Banned from education

A review of the right to education in Afghanistan

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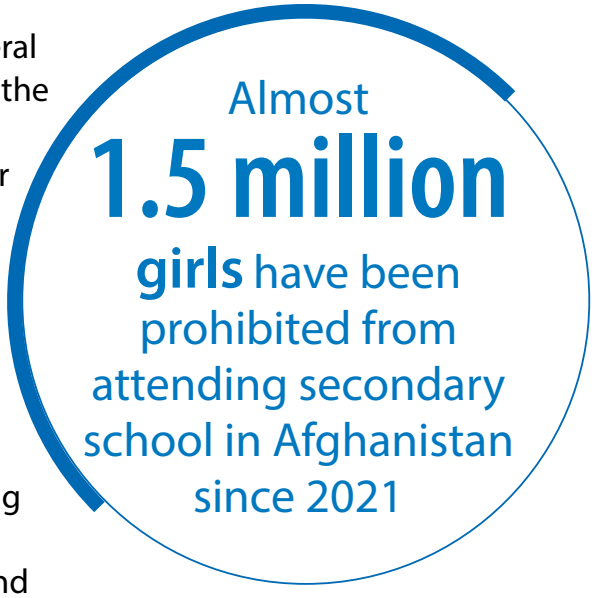
SHORT SUMMARY

The alarming reality of the right to education in Afghanistan

The situation in Afghanistan since the Taliban took power in August 2021 has had alarming effects on the right to education for millions of Afghans, especially women and girls. The country is currently the only one in the world where girls are formally banned from attending school beyond primary education (Grade 6), including secondary schooling, technical and vocational education and training (TVET), higher education and community-based learning initiatives. Economic instability has also led many boys to work instead of going to school. Vulnerable groups, including minorities, persons with disabilities and displaced populations, are among those struggling to access education.

The quality of education has suffered due to several factors, including inadequate implementation of the curriculum and shortages of qualified teachers. Punitive salary cuts for women, delays or irregular salary payments, and the lack of teaching materials and proper equipment and facilities, have degraded education standards. This has affected teaching and learning motivation, as well as learning outcomes, and has led to a rise in out-of-school children and youth.



This report draws on the latest evidence, including first-hand interviews with representatives of key stakeholders. While recognizing the efforts and achievements made by development partners, this report aims to raise awareness of the cumulative and intersectional challenges faced by the Afghan population, and to encourage swift actions to address these challenges.

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"Since wars begin in the minds of men and women it is in the minds of men and women that the defences of peace must be constructed."

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Foreword

In 2001, almost no girls in Afghanistan were enrolled in school. Over the following two decades, through coordinated efforts with the Afghan government, international NGOs and civil society partners, we made major strides in the country in the field of education. By 2021, the female enrolment rate had increased to over 80% at the primary level, 50% at the secondary level and 30% in higher education.

Yet, in August 2021, the Taliban seized power in the country. Since then, a series of regressive measures have drastically reversed the hard-won progress for Afghan girls' and women's education.

The first signs of this regressive vision appeared as early as September 2021: schools gradually reopened when COVID-19 restrictions were lifted, but only boys could resume their studies. In March 2022, girls over the age of 12 were officially banned from school, excluding nearly 1.5 million girls from secondary education. Less than a year later, young women were also banned from universities. Most recently, in December 2024, they were banned from medical training—including disciplines essential to women's health, such as midwifery and gynaecology.

Today, Afghanistan stands out as the only country in the world with such extreme legislative restrictions targeting women and girls—and these measures do not stop at education. Over the past three and a half years, the Taliban have effectively tried to erase Afghan women and girls from public life, obstructing every path to their emancipation, with devastating impacts on an entire generation.

Their lack of prospects is causing an increase in early and forced marriages. Confined to their homes, women are left vulnerable to the growing number of domestic and sexual violence cases. Depression and anxiety rates have risen among Afghan women, with a growing number even considering suicide. And depriving women and girls of education also deprives the country of half its potential for recovery.

This report is an urgent appeal to all those committed to defending women's human rights, particularly their fundamental right to education. As the United Nations' lead agency for education, UNESCO has remained steadfast in calling for the ban on girls' and women's education in Afghanistan to be lifted. We can neither compromise on nor negotiate the right to education.

This is why UNESCO dedicated International Women's Day 2025 to Afghan women and girls. To mark this commitment, we organized an international conference bringing together prominent Afghan women activists, women's rights advocates and international experts. This was an opportunity to shed light on the dire situation of Afghan women and girls, to honour and amplify their voices and to discuss ways in which the international community could support their education.

UNESCO is also working in the field to support alternative modes of learning for these women and girls, such as community-based literacy classes, online courses in partnership with overseas universities, and educational programmes broadcast via radio and television.

But nothing can replace a classroom. Through this report, UNESCO calls for the immediate and unconditional return to education for all women and girls in Afghanistan. We must continue to advocate and mobilize internationally to ensure that the fundamental, inalienable right to education is enjoyed by everyone, everywhere.

Audrey Azoulay

Audrey Azoulay
Director-General of UNESCO

Key highlights

The findings presented in this report are based on desk-based research, relying on the review and analysis of available documents, media reports, data, and existing literature. These are complemented by the insights and first-hand accounts of the education challenges and barriers as informed by the interviews with key stakeholders. The snapshots of these accounts include, but are not limited to, the following:

Access to and participation in education:

- **Girls are banned from attending school after primary education (Grade 6)**. The situation was reportedly worse in some cases. There had been reports of girls showing signs of puberty, despite being under 12, being discouraged from attending school due to misunderstanding of the regulations in place. Approximately **1.5 million girls remain deprived of continuing their education** beyond the primary level due to the ban (OCHA, 2024c), which has repercussions that reach far beyond education.
- The economic and humanitarian crises have also increased the responsibilities of **schoolboys, which has led many boys to work instead of going to school.** In a school census led by UNICEF, 66 per cent of the key informants in schools identified economic reasons as the main cause for boys' absences from primary school, and 47 per cent for girls' absences (UNICEF in OCHA 2023a). According to the *de facto* Ministry of Education data, boys' enrolment decreased from 4,092,658 (primary) and 1,393,423 (secondary) in year 1400 (Mar 2021-22) to 3,791,447 (primary) and 1,177,363 (secondary) in year 1402 (Mar 2023-24) respectively.[1]
- Furthermore, delays in allowance payments for **people with disabilities** and pensions for civil servants will further restrict access to education. These delays can create financial strain on families, leading to an inability to afford even basic educational resources or school fees.

Quality and relevance of education:

- Student learning experiences and outcomes are being potentially affected by **changes to the timetable and skewed implementation of the curriculum.**
- There is skepticism towards whether recruitment practices are merit-based, as some respondents suspected that some **teachers and administrators were hired based on connections and affiliations** with the *de facto* Authorities (hereinafter DfA), rather than their qualifications or experience.
- The seizing of power has led to significant **changes in the allocation and management** of education resources in the country. This situation further compromises the quality of education, as prior to the seizing of power a substantial number of **public schools lacked proper** facilities and materials, especially in rural areas. In addition, according to several interviewees, teacher salaries have been substantially reduced.

1 The calendar used in Afghanistan is the Solar Hijri Calendar.

Legal framework concerning the right to education:

- Since August 2021, the country's **legal framework has been unclear and unevenly interpreted.** Rules are often disseminated through informal channels, both orally and in writing: as an example, in March 2023, confusion arose at the beginning of the academic year when the *de facto* Ministry of Education informed school principals of the reopening date via letter without any public announcement.
- In May 2022, the DfA disbanded Afghanistan's **Independent Human Rights Commission,** originally established under Article 58 of the 2004 Constitution. Its dissolution has profound implications for the rights of the Afghan population.
- The DfA have **not formally denounced** any international treaties. However, since August 2021, the international community has been voicing **deep concerns about the severe human rights impacts** of its policies, especially against women.
- The concerning **definition of 'child' based on the absence of physical signs of puberty** by the DfA jeopardizes the right to education of children, exposing them to the risk of **recruitment** in armed groups, as highlighted by the United Nations Secretary-General.
- Since August 2024, the Law on the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice in Afghanistan has drastically tightened public behaviour regulations, severely impacting women's and girls' human rights by **enforcing strict dress codes for women and restricting their voices in public spaces.**

Multiple and multifaceted crises:

- Despite having a near-zero carbon footprint, Afghanistan is the sixth most vulnerable country to climate change and the least prepared to cope with climatic shocks (United Nations, 2024a). **Climate change significantly impacts education** by exacerbating environmental conditions that disrupt schooling and learning.
- At the end of 2023, Afghans constituted the second largest refugee population, reaching an estimated 6.1 million (IOM, UNHCR and World Bank, 2024), with many of them staying in Iran, Pakistan and other **neighbouring countries which are repatriating undocumented Afghans.** This heightens their vulnerabilities given the current multifaceted crisis in their home country. **Returnees are at risk of internal displacement,** in a country where more than 5.6 million persons were internally displaced at the end of 2023. These displacements increase the risk of education disruption, which, coupled with the inadequate infrastructures of Afghan schools, pose a considerable challenge for these populations in accessing education.
- Limited access to health care facilities, combined with poor or non-existent education and employment prospects, has had **devastating effects on the mental health of girls and women.** The seizing of power resulted in a sharp reduction in economic activity and was further exacerbated by the abrupt halt of international aid, leading to economic disruption. Approximately **85 per cent of Afghans live on less than US$1 a day** as highlighted by recent data from UNDP (2024).
- International development assistance – prior to the seizing of power – constituted 75 per cent of public expenditures, highlighting the **critical aid-dependence** of Afghanistan (OCHA, 2023a). Yet, despite the international community's swift response to the humanitarian crisis in August 2021, with United Nations and NGO aid amounting to US$3.6 billion (25.1 per cent of GDP) in 2022, the DfA's restrictions on girls and women's rights led to a significant reduction in aid in 2023 (UNDP, 2023).

The intersections of barriers, including gender-based restrictions, economic pressures, changes in the implementation of the curriculum, and impacts on teacher conditions, compounds the challenges faced by children and teachers. This further entrenches educational inequalities and hinders the full realization of the right to education, further exacerbating the vicious circle of marginalization.

The persistent **challenges in education services will have devastating consequences** for the entire country. It is critical to foster a multifaceted and inclusive dialogue involving all stakeholders to address the systemic, social and economic issues plaguing Afghanistan's education system. **Restoring post-primary education for Afghan girls and women must be a priority.** Immediate efforts should strengthen alternative learning pathways, prevent further learning loss, and expand funding for community-based, digital, and media-based education. In the medium to long term, sustained advocacy and diplomatic pressure are essential to lifting the ban on their access to post-primary education.

Introduction

Today, Afghanistan is the only country in the world to prohibit access to education for girls over the age of 12 and for women. This situation must concern us all. The right to education cannot be negotiated or compromised. The international community must remain fully mobilized to obtain the unconditional reopening of schools and universities to Afghan girls and women.

Audrey Azoulay, UNESCO Director-General, August 2024

Introduction

In August 2021, the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan, marking a major disruption in the country's political landscape. While not recognized by the international community at the time of writing, they have since become the DfA in the country. Given the previous experience of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan (1996-2001), as well as actions taken in territories controlled by them during the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the international community expressed concerns about human rights, particularly the rights of minorities and girls.[2] The DfA responded to these concerns by stating that it would govern differently than it had 20 years earlier, and notably that it would respect women's rights to work and girls' right to attend school 'within the Taliban's interpretation of Islamic law' and respect rights of members of ethnic and religious minorities (OHCHR, 2021). Soon after, the DfA ordered the reopening of schools, which had been closed due to COVID-19 and the security situation. While this reopening at the end of August included both girls and boys at the primary level, only boys were instructed to return to secondary schools in mid-September 2021. From this point, and contrary to the initial statements made, many rules have been imposed on women and girls, severely impacting their life, including their right to education. This made Afghanistan the only country in the world where girls are denied their right to post-primary education (UNESCO, 2023a).

The increase in the global estimate of approximately 251 million children and youth worldwide deprived of education is largely due to the exclusion of girls and young women from education in Afghanistan (UNESCO, 2023c) with an estimated 1.5 million teenage girls out of school due to the ongoing ban (UNICEF, 2024b; see also OCHA, 2024c). The right to education is a fundamental human right, essential for personal and societal development. It empowers individuals, particularly those marginalized economically and socially, to lift themselves out of poverty and fully participate in society. Ensuring access to quality education through legal guarantees binds countries to uphold certain standards and provides mechanisms to enforce these rights. Education as a fundamental human right is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and many other international human rights instruments (e.g. the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women).[3] UNESCO's foremost standard-setting instrument in the field of education is the 1960 Convention against discrimination in education (CADE), a binding international legal instrument that requires countries to respect the right to education extensively. The Convention is the cornerstone of the Education 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) for education, both of which are grounded in human rights. Afghanistan became party to the CADE in 2010 and participated, as all United Nations Member States, in the negotiation and adoption of the SDGs in 2015.

