generations, since women with an education "are more likely to invest in the health and education of their children, creating a virtuous cycle of human capital development."[344] Viewed through a feminist lens, this illustrates that the oppression of half the population not only directly harms women, but also generates long-term negative consequences for the society as a whole. As Bell Hooks argued, striving for greater equality benefits not just women but also men, which strongly resonates with the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan.[345] It is therefore of the utmost necessity that the Taliban reverses their ban on education rather sooner than later. The more time goes by, the more severe the implications of this ban will become, not just for women but for the Afghan society as a whole.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter answers the subquestion, *What are the short-term and potential long-term implications of the ban on education from the perspective of Afghan women?* The implications of the ban on education for Afghan women naturally vary widely. Depending on the opportunities that girls and women still have, or no longer have, their experiences of the ban differ. However, all girls and women have experienced a complete change of their day-to-day lives as a result of the education ban and other restrictive policies implemented by the Taliban to reinforce the gender apartheid they first introduced in the late 1990s. The most common implications involve negative feelings brought on by the lack of future prospects. Feelings of boredom, sadness, depression, hopelessness, and anger are logical responses to the reality that many girls are confined to their homes, with no access to school to structure their daily

[341] Heymann et al., "The Right to Education," 207.
[342] UNESCO-Afghanistan, "Costs of Continued Suspension," 1.
[343] Aletta André, "Geen Geld Voor Melkpoeder: Steeds Meer Ondervoede Kinderen In Afghanistan," NOS, 3 March 2024, https://nos.nl/artikel/2511325-geen-geld-voor-melkpoeder-steeds-meer-ondervoede-kinderen-in-afghanistan.
[344] Najam, Patrinos, and Kattan, "The Miseducation of Women in Afghanistan," 11.
[345] Hooks, *Feminist Theory,* 26.

routines. When these feelings are left unaddressed, the risk of developing serious mental health issues increases. Research and testimonies show that a majority of girls and women exhibit signs of depression. Without adequate mental health support, the number of suicides and suicide attempts among women and girls is likely to rise. When life feels hopeless, suicide may appear to be the only escape. At the same time, however, the oppression of women has also sparked surges of hope and resistance. Some Afghan people are defying the Taliban by keeping education for girls alive through secret schools. Girls who still have some access to education often express a more hopeful outlook on their futures, since in Afghanistan, education is essential for a woman's chance at a better future. Yet these opportunities are rare and come with significant danger. The fact that most girls lack such opportunities helps explain the widespread presence of negative and depressive thoughts among Afghan girls and women.

The mental health consequences of the education ban represent its short-term impact. However, the ban also has long-term implications that may not yet be fully visible but are likely to become increasingly apparent over time. One of the most pressing concerns is the bleak future of healthcare for Afghan women. Since cultural norms require women to be treated by female doctors, and no new female doctors are currently being trained, more women will likely die in the near future due to the lack of accessible healthcare. In addition, the pool of skilled and educated women is rapidly shrinking. This will severely affect the future of girls' education. If the ban on education were to be lifted, a shortage of qualified female teachers would likely hinder the recovery of the education system, creating a downward spiral for education access. Moreover, the absence of educated women will deal another blow to Afghanistan's already fragile economy, pushing it further into decline. Finally, one implication that is already visible is the solidification of traditional gender norms. Without education, gendered structures in Afghan society will only deepen, reinforcing a patriarchal system in which women are increasingly treated as second-class citizens.

The severity of the implications of the ban on education in Afghanistan underscores that this measure is not merely one of the many policies issued by the Taliban, but rather the most crucial restriction that not only affects women but is assured to impact the Afghan society as a whole over time. As such, through this ban, the Taliban not only reinforces the oppression women, but extends its control over the entire Afghan population.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This thesis has examined the social and cultural short- and long-term implications of Taliban's ban on education for women through the research question:

> *What are the implications of the use of a ban on education as a form of oppression of women in Afghanistan under Taliban rule between 1996 and 2025?*