The situation of women's rights under the Taliban's rule has been well documented. Numerous rules, including changes in the implementation of the curricula, teachers' recruitment, qualifications and working conditions, have been implemented since August 2021, impacting not only girls' education but the entire educational system. These measures have entailed repercussions notably for mental health, employment opportunities, and displacement of people.

Purpose and scope of the report

In September 2021, UNESCO published the report The right to education: what's at stake in Afghanistan? A 20-year review. It aimed at taking stock of the achievements in education made by Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021, as well as remaining challenges and gaps that needed to be addressed urgently against the backdrop of deep political change in the country. Notably it acknowledged that Afghanistan lagged far behind all its neighbouring countries on most development indicators, especially those in education. Despite these shortcomings, the analysis of Afghanistan's education trajectory between 2001 and 2021 revealed that: 'relatively speaking, its pace of progress has been faster than that of most other countries in the South Asia subregion' (p. 9). Enrolment

2 On education and media freedom, see, for example, UNESCO's call of August 2021 (in French). On human rights, see, for example, the Statement by United Nations Human Rights Experts. On women's and girls' rights, see, for example, CEDAW's and CRC's call of August 2021.
3 See Chapter 2 of the Right to Education handbook (UNESCO and Right to Education Initiative, 2019).

had increased ten-fold, with substantial gains for girls and female literacy, female teachers were hired, and steady efforts were made to expand the school network across the country. The report further highlighted that: 'The country had ratified key international normative instruments relating to the right to education; enshrined this right in its Constitution and adopted a wide range of policy measures to increase access, improved education quality and reduced gender, socio-economic and rural/urban disparities. But the challenges remained colossal, with half the primary school-aged children not enrolled in school and very low learning outcomes' (p. 42). The country was also highly dependent on external aid to sustain its education system (UNESCO, 2021).

Three and a half years after a major disruption in Afghanistan's political, social and economic situation, there is a pressing need to analyze the evolution of the implementation of the right to education for all in Afghanistan. This report, aiming to serve as a tool for advocacy and awareness, focuses on the impact of recently adopted rules on the education sector, from August 2021 to January 2025. As such, it should not be considered as an update of the aforementioned 2021 report, but rather a review of the regulatory and policy changes and their impacts on education. This new analysis is crucial to assess how recent rules and practices have impacted education, notably regarding access to and quality of education. Understanding these changes will provide a clearer picture of the challenges within the education sector, informing efforts to better support and improve educational opportunities for all children and learners in Afghanistan.

Methodology

The research method for this report was primarily desk-based, relying on the review and analysis of available documents, media reports, data, and existing literature. However, recognizing the limitations of online sources and the need for accurate, up-to-date information, a consulting firm was hired to conduct on-the-ground research and surveys, including interviews. This firm was tasked to cross-reference existing sources to ensure their veracity and gather additional data, in order to ensure a comprehensive and reliable understanding of the current situation.

The quantitative data used in this report are derived from reputable secondary sources, including data collected and published by various international organizations. These sources are recognized for their reliability and accuracy, ensuring that the data used in this study is of high quality and credibility. Using established databases and reports from respected international bodies, the study leverages comprehensive and systematically gathered information.

The qualitative part of this study (hereafter referred to as 'interviews') included interviews conducted with key stakeholders (covering different profiles: former students, parents, teachers including former teachers, school administrators, NGO representatives and community leaders from various provinces), the majority of whom were women. The interview protocol included questions grouped around the following aspects: 1) Background information; 2) General context; 3) Institutional framework; 4) Rules and regulations; 5) Impact on access to education; 6) Specific policies and their impacts; 7) Challenges and solutions and 8) Additional information.

Secure communication methods were used for these interviews to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the interviewees. Furthermore, any personal or specific information disclosed during these interviews has been anonymized, meaning that identifiers have been removed or modified to prevent identification of participants. This process ensures that identities are protected while still allowing the anonymized data to provide valuable insights and uphold the ethical standards of the research.

The online sources used for this report encompass a variety of types, reflecting the challenges in accessing information regarding the regulations applicable in the country. The DfA's websites are not always up to date, and most rules appear to lack formal codification in official texts, instead they are taken by various entities and disseminated through various means without uniform procedures. Due to the lack of formal legislative processes and documents in Afghanistan since August 2021, this report analyzes regulations being applied in the country with a direct or indirect impact on education, regardless of their form. To access information, unofficial translations were used when necessary.

Disclaimer

The United Nations do not recognize the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. Consequently, references to the 'de facto authorities' (DfA) in this report pertain to the Taliban's current control over Afghan territory and administrative functions. This terminology is used solely to describe the existing situation and does not imply any form of official recognition or legitimacy.

Given the nature of the situation in Afghanistan, only a few decrees have been officially published, and numerous regulations are enforced without being formally documented. Therefore, regulations and measures taken by the DfA were sourced from various organizations, media outlets, or other entities. The use of media outlets aligns with the methodology employed in reports by other United Nations entities, such as UNAMA[4] and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan.[5] The United Nations Secretary-General also referred to a media interview in his report on Afghanistan,[6] underscoring the importance of media sources in this context. To minimize inaccuracies, rigorous cross-referencing was undertaken to the extent possible.

Structure of the report

Following an introduction, this report is divided into two chapters:

Chapter I gives an overview of Afghanistan's current landscape covering political, developmental, humanitarian, climactic and geographic contexts before providing a sector-wide overview and setting the stage for a detailed analysis of the challenges and opportunities within the education sector. This chapter then delves into the domestic legal framework, presenting the international human rights treaties, the Constitution and an overview of the myriad decrees and various forms of rules that apply. This chapter concludes with a focus on international processes, including the resurgence of the concept of gender apartheid in international discussions.

Chapter II is the core of the report, analyzing the drastic regulatory and policy changes which have taken place since the seizing of power and their implications for the right to education. It is structured around four main sections. Following an overview of the education context (Section A), Section B covers the barriers to participation in education. This section looks into both direct barriers, such as the ban on girls' and women's right to education, repercussions of the ban, and security and safety concerns affecting education, as well as indirect barriers to education, including restrictions on women's freedom of movement and right to work, economic barriers and displacements. Section C on quality education investigates the measures taken that impact the curriculum (with consequences on learning outcomes) and learner well-being, teachers and the resources for education. This chapter concludes with international organization's actions specifically on education (Section D). Finally, the report concludes with some considerations for action.

4 See: UNAMA's report '*De Facto* Authorities' Moral Oversight in Afghanistan: Impacts on Human Rights', July 2024.
5 See: Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan's report 'Situation of human rights in Afghanistan', Doc. A/78/338, 1 September 2023.
6 See: UN Secretary-General's report: 'The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security', Doc. A/78/628-S/2023/941, 1 December 2023.

Chapter I

Post-2021: Navigating the new national landscape

This section of the report presents the overall situation of the country and its ruling system. The detailed overview of how the country currently operates aims to equip the reader with the broad understanding needed for the subsequent analysis of the education system and the impacts of changes which have occurred during the last three and half years.

A. Overall situation

1. Demographic dynamics

An official population census has not been conducted since 1979. According to estimates, the population of Afghanistan has been steadily increasing over the last thirty years, reaching 42.2 million in 2023 (UNFPA, n.d.), with women representing 49.5 per cent of the population and men 50.5 per cent (UNFPA, n.d.). Afghanistan has a young population, with 43 per cent of the population aged between 0 and 14, and fertility rates are relatively high with an average of 4.4 births per woman (UNFPA, n.d.). This population trend puts pressure on social services. The average life expectancy is relatively low, reaching 68 years of age for females and 62 for males in 2024 (UNFPA, n.d.). Despite constituting 73 per cent of the population, the rural population of Afghanistan has gradually decreased over the years (World Bank data, n.d. a).

According to UNDP (2023), since August 2021 population movements have increased with approximately 1.7 million and 2.9 million leaving the country in 2022 and the first 8 months of 2023, respectively.. Other sources indicate that an estimated 1.6 million Afghan people fled the country (USA for UNHCR, 2023, as cited in UNESCO, 2024), indicating the difficulty in monitoring the situation and obtaining accurate data.

On the other hand, according to available data, there were 1.7 million cross-border returnees[7] in 2021 and 2022, of which 60 per cent returned from the Islamic Republic of Iran, 27 per cent from Pakistan, 11 per cent from Europe and Türkiye and 2 per cent from other countries (IOM DTM, 2023).

Regarding internally displaced people (IDPs), according to IOM DTM (2023), in 2021, there was a surge with 1.6 million Afghan nationals fleeing their homes, corresponding to a 73 per cent increase compared to 2020. However, in 2022, the trend was reversed as the number decreased to one million persons fleeing their homes. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) noted that by the end of 2022, Afghanistan accounted for about 70 per cent of IDPs in South Asia, with 4.2 million displaced by conflict and violence and 1.5 million by disasters – the latter being the highest globally at the end of 2023 (IDMC, 2024).

According to IOM DTM (2023), among all IDPs in 2021 and 2022, 56 per cent were displaced by disasters (such as earthquakes, draughts and floods). This is the first time that IOM DTM monitored a larger proportion of displacements due to disaster compared to conflict, which has been the predominant factor since 2012.

2. Humanitarian context

Afghanistan is experiencing a multi-faceted crisis which includes a humanitarian crisis, with elevated human costs due to factors including the decrease in international aid, the COVID-19 pandemic, severe draughts across the country and the DfA's shortcomings in providing essential services (EUAA, 2023). According to UNDP (2023), in 2023 'seven out of ten Afghans are subsistence insecure – that is, they don't have access to the most basic items such as utilities, cooking items, winter clothing, basic healthcare and coping strategies needed for mere subsistence' (p. 11).

The international community was quick to respond to the humanitarian crisis that ensued from August 2021. During 2022, total United Nations and NGO aid reached US$3.6 billion (25.1 per cent of GDP) targeting predominately basic needs (UNDP, 2023). According to the same report, this aid declined considerably in 2023 (UNDP, 2023). The call for aid of US$3 billion for the year 2024 was only financed up to 20 per cent revealing the challenge to mobilize funds due to, in part, international competition caused by other humanitarian crises (United Nations, 2024a). The lack of transparency on the use of funds and restrictions imposed on women are among the reasons for the dwindling aid (United Nations, 2024a). Figure 1 shows **the total humanitarian funding from external sources and its decrease between 2022 and 2024,** as well as the amount dedicated to the education sector.

In this regard, United Nations Security Council Resolution 2615 affirmed that humanitarian aid, and

7 IOM defines these as 'Afghan nationals who have returned to the assessed locations after having spent at least six months abroad' (IOM DTM, 2023, p. 17).

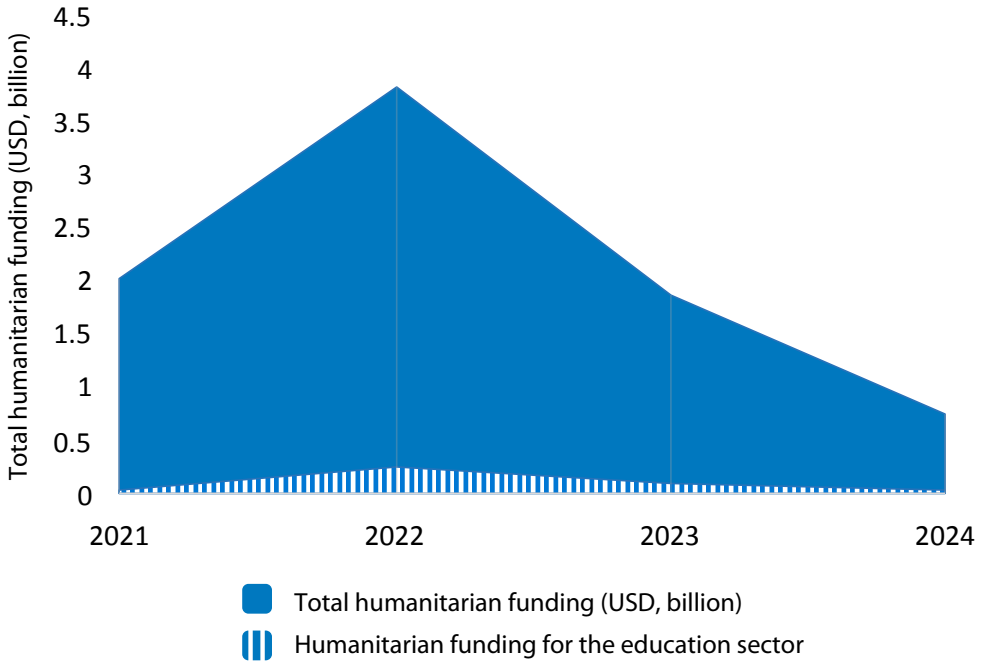
any activities that sought to respond to the basic needs of Afghans, would not constitute a violation of the United Nations sanctions imposed against the Taliban (United Nations, 2021b).

Poverty and food insecurity are grave concerns due to the loss of employment and livelihood, rising food prices and the devaluation of Afghani currency (OCHA 2024; see also OCHA, 2022). Already in 2016, the proportion of Afghanistan's population living below the national poverty line, according to last available data, was a shocking 54.5 per cent (World Bank data, n.d. a). Recent data from UNDP (2024) found that approximately 85 per cent of Afghans live on less than US$1 a day, noting that since August 2021 the situation was particularly acute for women due to restricted access to education and employment. In 2025, OCHA (2024c) estimates that some 22.9 million people (approx. half of the population) will need humanitarian assistance, of which 54 per cent are children and 23 per cent are women. This situation has led to negative coping mechanisms including an increase in 'the sale of assets, marrying off girls or the sale or exchange of children' (EUAA, 2022, p. 27).

According to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, and despite some progress since the winter of 2021/2022, hunger continues to be a major issue, with 14.8 million people – i.e. over one-third of the population – estimated to experience severe food insecurity until March 2025 (OCHA, 2024; see also OCHA, 2023a). These numbers are expected to increase with reduced agriculture yields and expected shortfalls due to climate change.

The public health system has also been severely impacted to the 'brink of collapse' (EUAA, 2023), chiefly due to the loss of international aid. Most health care facilities have poor infrastructure and few qualified health workers, which is only exacerbated by the 'brain drain' and ban on women attending university (OCHA, 2023a). A total of 13.2 million people live in areas where health care services are not accessible within a one-hour walking distance (Ibid.).

Figure 1: Humanitarian funding for Afghanistan



Note: This figure displays total funding reported to OCHA Financial Tracking Service. Sources of funding can include, for example, United Nations Member State, International organization, private donor, UN Agency... etc. therefore the numbers differ slightly from those in the text.

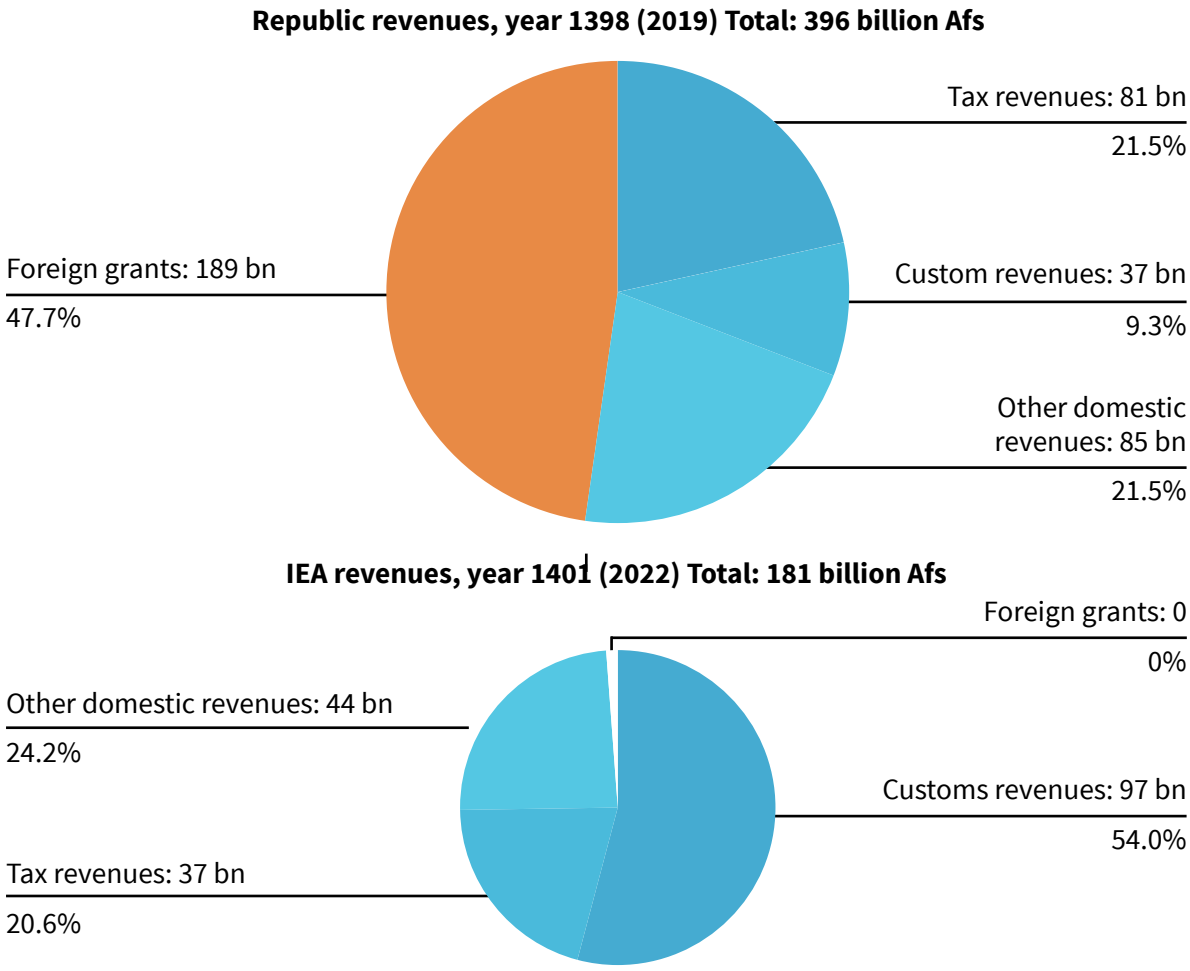
Data source: OCHA Financial Tracking Service. Afghanistan 2024. http://fts.unocha.org [last consulted 15 July 2024]. Data available under CC BY 4.0.

3. Economic hardship

The seizure of power in Afghanistan triggered a sharp reduction in economic activity (reasons include, but are not limited to, the brain drain and restrictions imposed on women) and was further exacerbated by the abrupt halt of international development funding. According to OCHA (2023a), previously, direct international development assistance accounted for 75 per cent of public expenditures. The World Bank (n.d. b) notes that reduced aid led to a 'decline in aggregate demand and widespread disruptions to public services.' While some humanitarian and development aid has resumed, it is significantly less than the amounts received between 2001 and 2021. Now, Afghans predominantly finance their state through taxes, marking a significant shift from the Republic's economy, which relied heavily on aid (Clark and Shapour, 2023).

Having lost access to international banking systems as well as offshore foreign exchange reserves, central bank assets were also frozen (World Bank, N.d. b). In 2021, the GDP contracted by a severe 20.7 per cent, and further contracted by 6.2 per cent in 2022 (World Bank, N.d. b). Other sources indicate that the economy contracted by 22 per cent in 2022 (United Nations, 2024a).

Figure 2: Comparison of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (IRA) and Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) government revenues



Sources: 1398 domestic revenues: Ministry of Finance Revenue Department website.
1398 foreign grants: The World Bank Afghanistan Development Update April 2021; Setting Course To Recovery.
1401 revenues: These are annualised figures based on the first nine months of 1401 (March-December 2022) from The World Bank Economic Monitor, 25 January 2023. Revenues fluctuate monthly, so annualising only gives a rough idea of the yearly total. (NB Islamic taxes collected by the Ministry of Agriculture apparently not included.)

Source: Clark and Shapour, 2023, p. 5. Available under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. Reproduced with permission

Regarding employment, there have been huge losses in jobs as well as working hours since the seizing of power, with women being the most affected. ILO estimated that 'at the end of 2022, 900,000 fewer workers were in employment compared to the no-crisis scenario' (ILO, 2023, p. 1). Several key sectors have been affected, including agriculture, construction, and the civil service. ILO (2023) notes that: 'The employment-to-population ratio also remains nearly 3 percentage points below pre-crisis levels'. Women and youth employment was estimated to have decreased by 25 per cent in the fourth quarter of 2022 relative to the second quarter of 2021 (ILO, 2023).

Lack of wages, alongside the current deflation the country is experiencing (World Bank, 2024), is placing great strain on families who struggle to cover their living costs (UNDP, 2023). It was also reported that women employees of the previous government, who are obligated to work from home, had their salaries capped at a mere US$70 per month, an amount insufficient to cover living expenses (United Nations, 2024a).

4. Climate and geographical hazards

Afghanistan is a landlocked country located in the heart of south-central Asia, between Pakistan (to the east), Iran (to the west) and Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan (to the north).

The country is prone to considerable temperature and precipitation variations between seasons due to its arid continental climate (World Bank CCKP, n.d.). The diversity of the landscape, between the mountainous regions and arid southern regions, also results in sharp differences in temperature from below zero in the former, to above 35°C in the latter. Precipitation is also considerably affected by topography, with heavy precipitation in the north (more than 1,000 mm) and far less in the south arid region (less than 150 mm).

As noted in a recent United Nations press release (2024a), **climate change is particularly aggravating the existing crisis.** Despite having a near-zero carbon footprint, Afghanistan is the sixth most vulnerable country to climate change and the least prepared to cope with climatic shocks (United Nations, 2024a). By 2030, annual droughts are expected to become the norm, alongside an increase in the likelihood of flash floods. These severe and unpredictable meteorological phenomena are expected to multiply and have serious repercussions on infrastructure and agriculture, while also contributing to population displacement. In December 2022, Afghanistan experienced a critical drought exacerbated by the first triple La Niña effect[8] since 1998-2001. The risk of another La Niña episode by early 2025 raises concerns, which could lead to drought-like conditions, further exacerbating the humanitarian crisis (OCHA, 2024c: see also OHCA, 2023). In April and May 2024, entire villages were destroyed with over 340 people killed and livestock and farmland lost.

In 2023, climate change displaced 418,000 people within Afghanistan, nearly double the number in 2022 (IDMC, 2024). Earthquakes caused 491,000 displacements in South Asia, with over three-quarters occurring in Afghanistan's Herat province (IDMC, 2024).

8 The World Meteorological Organization explains La Niña as the following: 'The El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) is a recurring natural phenomenon characterised by fluctuating ocean temperatures in the equatorial Pacific, coupled with changes in the atmosphere, which have a major influence on climate patterns in various parts of the world. (…) El Niño and La Niña are the oceanic components while the Southern Oscillation is the atmospheric counterpart, thus giving rise to the term El Niño/Southern Oscillation. Though ENSO is a single climate phenomenon, it has three phases - El Niño, La Niña and Neutral. (…) El Niño/La Niña can have widespread impacts on climate and weather patterns, with changes in temperature and rainfall in various parts of the world and it is the dominant feature of climate variability on inter-annual timescales.'

B. Domestic legal framework: frequently volatile and informal

Since August 2021, **the legal framework in the country has been unclear and somewhat unpredictable.** This is notably because it does not adhere to the formal procedures typically observed when adopting a regulation and is often based on oral or written declarations made by various entities of the DfA. Several statements have been made by the DfA regarding international treaties and the national legal framework, including the Constitution and legislation. However, these statements were often unclear and frequently lacked follow-up implementation. Moreover, they were sometimes contradicted by later actions, which allowed for a certain level of flexibility.

1. The place of international human rights treaties

Regarding international human rights instruments, there was a wave of ratifications in the decade following 2001.[9] Afghanistan ratified notably the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 2003, without any reservations. By doing so, it became the first Muslim state to ratify the CEDAW without reservations (Farhoumand-Sims, 2009).[10] Other international instruments subsequently adopted were two optional protocols of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 2002 and 2003,[11] the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education in 2010, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2012 and the Optional Protocol of the Convention against Torture in 2018.

In May 2022, the DfA dissolved Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission (OHCHR, 2022), established under Article 58 of the 2004 constitution. This commission played a crucial role in monitoring human rights implementation and promoting human rights in the country (AIHRC, n.d.). Its dissolution has profound implications for Afghanistan's population, including a significant reduction in oversight for human rights abuses. Indeed, the most recent United Nations Universal Periodic Review[12] recommendations from 2019 encompassed a wide array of issues such as enhancing economic opportunities, improving access to education and basic services, supporting vulnerable groups, promoting human rights education, addressing security and economic challenges, advancing the SDGs, ensuring food security, alleviating poverty, and safeguarding education from disruptions (OHCHR, 2019). The absence of this commission jeopardizes monitoring in these critical areas.

As of July 2024, the treaties continue to effectively apply in Afghanistan. However, at the end of September 2021, the DfA's Ministry of Justice published a press release on Facebook, where it was indicated that international laws and treaties which were not 'against Islam and the Taliban regime' would be respected (Anadolu Ajansi, 2021). Many rules and actions later adopted by the DfA violate international human rights law according to United Nations human rights entities (see Section C below and Chapter II of this report).

Although the DfA have claimed that human rights are an internal matter to be addressed nationally, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, alongside UNAMA, OHCHR the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation in Afghanistan, cautioned that Afghanistan is obligated to adhere to several international human rights treaties to which it is a party (UN DPPA, 2024). Consequently, human rights cannot be considered solely an internal issue.

9 Afghanistan also acceded to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1983 and the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1994.