In order to provide an answer to the research question, this thesis first explained why and how the Taliban enforced the education ban. Afghanistan has a long history of patriarchal social structures. Throughout the 20th century, prolonged instability and conflict have caused these structures to intensify and recede at various moments. In 1996, amidst a power vacuum created by decades of war and chaos, the Taliban capitalised on the opportunity to position themselves as legitimate and serving leaders of both the Afghan people and Islam. However, the Taliban have consistently pursued the systematic oppression of women, offering various justifications to legitimise this repression. In both their first (1996-2001) and second (2021-present) period in power, they have employed similar rhetoric. They claim their interpretation of Sharia law and their interpretation of women's rights is the only valid one, leaving no room for reinterpretation. Additionally, they refer to so-called 'unresolved issues', such as logistical and security concerns, as obstacles preventing women and girls from accessing education. At times, the Taliban claim that restricting education is the only way to protect girls in what they frame as a dangerous and unruly Afghan society. In other instances, they deflect responsibility or openly admit that the well-being of girls and women is simply not a priority. However, upon closer examination, these justifications lack real substance, suggesting that they serve primarily to legitimise systematic oppression. By exerting control over women, the Taliban have deliberately used the ban on education as a tool to reinforce their own authority and credibility within the country. Between 2001 and 2021, Afghanistan saw a period of modest progress in terms of women's rights and access to education. Nevertheless, the Taliban's influence remained present, especially in regard to the safety of girls attending school.

After exploring why and how the Taliban enforced the education ban, this thesis continued by analysing the implications of the ban on education. When examining the lived experiences of girls and women under Taliban rule, and specifically under the ban on education, it becomes evident that this restriction has had severe impacts on their lives. The abrupt transition from attending school or work to being largely confined to the home has had a profound impact on their daily lives. Among the most immediate and visible short-term effects are the psychological consequences of seeing one's future aspirations suddenly collapse. Many girls had envisioned careers and futures that are now placed in jeopardy due to the loss of educational opportunities and the uncertainty of whether these opportunities will return. Feelings of boredom, sadness, depression, hopelessness, and anger are widely reported among those deprived of access to education. Increasing numbers of girls and women exhibit signs of clinical depression and are in urgent need of psychological support. In the absence of such care, reports of suicide and attempted suicide among Afghan girls are increasing. Nevertheless, instances of hope and resilience have also surfaced, particularly among girls who still have limited access to education, such as through secret schools. For these individuals, the possibility of continuing their education, however precarious, offers a reason to remain optimistic. In addition to these short-term emotional and psychological effects, the ban on education carries significant long-term implications. The growing shortage of female healthcare professionals is already placing increasing pressure on the medical system, resulting in preventable deaths among women. The broader, already fragile, economy is also likely to suffer from the absence of skilled and educated women in the workforce. Furthermore, the systematic exclusion of women from the public sphere threatens to further entrench Afghanistan's deeply patriarchal structures, reinforcing gender inequality and pushing women further into positions of social and economic marginalisation.

Having examined the social and cultural short- and long-term implications of the education ban, the question arises how these findings should be interpreted. When placed within the broader political context of Afghanistan, it becomes evident that the Taliban use the ban not merely to oppress Afghan women, but as a deliberate strategy to assert control over the entire society. It is therefore essential for scholars and policymakers to recognise that this policy is not just one of the many mechanisms of repression, but arguable the most significant and consequential tool the Taliban use to maintain long-term power. As this thesis argues, the education ban must be taken more

seriously by the international community and should serve as a critical point through which the Taliban are held to greater accountability.

Given the short timeframe of this thesis project, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the situation in Afghanistan is highly volatile, with Taliban decrees subject to rapid change, which may affect the accuracy and relevance of some conclusions over time. Second, the Taliban's lack of transparency, limited documentation, and language barriers hinder a full understanding of their motivations behind the education ban. This restricts a fuller understanding of their policies. Third, the perspectives of Afghan women included are limited. Fear and restricted access to media means that many voices, especially those from rural areas, remain unheard. Fourth, the thesis has a limited geographical scope. It and may not fully reflect the ethnical and culturally diversity, and ideological differences between different Afghan regions. As such, some Afghan groups or communities may be underrepresented. Lastly, comparing different time periods (1996-2001, 2001-2021, 2021-present) has interpretive value but direct comparison must be approached with caution due to shifting socio-political contexts over time. Despite these limitations, this thesis offers space for future research. The analysis presented here has primarily draw on a feminist theoretical framework to explore how the Taliban systematically oppresses women by denying their right to education. However, it would be equally valuable to approach this issue from alternative perspectives, such as the postcolonial lens, to better understand the broader dynamics of the past and the present. Additionally, the limitations outlined above highlight the need and opportunity for further, more in-depth research into the lived experiences of Afghan women under Taliban rule. Overcoming these limitations can expand and deepen our understanding of the impact and implications of the oppression imposed by the Taliban on women.

Nevertheless, this thesis highlights the severity of the current situation in Afghanistan by placing it within a broader historical framework. In addition to examining the short- and long-term implications of the Taliban's oppression of women, it also serves as a call for a more urgent and effective international response to these discriminatory policies. The longer the ban on education persists, the more damaging its consequences will become, not only for Afghan women but for Afghan society as a whole. Oppressive governance should never be normalised, and, most importantly, the grave reality faced by Afghan women must not be overlooked or forgotten.

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