10 It should be noted that the CEDAW was initially signed by Afghanistan in 1980. By signing a convention or treaty, the State endorses its principles; by ratifying it, the State commits to be legally bound by it. Usually, this involves the legal obligation for the ratifying States to apply the Convention by incorporating its provisions in their national constitutions or domestic laws. Treaties can usually allow reservations. According to the Vienna Convention on the law of treaties, article 2: "Reservation" means a unilateral statement, however phrased or named, made by a State, when signing, ratifying, accepting, approving or acceding to a treaty, whereby it purports to exclude or to modify the legal effect of certain provisions of the treaty in their application to that State'. For further information on reservations, their scopes and impacts, see UNESCO and Right to Education initiative, Right to education handbook, box 6.1 'Further information: Reservations to treaties', page 171.

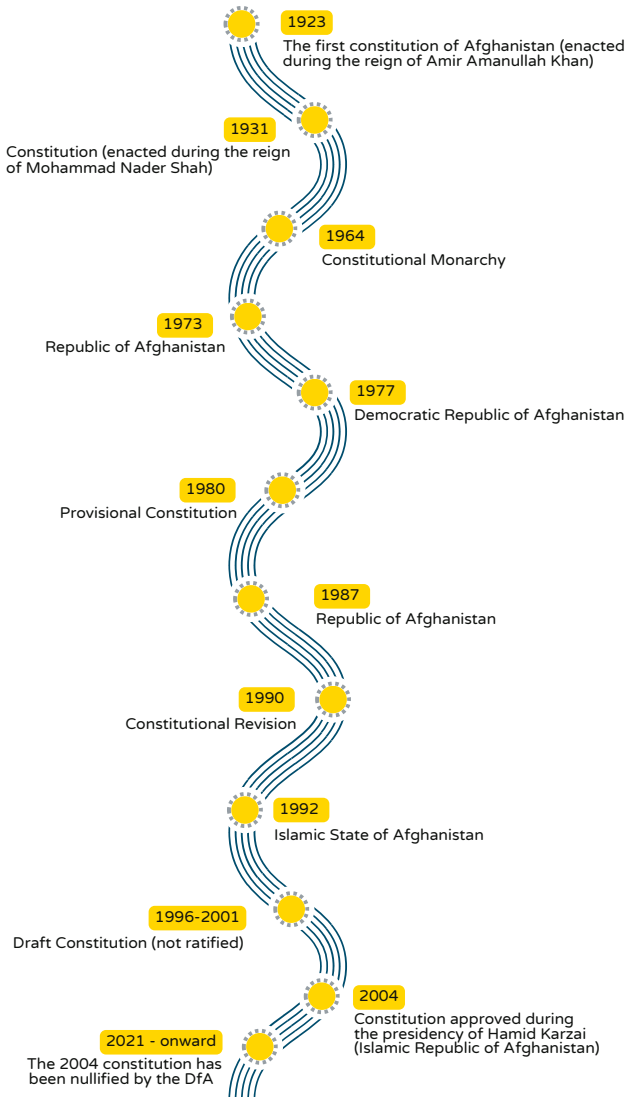
11 The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography in 2002 and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict in 2003.

12 The UPR is a mechanism of the Human Rights Council that calls for each UN Member State to undergo a peer review of its human rights records every 4.5 years. See: UN Human Rights Council, UPR webpage Afghanistan was reviewed in April 2024, but the outcome of the review is yet to be published.

2. The state of the Constitution

The Constitution usually represents the highest protection that a state can afford to human rights, including the right to education (UNESCO and Right to education initiative, 2019). The former Constitution of Afghanistan was ratified in 2004 by then President Hamid Karzai. Following the seizing of power, the *de facto* Minister of Justice announced plans to re-adopt temporarily the 1964 Constitution (Constitute Project, n.d.), without implementing provisions that would be considered contrary to sharia law (BBC News, 2021).

Figure 3: Constitutions of Afghanistan over time



The 1964 Constitution, enacted by King Zahir Shah a decade before Afghanistan transitioned into a republic, established a constitutional monarchy. The declaration of the DfA to re-adopt this Constitution, was somewhat surprising, as it was used as a reference to draft the 2004 Constitution (De Lauri, 2012). In 1964, the objectives were to abolish discriminatory norms, to centralize the government authority, to reform the judicial system and to promote instruction (Amin in De Lauri, 2012). It also re-introduced the right to vote for women[13] and their right to run for office (Leclerc and Shreeves, 2023).

While from 1996 to 1998, the Taliban views were that a 'truly' Islamic political order needed no formal Constitution (IDEA international, 2022), the discourse changed in mid-1998 and an assembly of Taliban elders was convened to draft a Constitution for the then named Islamic Emirate. However, it was never adopted (USIP, 2020), and no mention of it has been made since the seizing of power.

Furthermore, the declaration to temporarily re-introduce the 1964 Constitution was not followed by any formal process and has not been addressed since. As a result, three and half years after the seizing of power, Afghanistan remains without a formal Constitution. While the *de facto* spokesman stated that the process regarding the Constitution was underway (TOLOnews, 2022b), he also 'denounced calls for the DfA to commence a constitution making process, stressing that improving the governance and economic situation of Afghans would precede such a process and that the process needed to be consistent with sharia law' (UNGA, 2024, p. 6), therefore casting doubt on the intention to pursue such an endeavour. More recently, at the beginning of 2024, the *de facto* Minister of Justice stated that there was no legal vacuum in the country and that laws were adopted based on the Quran, Sunnah and Hanafi jurisprudence and that later secondary laws could be turned into a Constitution (Afghanistan International, 2024b).

3. Decrees and various forms of rules in lieu of formal legislation

In light of the situation with the Constitution, which is supposed to specify how laws are to be elaborated and adopted, the current legal framework lacks clarity. While the DfA said that all laws adopted before August 2021 would undergo a revision process (*de facto* Ministry of Justice, 2022), there are currently no public results available regarding this work. However, in November 2023, the *de facto* Ministry of Higher Education, through a letter, banned reference to the former Higher Education law and stated that all laws and regulations from the previous government should be considered null and void (Independent Persian, 2023). Recently, the *de facto* Minister of Justice said that the ongoing work to prepare laws was proceeding quickly and that several laws had been ratified, including on the restitution of usurped lands, the statute of the sharia court and the law on public oversight (Afghanistan International, 2024b).

In 2023, the DfA published some decrees, several of which are dated from before August 2021 and as early as 2016 (Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2023). Furthermore, while the DfA have repeated on a number of occasions that the applicable law is sharia law, UNAMA's monitoring of how incidents of gender-based violence against women and girls have been addressed since August 2021, revealed that complaints regarding gender-based violence are dealt with using both sharia law and the laws of the Government in place before the seizure of power, with sharia law taking precedence (UNAMA, 2023a).

The process for adopting a 'legislative document' is detailed in a decree dated 24 October 2022 (unofficial translation). Consisting of five articles, it outlines the necessary steps for implementation. The process begins with the drafting of the document by the relevant department, which involves a committee of Ulema, experts, and skilled professionals. For sharia-related issues, sources of Islamic jurisprudence must be identified. Once the initial draft is ready, it is submitted to the *de facto* Ministry of Justice for 'sharia-based analysis, review, and evaluation'. After this review, the document is sent to an independent commission for further review and modification. Once finalized, it is signed by the *de facto* head of state, published by the Ministry of Justice, and only then does it come into effect (Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2023).

Although this is theoretically the formal process for adopting a decree, in practice, the process for adopting and communicating rules appears to be much less clear

13 In Afghanistan, the right to vote for women was first introduced in 1919 by King Amanullah and later removed by King Zahir Shah (Leclerc and Shreeves, 2023).

and not always adhered to. Additionally, rules do not always take the form of a 'legislative document' such as decrees but are often shared orally or in writing through letters or informal channels. For example, there was confusion that occurred at the beginning of the academic year in March 2023. The *de facto* Ministry of Education sent a letter to school principals informing them of the reopening date, but no public announcements were made. Consequently, many schools in several provinces remained empty and lessons were not held. The reopening date coincided with Nowruz, which had been a public holiday before the seizing of power (CBS News, 2023). Furthermore, rules are sometimes applied at provincial level before becoming national. It is notably the case of a recent rule that requires the transfer of community-based education (CBE) from international NGOs to national NGOs (see Chapter II).

Therefore, although there is a codified process for adopting legal instruments, it appears that practice does not really align with it. Various ministries often make announcements via official webpages or social media accounts, with formalization occurring at a later stage (Human Rights Council, 2023). This situation is also reflected in the private sector. Despite players reporting an improved business environment — especially in terms of security and reduced corruption — there are still several concerns, including the absence of a clear legal framework (United Nations, 2024a).

This lack of clarity regarding the existing legal framework and its enacting process is also reflected in its implementation.[14] As reported by UNAMA's monitoring, although several *de facto* entities were legally authorized to handle complaints on gender-based violence, some were also mediated by the *de facto* Departments of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, despite not being officially mandated to do so (UNAMA, 2023). Furthermore, the categorization of some acts of gender-based violence as criminal or civil cases is uneven and seems to depend on the *de facto* official handling the case. In fact, few *de facto* officials interviewed by UNAMA considered that all acts previously criminalized in the Elimination of Violence Against Women Law (enacted in 2009) still constitute criminal cases, while others considered some of these same acts as civil cases (UNAMA, 2023). The situation persists. Between October and December 2024, UNAMA documented incidents of gender-based violence against women and girls, including murders, so-called honour killings, child and forced marriages, rape, domestic violence, and suicides linked to domestic abuse (UNAMA, 2025). In some cases, severe incidents, such as attempted murder, were referred to mediation by DfA, despite victims or their representatives seeking formal judicial resolution (Ibid.). The overall legal uncertainty leaves room for inconsistent enforcement and application of the law.

C. International processes under review

The situation in Afghanistan has been an important focus of the international community since August 2021, particularly due to the human rights implications of the rules imposed by the DfA. Numerous statements and denunciations have intensified, as conditions worsened. While discussions are ongoing regarding the potential codification of the concept of gender apartheid (further elaborated in the following section), the only international judicial process currently underway is before the International Criminal Court (ICC).[15]

Numerous international entities have increasingly condemned human rights violations in Afghanistan. The UNHCR highlighted severe violations including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, torture, and

14 The DFA in charge of the monitoring of implementation of decrees is, since early 2023, the *de facto* High Directorate of Supervision and Prosecution of Decrees and Edicts, which also deals with investigations for 'breaches/crimes' of the DFA. Prior to being attributed with this name, this entity used to be the *de facto* Attorney General's Office, and its line Prosecution Units were in charge of investigating crimes committed by individuals. This *de facto* entity had already stopped its prosecution activities in August 2022, before being renamed and repurposed in 2023 (UNAMA, 2023a).

15 The ICC is an independent international organization, not part of the UN system, which has jurisdiction over the crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and crimes of aggression (see the ICC website). The Court is governed by the Rome Statute that Afghanistan ratified in February 2003, therefore making it possible for the ICC to exercise its jurisdiction over these crimes if committed in Afghanistan or by its nationals from May 2003 onwards. The ICC is currently investigating allegations against the Taliban, including persecution on gender grounds (article 7(1)(h) of the Rome Statute).

restrictions on freedoms of opinion, speech and assembly (UNHCR, 2023). With over half the population under 19 (UN Data Portal Population Division), young people and children's rights, including education, have also become a major concern, exacerbated by poverty and humanitarian crises. The United Nations Secretary-General criticized policies such as the ban on girls' education and the definition of 'child' based on physical signs of puberty which puts children at risk of recruitment, and the use and detention by armed groups (UN Security Council, 2023). Experts have noted that initial promises of inclusion in Afghanistan have not been upheld, including for minorities who suffer from discrimination (OHCHR, 2023).

Regarding girls' and women's rights, initial concerns[16] have evolved into strong denunciations as the DfA implemented new and stricter regulations, with the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan (2024a) describing widespread and systematic abuses. The enactment of the Law on Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice of 2024 on 21 August 2024 has intensified international concerns.[17] Several United Nations experts, including UNAMA (2024b), the Special Rapporteur on human rights in Afghanistan, the Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls, and the Chair of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, have highlighted a further deterioration in human rights since the law's implementation and an increase in oppressive measures against women (OHCHR, 2024). As restrictions have intensified, UN experts assert that the practices of the DfA constitute gender persecution — a crime against humanity — and are engaging in discussions on codifying 'gender apartheid' (OHCHR, 2023).

Gender apartheid

Gender apartheid can be understood as the economic and social sexual discrimination against individuals because of their gender or sex (UNESCWA, n. d.). This concept bears its history in the gradual evolution of discriminatory practices, initially associated with racial apartheid due to South Africa's racial segregation policies. This led to the inclusion of 'apartheid' in the 1973 International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid (CSPCA), defining it specifically in racial terms (United Nations, 1974). The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998) also categorized apartheid as a crime against humanity, maintaining its racial definition.[18] Recently, there have been calls to expand the definition of apartheid to include 'gender apartheid', a concept dating back to the late twentieth century. Advocates seek to enshrine it in international law (United Nations, 1999), arguing that existing treaties do not fully address the systematic nature of gender-based rights deprivations.[19] United Nations experts propose leveraging the ongoing process of drafting an international convention on crimes against humanity to define and include gender apartheid in international law, arguing that this would enhance legal condemnation and action, and uphold equality and non-discrimination principles (United Nations, 2024b). The International Law Commission (ILC) included the topic in its long-term work programme in 2013. By 2019, the ILC had adopted the Draft Articles on Prevention and Punishment of Crimes Against Humanity (United Nations, 2019), using the Rome Statute's definition of apartheid.

The situation in Afghanistan has highlighted the issue of gender apartheid. Since 2018, and especially after August 2021, the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls has proposed expanding draft article 2 to include gender apartheid, defined as 'inhumane acts committed in the context of an institutionalized regime of systematic oppression and domination by one group over another group or groups, based on gender, and committed with the intention of maintaining that regime' (Human Rights Council, 2024). In October 2024, during the 79th session of the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly, it was emphasized by the Chair of the United Nations Working Group on discrimination against women and girls that the discriminatory decrees imposed by the DfA in Afghanistan constitute an 'institutionalized framework of gender apartheid' (UN Press, 2024b). In

16 See for example the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) call on the Taliban to honour their pledge to protect Afghan women and girls (august 2021). See: OHCHR website.

17 Available at: afghanistan-analyst.org

18 Article 7 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 1998: Crimes against humanity. [...] The crime of apartheid 'means inhumane acts of a character similar to those referred to in paragraph 1, committed in the context of an institutionalized regime of systematic oppression and domination by one racial group over any other racial group or groups and committed with the intention of maintaining that regime'.

19 Several treaties prohibit sex and/or gender discrimination (such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the CEDAW).

December 2024, the UN's Sixth Committee[20] adopted the resolution A/79/470 after arduous negotiations. Based on the 2019 International Law Commission draft articles, the resolution has convened a United Nations plenipotentiary conference on preventing and repressing crimes against humanity. The conference will meet at the United Nations Headquarters in New York for three consecutive weeks in early 2028 and again for three consecutive weeks in early 2029 to draft and finalize a legally binding instrument on these issues (UN General Assembly, 2024a). While gender apartheid is not yet formally recognized in international law, the UN Deputy Secretary-General (2023) and Richard Bennett, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan (2024b), have used the term to describe the severe gender-based discrimination in Afghanistan.

20 The Sixth Committee is the primary forum for the consideration of legal questions in the General Assembly.

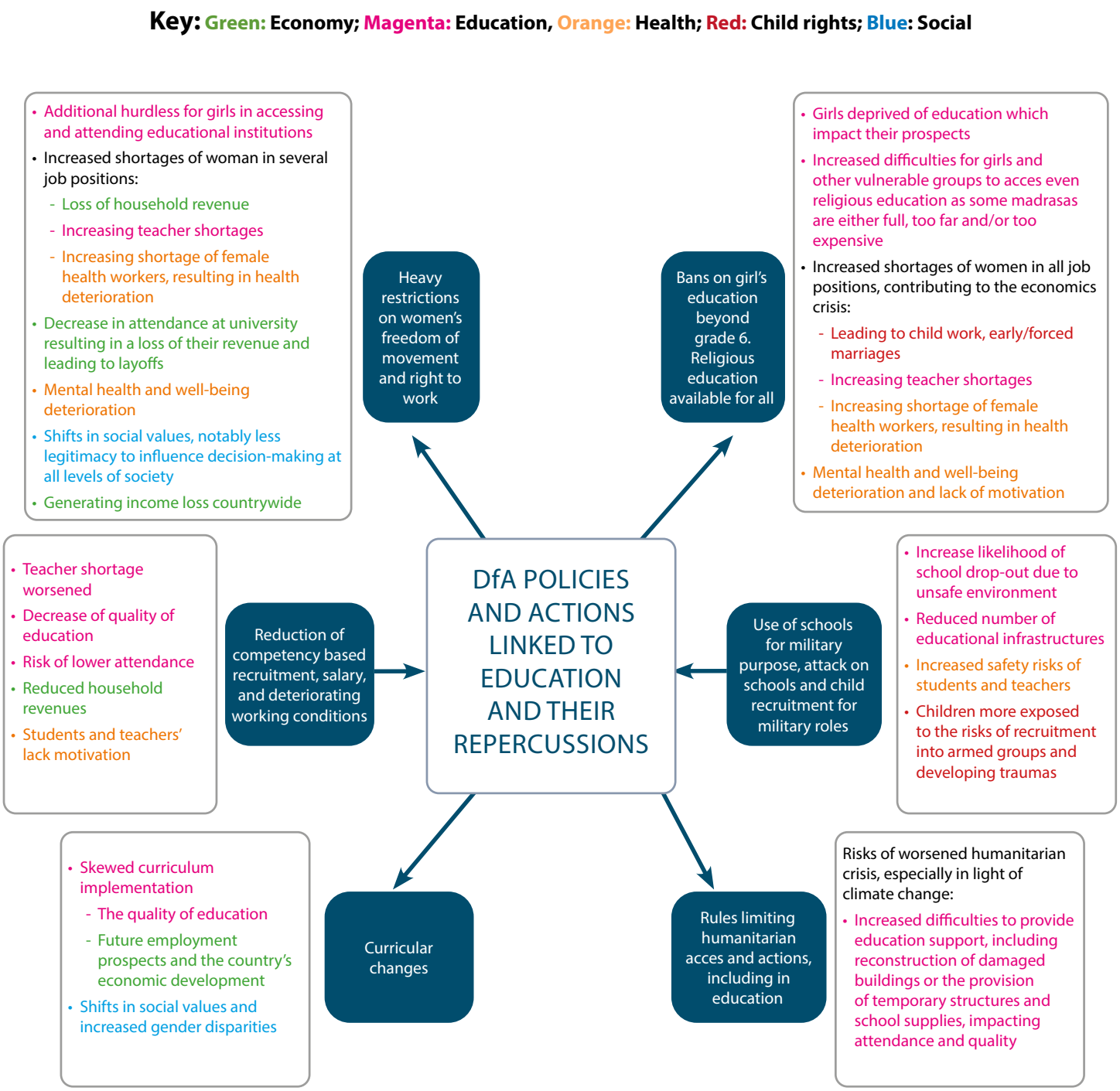
Chapter II

Drastic regulatory and policy changes and their impacts on education

This chapter focuses on education and specifically on the consequences of the regulatory and policy measures adopted by the DfA on the right to education of all Afghans, while providing a system-wide and cross-sectoral perspective. Figure 4 provides a snapshot of these education-related actions and their repercussions.

Structured in four sections, the chapter begins with an overview of the education context (section A), followed by the barriers to participation in education (section B), implications on quality of education (section C) and finally the actions for education taken by international organizations (section D).

Figure 4. Overview of measures/actions taken by the DfA and their likely repercussions



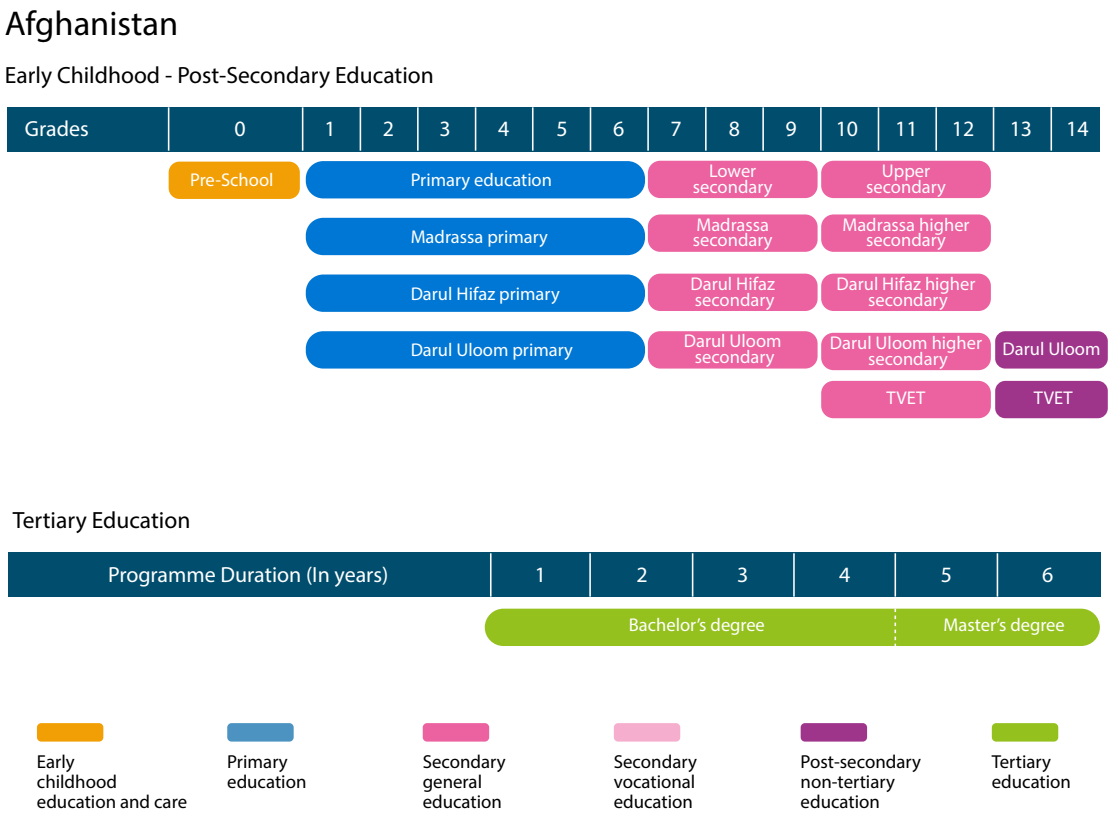
*Consequences result from various factors. For example, many factors may affect the mental health of students and teachers, not limited to those listed in this figure.

A. Overview of new developments in education

Education structure and landscape

The educational landscape in Afghanistan encompasses a diverse array of institutions and includes public schools, which are government-funded and provide free education at primary and secondary levels; private schools; and TVET centres that aim to equip students with practical skills. There are also religious schools, public and private, which focus on Islamic education, with some also offering secular subjects. Religious schools are sub-divided into various types: madrasas (generally considered primary school with emphasis on the Quran), Darul Uloom (generally similar to high school with emphasis on sharia and Islamic Scholarship) and Darul Hifaz (generally memorizing the Quran and Islamic Scholarship). In April 2022, the *de facto* Minister of Education announced that the DfA were planning to establish three to ten new religious schools in each district[21] across the country (Afghanistan International, 2022a). Additionally, while there is no mention of other types of religious schools in the latest statistical yearbook published by the DfA, it has been reported that new types of madrasas, named 'jihadi madrasas', have been put in place by the DfA since 2022 (Afghanistan International, 2024a), but there is little information on how they operate or differ from other religious schools. Furthermore, CBE programmes emerged since 2003, providing flexible learning opportunities for children who cannot access formal schools due to various barriers (Afghanistan Education Cluster, 2022). However, as discussed below (Chapter II, section B(2)(c)), the DfA ordered the transition of CBE centres from NGOs to local DfA. Higher education is offered through public universities and private institutions.

Figure 5: Current Afghanistan education system diagram



Source: Adapted from UNESCO UIS, 2021

21 While it is difficult to obtain accurate data on the number of districts, the Statistical Yearbook 2020 indicates that there were 365 districts in 2020-2021, while the Statistical Yearbook 2022-2023 published by the DfA indicates that there were 423 districts in 2020-2021.

The start and end of the school year depends on the climate of the province. In 28 of the provinces where the climate is colder, the school year runs from March to November. In the remaining 6 provinces, which have a hotter climate, school runs from September to June (Afghanistan Education Cluster et al., 2023).

Education governance is structured as follows:

National level: The education system is mainly governed by the *de facto* Ministry of Education and the *de facto* Ministry of Higher Education.

- The ***de facto* Ministry of Education** oversees primary and secondary education in Afghanistan. It sets educational policies, curricula, and standards for schools across the country. The *de facto* Minister of Education is responsible for overall policy, strategy, and management and *de facto* Deputy Ministers oversee specific areas such as general education, Islamic education, literacy, curriculum development, and teacher education. Under the *de facto* Ministry of Education, there are several departments and directorates focusing on different aspects including policy and planning, monitoring and evaluation, human resources, finance, and procurement.
- The ***de facto* Ministry of Higher Education** manages higher education institutions, including universities and colleges. It is responsible for setting policies, curricula, and standards for higher education (both public and private institutions).
- The ***de facto* TVET authority** is responsible for formal TVET and the ***de facto* Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs** for non-formal TVET.

Other *de facto* ministries also implement measures that impact education: the *de facto* Ministry of Information and Culture (influences educational content and cultural policies); the *de facto* Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs (can influence religious education and the integration of Islamic studies into the broader educational curriculum); and the *de facto* Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (ensures that schools and universities adhere to the DfA's moral and religious standards).

Provincial level: There are Provincial Education Directorates, whose directors report to the *de facto* Ministry of Education and manage education in their respective province. *De facto* Deputy Directors handle specific areas such as general education, Islamic education, and literacy. Furthermore, departments and units manage school administration, teacher management, curriculum implementation, and logistics. During the last three and half years, the role of *de facto* Provincial Governors in education-related aspects has become more prominent.

District level: District Education Officers report to the *de facto* Provincial Education Director and oversee the education sector within the district.[22] Assistant District Education Officers assist in various administrative and management tasks. Finally, School Supervisors ensure the implementation of policies and programmes at the school level.

When it comes to **education policies**, the DfA have not introduced any nationwide policy governing education, however they have announced several measures applying to education (see Chapter II).

22 Kabul is the only exception, with the Kabul Provincial Education Directorate overseeing Education Offices in rural districts, and the Kabul City Education Directorate overseeing Education Offices in urban districts.

B. Barriers to participation in education

1. Direct barriers to education

The DfA have introduced several measures that predominantly target girls' and women's rights. This section addresses both these direct bans and restrictive measures as well as the repercussions on girls' and women's other human rights. Another direct barrier covered in this section, which impacts all children, are the attacks on schools, the use of schools for military purposes and the recruitment of children by the armed forces which result in children being out of school and may directly jeopardize their right to education.

a) Bans on girls' and women's right to post-primary education

> **No country in the world should bar women and girls from receiving an education. Education is a universal human right that must be respected. The international community has the responsibility to ensure that the rights of Afghan girls and women are restored without delay. The war against women must stop.**
>
> ***Audrey Azoulay, UNESCO Director-General, 19 January 2023***

With the seizing of power, it is the 20.9 million girls and women who have been the hardest hit. The DfA have imposed a number of increasingly restrictive bans that have curtailed girls' and women's rights, including their right to education, raising alarm bells worldwide.

One of the first measures announced by the DfA was prohibiting mixed classes at universities, as classes must segregate men and women, with female classes being taught exclusively by female instructors (RFI, 2021). The *de facto* Minister of Higher Education declared that 'mixing men and women is against Islam and our traditions' (Le Monde, 2021). However, due to financial resource constraints (see Section 4), separating classes is not always feasible for universities, with risks that men's education is prioritized over women's.

The situation deteriorated further when, in September 2021, while most schools had been closed since the seizure of power, secondary schools were re-opened only for boys, leaving girls without access to secondary education (Afghanistan Education Cluster et al., 2023). Furthermore, as mentioned previously (Chapter I, section B(3)), while secondary schools were announced to re-open in March 2022 (the new school year for cold climates), the order was finally reversed at the last minute. Some girls in the higher grades even returned to class only to be told to go home (Associated Press, 2022). Girls are only allowed to pursue education beyond Grade 6 in religious education institutions (UNESCO, 2024). However, during the interviews, some parents reported that private madrasas were too expensive for many families, and that public madrasas were either too far or already full. As a result, attendance increased for boys but decreased for girls: the proportion of boys attending school increased from 63 per cent in 2022 to 75 per cent in 2023; while it decreased from 44 per cent in 2022 to 39 per cent in 2023 for all school-age girls, notably due to the ban on secondary education for girls (UNDP, 2023).

In October 2022, women were restricted from selected specialized fields of study which were considered too challenging (Atlantic Council, n.d). Studying courses such as agriculture, veterinary science, civil engineering, medicine and mining were prohibited for women throughout the country (BBC News, 2022). This measure was further exacerbated as, in December 2022, the education ban was extended to women in university (HRW, 2023). UNICEF (2023b) estimates that if the ban was to persist through to 2030, over 4 million girls would be affected. In December 2024, the DfA further restricted one of the few remaining options for girls and women by barring them from attending institutions

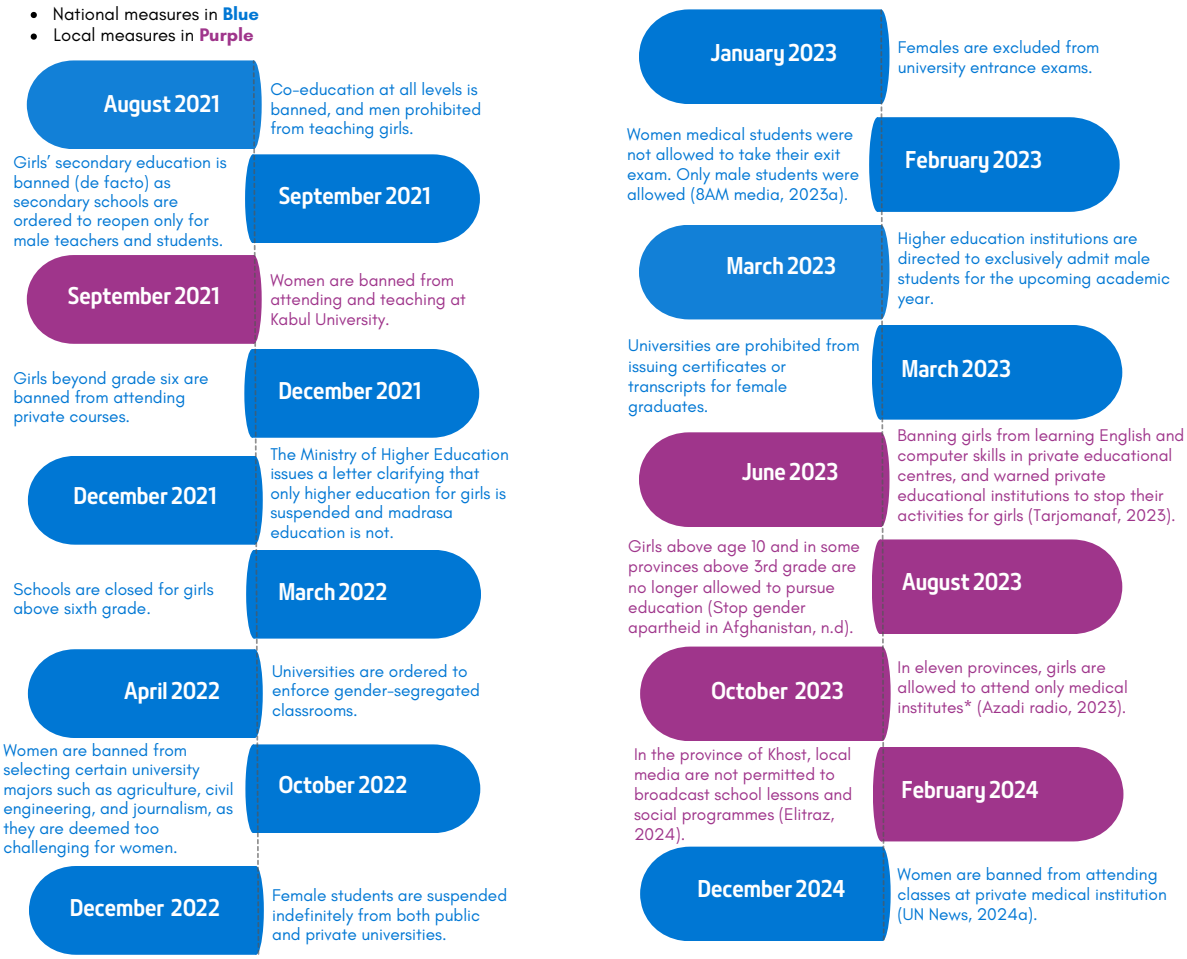
offering medical education, further endangering the health, well-being, safety and lives of not only Afghan women and girls but all Afghans. These bans have serious implications for human resources in the country, as they deprive girls and women of essential educational opportunities, leading to a significant loss and gap in knowledge and skills. Moreover, the large majority of study certificates have not been distributed (Nimrokhmedia, 2023), preventing women and girls from proving their qualifications, continuing their studies, and even impacting their employment. The *de facto* Chief Justice of the Supreme Court stated that a woman's place is at home where her role is to raise children and take care of them (8AM Media, 2024a). This political stance seriously undermines women's rights and specifically their right to education.

In addition, while only a few cases and for a short period in time, some provincial authorities misunderstood the ban, with certain districts prohibiting girls over the age of 10 (or beyond Grade 3) from attending primary school (BBC News, 2023b). This reflects the confusion around the rules imposed by the DfA which may lead to even more restrictive measures on girls. This limitation also affects literacy classes in certain areas (BBC News, 2023b). When questioned by the BBC, a member of the *de facto* Ministry of Education acknowledged awareness of the situation but stated they had not yet received any official directive on the matter (BBC News, 2023b).

More recently, in February 2024, the province of Khost implemented a measure prohibiting local media from broadcasting school lessons and social programmes (Etilaatroz, 2024). Though not a nationwide measure, broadcasting school lessons and online programmes is a crucial means of reaching girls who are unable to pursue their education beyond Grade 6 (Safi and Rivas, 2023). By banning media from offering such classes, the possibility of continued learning for these girls is drastically affected, leaving them to learn in secret through online schooling or in hidden makeshift classrooms (EUAA, 2023). Due to these restrictions, families are increasingly relocating to nearby countries to enable their girls to continue their education.

As illustrated in Figure 6, understanding the full scope of the education ban faced by girls requires considering the patterns of enactment of regulations at both national and local levels. In the past three and half years local restrictions often preceded national adoption, raising concerns about the potential spread of the local rules. While there is no comprehensive ban covering all education aspects, the accumulation of decrees and regulations at both national and local levels, leave very little room for girls and women to exercise their right to education.

Figure 6: *De facto* Authorities measures restricting girls' and women's access to education



* According to reliable sources, these are limited to certain courses (see below).

Sources: Atlantic council, n.d; 8AM media, 2023a; Tarjomanaf, 2023; Stop gender apartheid in Afghanistan, n.d; Azadi radio, 2023; Etilaatroz, 2024; UN News, 2024a.

[Unless indicated otherwise: Atlantic council, n.d]

Women's right to participate in all aspects of cultural life, enshrined in Article 13(c) of CEDAW, is also being impeded. For example, in 2022, all computer workers in Kandahar were ordered not to transfer music or movies into women's phones or computers if they visit their shops without being accompanied by a mahram (male guardian) (Rukshana media, 2022). In addition, women were banned in January 2023 from visiting historical sites (Stop gender apartheid in Afghanistan, n.d) and parks (Amu TV, 2022b). These cultural restrictions further compound the challenges to women's right to education. Access to cultural life, including music, movies, and historical sites, is an essential component of a holistic education that goes beyond formal schooling. Such experiences enrich learning, foster critical thinking, and provide a broader understanding of history and society. These measures curb their educational development but also isolate them from societal narratives and histories that could inspire and inform their educational journeys.

Education is a fundamental human right notably enshrined in the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960). As recorded in the UN Security Council meeting coverage, Shabana Basij-Rasikh, Co-Founder and President of the School of Leadership, Afghanistan, shared that the secret to a stable, peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan 'is no secret at all': it is educated girls, who become educated women, who raise more educated girls and boys (United Nations, 2023b).

b) Repercussions of the bans on other girls' and women's rights: a cross-sectoral perspective

The direct education and employment bans (see below regarding employment) on girls and women have had alarming impacts on their other human rights. In December 2022, female students were suspended indefinitely from both public and private universities (Atlantic Council, n.d.) and female medical students were prohibited from taking their exit exam in February 2023 (8AM Media, 2023a). However, there was already a shortage of female doctors, who are the only health care providers available to women and children (Al Jazeera, 2023). As of November 2022, the *de facto* Ministry of Public Health announced an official policy stating that male doctors should not treat women (Amu TV, 2022a). Since December 2024, in the Paktia province, the *de facto* Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice stopped women without mahrams from accessing health facilities (France 24, 2024). The lack of access to women doctors and limits to their access to health centres, deprives girls and women of their right to health. This contributes to a deterioration in their health outcomes and affects their access to 'reproductive and maternal health care services, vital for addressing high maternal mortality rates and ensuring safe pregnancies and childbirths' (UNESCO, 2023b). The October 2023 announcement permitting girls to attend medical institutes in eleven provinces (Azadi radio, 2023), was a welcome step towards mitigating the catastrophic impact on the Afghan health care system, although limited to certain health care courses such as nursing, midwifery, anaesthesia and medical technology. However, in December 2024, the DfA imposed a new ban preventing women from attending classes at private medical institutions, removing any possibility for higher education and further straining an already burdened health sector (UN News, 2024a). Accusations abound that the Taliban's policies constitute gender apartheid, resulting in the loss of jobs by almost half of Afghanistan's employed women, as well as a 25 per cent rise in child marriages and 50 per cent rise in maternal mortality (United Nations, 2024c).

Limited access to health care facilities, coupled with poor or non-existent education and employment prospects, has had devastating effects on girls' and women's mental health. Safi and Rivas (2023) found that 'The mental health crisis affecting Afghan women has reached unprecedented levels and the impact on future generations could be irreversible' (p. 12). In a survey of 2,112 women conducted by BISHNAW-WAWRA,[23] over 1,000 women reported suffering from depression and anxiety (Safi and Rivas, 2023). The same study reveals that suicide and attempts at self-harm are also increasingly prevalent, although due to the stigma associated with suicide, many families do not report it (BBC News, 2023a). IOM, UNAMA and UN-Women (2024) also conducted a study which revealed that 69 per cent of the women consulted reported significantly worsening feelings of anxiety, isolation, and depression between April and June 2023, compared to data collected from January to March 2023.

> **They [my daughters] could think about their future as they would become doctors, teachers, or so, but the Islamic Emirate does not allow them to go to school and study after Grade 6. They do not have any hope for the future since they all have to stay at home now. When we ask them what they want to be in the future, they are speechless and hopeless because they cannot continue their education.**
>
> A mother from the interview

This is particularly worrying considering that WHO (2023) estimated that 1.6 million people who face mental health issues will have little to no access to both mental health consultation and psychosocial support. Restrictions to education opportunities further reduce the support girls and women can have to help them cope with mental health challenges.

Access to education is also internationally recognized to contribute to the eradication of child marriage as stated in General Comment No. 36 of CEDAW (para. 9). Without education beyond primary level, Afghan girls are at a high risk of marrying prematurely, despite previous efforts to adopt a National Action Plan to End Early and Child Marriage, which has since stalled (UNICEF, 2023b). This is especially concerning as the Special Decree on women's rights published by the DfA in December 2021, covers marital issues and specifies the requirement of

23 BISHNAW-WAWRA is 'a digital platform that captures the voices of Afghan women in real-time and on a diversity of issues' (Safi and Rivas, 2023, p. 3). They conducted a survey of 2,112 women in March 2023 in over 17 provinces, and in April 2023 focus group discussions were conducted in 11 provinces with 159 women.

a woman's consent for marriage, but fails to define a minimum legal age of marriage (DfA Spokesperson, 2021). Without the prospect of an educational path, the pressure on girls to marry early is further heightened (Al Jazeera, 2023). According to a survey, the number of early marriages is growing, driven by both forced marriages and young women choosing to marry early due to the absence of prospects (Safi and Rivas, 2023).

> **(...) students over Grade 6 are forced to stay at home, and this issue has resulted in early or forced marriages. After all, when a girl cannot study anymore, our people tend to get married to begin their new life.**
>
> A teacher from the interview

Without access to secondary and higher education, the impact on household income and the economy at large will be significant. UNESCO (2023b) found that if this ban is not reversed 'approximately 600,000 women would leave the workforce by 2066 without being replaced by similarly educated individuals' (p. 7). Over the years to come, it is estimated that women with higher education qualifications could potentially earn an annual income ranging from US$500 to over 1000, without which household incomes would be drastically impacted (UNESCO, 2023b). In addition, it is estimated that based on the current population growth rate, cumulative income loss would be US$9.6 billion by the time the current cohort of educated women leaves the labour market (UNESCO, 2023b).

The regressive measures and shifts in social values, which affect their employment and education opportunities, result in less legitimacy to influence decision-making at all levels of society (IOM, UNAMA and UN-Women, 2024). Education and employment are critical pathways for gaining knowledge, skills, and experience necessary for effective participation in governance and policy-making. Without these opportunities, women lack the credentials and societal recognition needed to advocate for their rights. Additionally, the August 2024 ban on women speaking in public[24] further silences their voices, stripping them of the ability to engage in discourse and influence societal narratives (UN News, 2024b). Consequently, their voices are marginalized, and their perspectives are absent from crucial discussions that shape the future of their communities and the nation as a whole. This exclusion perpetuates a cycle of disempowerment, where the absence of women in decision-making roles leads to policies that further entrench gender inequality.

More broadly, by limiting their access to education, their cultural rights, their mobility, their right to work and even their right to health, the DfA are reinforcing a broader system of gender-based oppression that restricts women's and girls' participation in public life, further entrenching gender inequality. As noted by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan (2024b), 'The system of discrimination, segregation, disrespect for human dignity and exclusion institutionalized by the Taliban is motivated by and results in a profound rejection of the full humanity of women and girls. (…) these deprivations do not exist independently of each other. Rather, each deprivation systematically informs and interacts with others, creating a mutually reinforcing architecture of oppression' (para. 34). The oppression institutionalized by the DfA's governance has therefore been referred to by some as gender apartheid (see the previous Chapter I for a more in-depth analysis of this term).

c) Security and safety concerns around educational institutions

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan (2023), Richard Bennett, reported 'a sharp increase in attacks against schools, students and educational personnel, with a monthly average of eight attacks between January and September 2022' (para. 83). Another report found that between 2021 and 2022, there were 125 attacks on schools and education personnel, of which 65 per cent were attributed to the DfA and resulted in the death of 326 students (UN Security Council, 2023). These include schools being attacked and damaged as well as threats and violence against education facilities and personnel. These attacks resulted in 'The access to education of 37,405 children [being] affected' (UN Security Council, 2023, para. 41) and created an unsafe environment, deterring school attendance. It has been reported that risk education is still being delivered in the country, which is crucial given the decades of conflict it has experienced (International Campaign to Ban Landmines, 2023). However, the funding shortfall has crippled

24 See article 13 of DfA's Law on the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice of 2024, available at available at: afghanistan-analyst.org [unofficial translation]

Afghanistan's mine action sector, affecting several initiatives including risk education (OCHA, 2024d). More action is required to support risk education to minimize the risks of accidents.

Utilizing schools for military purposes puts educational facilities and students at risk of attack and disrupts the learning environment. At the international level, the UN Security Council in its resolution 2143 of 2014 expressed 'deep concern at the military use of schools in contravention of applicable international law, recognizing that such use may render schools legitimate targets of attack, thus endangering children's and teachers' safety as well as children's education' (para 18). Amnesty International (2021), the United Nations Secretary-General (United Nations Security Council, 2023) and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan (2023), reported on the military use of schools by the DfA. A total of 54 schools were used for military purposes by the DfA in 2022 according to the report of the United Nations Secretary-General (UN Security Council, 2023), and 32 in 2023 (UN General Assembly Security Council, 2024b). The use of schools for military purposes makes them targets, thereby undermining the safety and right to education for teachers, education officials and children. Afghanistan had endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration which requires states to consider 'measures to deter the use of schools by armed forces and armed non-State groups.'

Child recruitment in armed groups or forces severely jeopardizes the right to education by removing children from the educational environment and exposing them to conflict and violence. This practice has been a long-standing issue in Afghanistan from various groups, including the Taliban (EUAA, 2023). In 2021, at least 47 verified cases of child recruitment were reported, with 24 attributed to the DfA (EUAA, 2023). While these took place predominantly prior to the seizure of power on 15 August 2021, EUAA (2023) noted that they are since more visible in the ranks of the DfA. According to the UN Secretary-General, in 2023 in Afghanistan the DfA recruited children and used them in combat (150) as well as in support roles (192) (UN General Assembly Security Council, 2024b). Conscripting or enlisting children into armed forces or groups constitutes a war crime under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (Article 8(2)(b)(xxvi) and (e)(vii)).

Disruption to basic services such as education (further coupled with the poor-quality education as detailed in section B(1)), plus the economic crisis, leave children vulnerable to military recruitment and school dropout (UN Security Council, 2023). Yet, education has a role to play in providing physical protection by ensuring that school buildings and surroundings do not put children in danger of military recruitment and provide psychosocial protection and cognitive protection by developing appropriate life skills to cope with the conflict-affected environment, including landmine awareness (Save the Children UK, 2007). Furthermore, 'in comparing former (male) combatants and noncombatants, Blattman and Annan (2008) found that lower levels of education are one of the most significant consequences of time spent as a child soldier - even more significant than severe psychological distress, which may be experienced only by a minority of former combatants' (PEIC, 2010, p. 4). Education is also an important part of the broader process of reintegrating child soldiers, as it can notably provide them with skills and competencies to ease their economic and social reintegration and may prevent the stigmatization and social isolation of ex-child soldiers (PEIC, 2010).

2. Indirect barriers to education

Direct barriers to education significantly affect access, especially for girls. However, it is crucial not to underestimate indirect barriers, which also hinder educational access in the country for all. These indirect barriers include, notably, restrictions on women's freedom of movement and right to work, economic challenges, various types of displacement, and restrictions on CBE. Vulnerable populations, such as displaced persons and minorities, see their right to education further affected by some of these indirect barriers.

a) Restrictions on women's freedom of movement and right to work

Restrictions on girls' and women's freedom of movement are significantly impacting their right to education. The DfA announced a series of restrictions including only using public transport when accompanied by a mahram (a male guardian) (Ravizan, 2023), only leaving their homes in cases of necessity (UNAMA, 2022) and no longer issuing driver's licenses to women (Darivoa, 2023). Additionally, in accordance with Article 20 of the Law on Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of

Vice of 2024 [unofficial translation], staff and drivers of commercial vehicles are prohibited from transporting 'any woman who is not covered', allowing 'women to sit or mingle with an unrelated man', or transporting any woman who is not accompanied by an 'adult male who is a close relative and of sound mind' (Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2024a). Furthermore, Article 13.8 of the same law states that 'If an adult woman leaves home because of some urgent need, she is duty-bound to hide her voice, face, and body' [unofficial translation] further restricting women's access to public spaces and their freedom of movement (Ibid.). These restrictions create significant hurdles for girls in accessing educational institutions, attending classes regularly, and participating in extracurricular activities, thereby severely undermining their right to education. Additionally, they affect mothers who are responsible for ensuring their children's school attendance and involvement in school matters.

Several measures have also been adopted that ban women from several workplaces including foreign organizations (Independent Persian, 2023), NGOs (8AM Media, 2022b), the United Nations (Euronews, 2023a), participating in radio or TV shows (Azadi radio, 2024), as well as restrictions on teaching (see below). According to UNICEF (2023b), 'an estimated 15,000 women professionals, comprising about one-fifth of those in teaching, health, and policing, may be lost by 2030, leading to significant social and economic consequences' (p. 1).

Currently, people are depressed and worried about their children's future. They are concerned that they will not have female doctors, female teachers, and others in the future. Overall, it has devastatingly impacted our community.

A community leader from the interview

Limiting girls and women's work prospects further diminishes the value of education. If educated women are barred from utilizing their knowledge and skills in professional settings, the incentive for pursuing education is drastically reduced. This creates a disheartening cycle where the lack of educational opportunities leads to fewer professional prospects, and the lack of professional opportunities devalues the pursuit of education.

b) Economic barriers

Before the seizing of power, the Afghan economy was already fragile and heavily dependent on foreign aid, with significant declines observed afterwards in all economic sectors, including agriculture, industry and services (UNESCO, 2024), and approximately half of the population living below the national poverty line (World Bank, 2023b). With the seizing of power, the economy immediately experienced a steep decline, leading to economic instability marked notably by restricted access to banking services, inflation and the freezing of crucial international funds on which the country was heavily dependent (OCHA, 2023a). Moreover, the agricultural sector, which accounts for around 36 per cent of GDP, saw a notable decline of 6.6 per cent in 2022 (World Bank, 2023a), due to recurring disasters such as droughts and earthquakes. The restrictions on women's employment imposed by the DfA also affected household revenues negatively.

Restrictions on women working in aid organizations further jeopardize access to social services, including education, especially for vulnerable populations. In December 2024, the DfA ordered both national and international NGOs to adhere to a decree barring them from employing Afghan women. Exemptions for health and education sectors exist under strict conditions. Women can work remotely or in segregated facilities with separate entrances, rest areas, and prayer spaces. They must adhere to a full hijab dress code and travel with a male guardian. Employers must justify and document female employment. Challenges persist, especially in remote areas where women are critical for health care and education. Afghanistan's strained medical system and challenges in education highlight the essential role of female workers in delivering life-saving services and supporting vulnerable populations.

Impact on children

The economic crisis is impacting children's education, as families deprioritize education to look for extra sources of income and cut what can be seen as non-essential expenses, such as those that are education related. Primary school attendance decreased from 55 per cent (MICS 2010-11) to 48 per cent (MICS 2022–23) (UNICEF, 2023b). While there might be multiple reasons for such a low attendance rate, the share of households with at least one child working outside the home more than doubled in 2022, rising from 9 per cent in 2021

to 23 per cent in 2022 (OCHA, 2023a). In fact, in a school census led by UNICEF, 66 per cent of the key informants in schools identified economic reasons as the main cause for boys' absences from primary school, and 47 per cent for girls' absences (UNICEF in OCHA 2023a). This could be even more important in provinces where marginalized communities and minorities live, as there have been cases of discrimination in aid distribution, notably against the Hazara community (HRW, 2023).

While primary education is the only education that girls are currently allowed to attend, economic hardships prevent many from accessing even the little that remains of this right, as reflected in the interviews. This situation is exacerbated by the lack of secondary education and work prospects, which could lead families to prioritize boys' education. Additionally, the absence of a minimum legal age of marriage means that girls may be married off early to reduce the economic burden on their families.

People with disabilities

> **In the past, they were provided with bicycles or other stipends by NGOs and international organizations, but there are no such services available. We have noticed fathers who have taken their children with disabilities to school on their shoulders because of the lack of a wheelchair. Once the class is dismissed, another member of the household comes and takes the child home.**
>
> A community leader from the interview

While reliable data on people living with disabilities in Afghanistan is lacking, a national report released in 2018 estimated that there were 1.2 million Afghans with disabilities, with 41 per cent of them women (USIP, 2024). However, in 2020, the Asian Foundation estimated that approximately 17 per cent of children suffer from disabilities, and 80 per cent of Afghan adults experienced disabilities, with severity increasing with age (The Asian Foundation, 2020). After the seizing of power, the DfA started a re-registration process of people with disabilities who used to get a disability pension before August 2021 (ACAPS analysis hub, 2023), claiming that eligibility for benefits would be extended to families with members with disabilities unable to work or who had lost their primary breadwinners for any reason
(DW in ACAPS analysis hub, 2023). However, this re-registration process would have almost halved the number of persons eligible for assistance (International Campaign to Ban Landmines, 2023), and non-payment of pensions has been reported since (TOLOnews, 2022a; TOLONews, 2024). The DfA came up with several explanations for this delay, including lack of identity cards and bank accounts, or non-qualification for disability pension under the new DfA law (TOLOnews 2022a; TOLOnews 2024). These delays in payment and non-qualification under the DfA risk having a huge impact on people with disabilities, who are even more affected by the economic and humanitarian crisis. The absence of pensions, coupled with the cut in international funding, will further impact the right to education of children and students, in a country where there was already low capacity to provide inclusive education for children with disabilities (HRW, 2020).

c) Displacements

Returnees

At the end of 2023, Afghans constituted the second largest refugee population worldwide, after Syrians and before Ukrainians, with many of them staying in neighbouring countries such as Iran and Pakistan (IOM, UNHCR and World Bank, 2024). In March 2024, it was estimated that 5.5 million Afghan refugees were living in these neighbouring countries, and another 1.5 were undocumented (IOM, UNHCR and World Bank, 2024). In October 2023, Pakistan adopted a plan to repatriate undocumented Afghans which resulted in 609,409 persons returning to Afghanistan between then and May 2024 (IOM, 2024). Undocumented Afghans account for the majority of returnees since the adoption of this plan (89 per cent), mainly motivated by fear of arrest (89 per cent) (IOM and UNHCR, 2024). Returns also continue from Iran, mostly for undocumented Afghans (IOM, UNHCR and World Bank, 2024). While the current level of Afghan returns is not without precedent, this is particularly worrying in light of the current multi-faceted crisis, notably for education. Indeed, according to IOM, UNHCR and World Bank (2024), children below 15 represent 56 per cent of the total of current returnees. Though the data does not specify the proportion of girls among these youth, it implies that many girls will be deprived of education upon their return, given the current ban beyond Grade 6.

Internally displaced persons

Returnees can also be at risk of internal displacement, in a country where more than 5.6 million persons were internally displaced at the end of 2023, representing 70 per cent of IDPs in South Asia (IDMC, 2024). The economic crisis and its impact on unemployment and poverty played a greater role in displaced or moving households' decisions to leave their home region, with 81 per cent of recent displaced households in 2022 (versus 47 per cent in 2021) (OCHA, 2023a). Furthermore, even if the IDMC (2024) reports no new conflict-related displacements in 2023, the ongoing economic crisis and deterioration of basic services, particularly in health and education, could potentially trigger new displacements in the future (OCHA, 2023a). Climate change also plays an important role in contributing to displacement (see below).

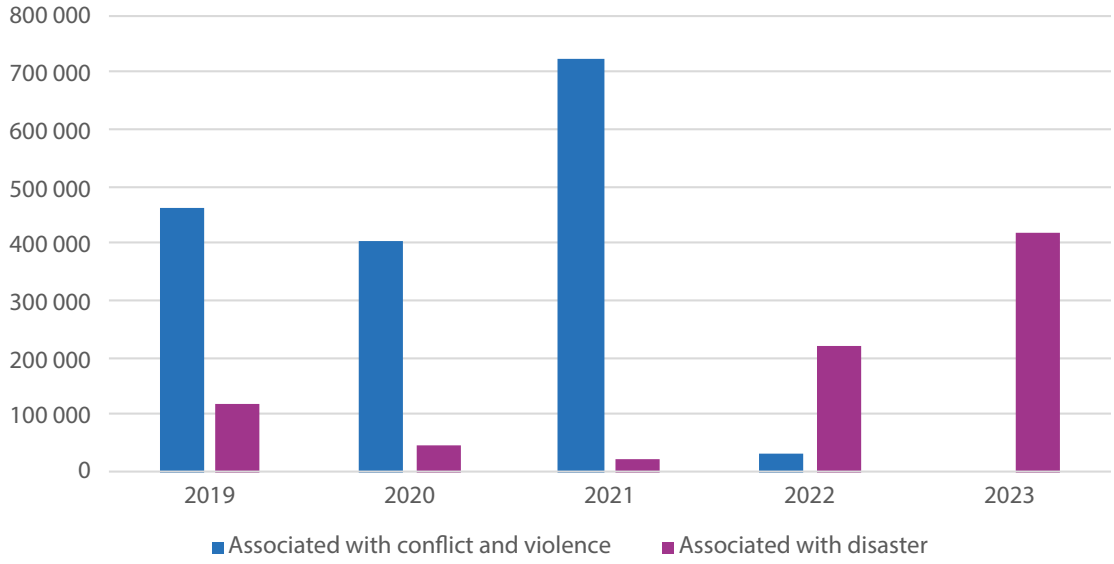
IDPs in protracted displacement situations often live in informal settlements, characterized by precarious living conditions and often established near urban centres to enable the search for work or because of food and water shortages (IDMC, 2024; OCHA, 2024c). The constant threat of eviction and the absence of secure property rights can discourage residents from enrolling their children in school, knowing they may have to move at any time. This insecurity also limits investment in adequate shelter, infrastructure and essential services (OHCA, 2024c; see also OCHA, 2023a) such as water, sanitation and education, exposing residents to prolonged deprivation and increasing their vulnerability to successive displacements, therefore increasing the risk of education disruption. In 2023, reports indicated an increase in the eviction of IDPs from informal settlements by the DfA, with one of the largest in Kabul in July 2023, while humanitarian organizations warned that the conditions in areas of return were inadequate for resolving IDPs' hardships sustainably (IDMC, 2024). Although the number of informal settlements decreased between 2022 and 2024, it is estimated that by mid 2024, around 1.7 million people were residing in 871 settlements across 24 provinces. Many internally displaced families live in inadequate shelters, with limited access to basic services and increased land tenure insecurity, heightening their risk of eviction (OCHA, 2024c).

The inadequate infrastructure of Afghan schools is another considerable challenge, particularly for displaced populations. While the significant lack of educational infrastructure remains one of the primary reasons many children are unable to attend school (OCHA, 2023a), this situation is set to worsen with the increasing number of returnees (with only 20 per cent, in 2024, of school-age returnee children being able to access education) and the still high number of IDPs, compounded by ongoing evictions (OCHA, 2024c). Furthermore, it has been reported that some public schools were converted into madrasas by the DfA (as reported in the interviews; 8AM Media, 2024b). These factors will place even greater strain on the education system, as many students will be unable to attend school due to a shortage of buildings or because existing facilities are overwhelmed by the influx of new students.

People displaced by climate change

According to IDMC (n.d), the number of internal displacements due to conflict and violence has significantly decreased since 2021, with no new displacements recorded for these reasons in 2023. However, this trend does not apply to internal displacements caused by disasters such as earthquakes, droughts, and floods (IDMC, n.d.). Afghanistan, identified as the sixth most vulnerable country to climate change and the least prepared to handle climatic shocks (United Nations, 2024a), is likely to see a continued increase in internal displacements due to climate-related disasters.

Figure 7: Internal displacement in Afghanistan (2019-2023)



Data source: IDMC, n.d. Afghanistan Country Profile. www.internal-displacement.org [Accessed on 01/08/2024]. Data available under CC BY 3.0 IGO.

Climate change significantly impacts education by exacerbating environmental conditions that disrupt schooling. Increasingly frequent and severe droughts, floods, and extreme weather events damage educational infrastructure, rendering many school buildings unsafe or unusable. The October 2023 series of earthquakes in the province of Herat is a clear example of such risks. It resulted in the damaging of eight schools and the destruction of six schools, three early child development centres, and two CBE classes serving 60 children (OCHA, 2023c). In 2024 alone, flooding affected 173,300 people and damaged or destroyed 20,000 homes, along with agricultural land and other civilian infrastructure including schools (OCHA, 2024c)

The freeze on international funds since August 2021 has hampered efforts to repair damaged schools, reducing the number of safe, functional learning environments available (OCHA, 2023a). Faced with an infrastructure that cannot withstand disasters, parents may prefer not to send their children to school for their safety (UNICEF, n.d). Some schools have also been used as disaster hubs putting further pressure on an already fragile education system (OCHA, 2023a).

These environmental challenges also contribute to economic instability, as families reliant on agriculture face crop failures and livestock losses, further pushing children out of school to support family income, as mentioned above. In 2022, the country experienced its worst drought year in nearly 30 years, in a country where 75 per cent of the population depends on agriculture. In 2023, the rainy season started early, causing flooding that affected more than 126,000 people in 18 provinces (UNICEF, 2023d). Faced with these extreme weather conditions, and the rising cost of agricultural inputs resulting from an economic slowdown since 2021, many farmers are gradually withdrawing from their activities and others have reduced their livestock to cope with the deteriorating economic situation. This has exacerbated food insecurity, which was further deepened when food aid funding was drastically reduced in September 2023 (IDMC, 2024).[25]

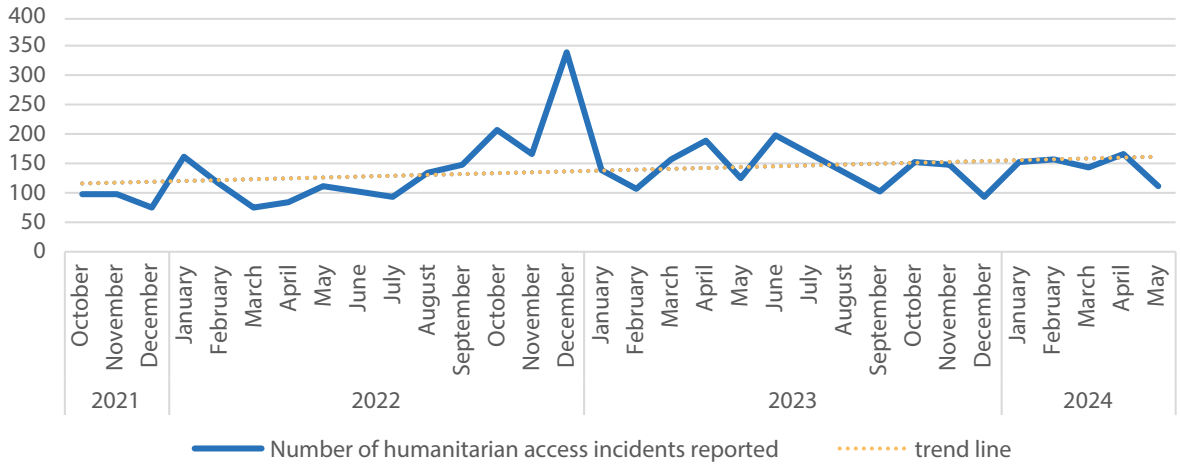
Furthermore, while in 2023 Afghanistan endured its worst drought in 30 years, it also experienced its third year of drought in a row in 2024 (OCHA as cited in EUAA, 2024). A total of 30 out of 34 provinces are suffering severe or extremely poor water quality and the number of people in need of access to clean water and sanitation has increased from 3.5 million, reaching 21 million people (OCHA, 2024c). Inadequate access to clean water and malnutrition increases health risks and hampers educational opportunities, as students often miss

25 Due to a massive funding shortfall, The World Food Programme has been forced to drop 10 million people from food assistance in Afghanistan. See WFP, News releases 5 September 2023.

school due to illness or weakness from dehydration and malnutrition. These intersecting difficulties compromise not only children's physical well-being, but also their cognitive development and academic performance. Schools themselves face considerable challenges in terms of access to facilities offering appropriate water, sanitation and hygiene services (UNICEF, 2023c).

The DfA's prioritization of military spending over essential social services further limits its ability to respond effectively to these humanitarian crises (HRW, 2024). Additionally, humanitarian operations are further constrained by the DfA's restrictions on women working for national and international NGOs and United Nations agencies and the new procedure for coordination of humanitarian response published in 2023 by the DfA (OCHA, 2023b), the third version of which was issued in May 2024 (OCHA, 2024a). Figure 8 shows the number of humanitarian access incidents[26] reported between October 2021 and May 2024.

Figure 8: Humanitarian access incidents reported



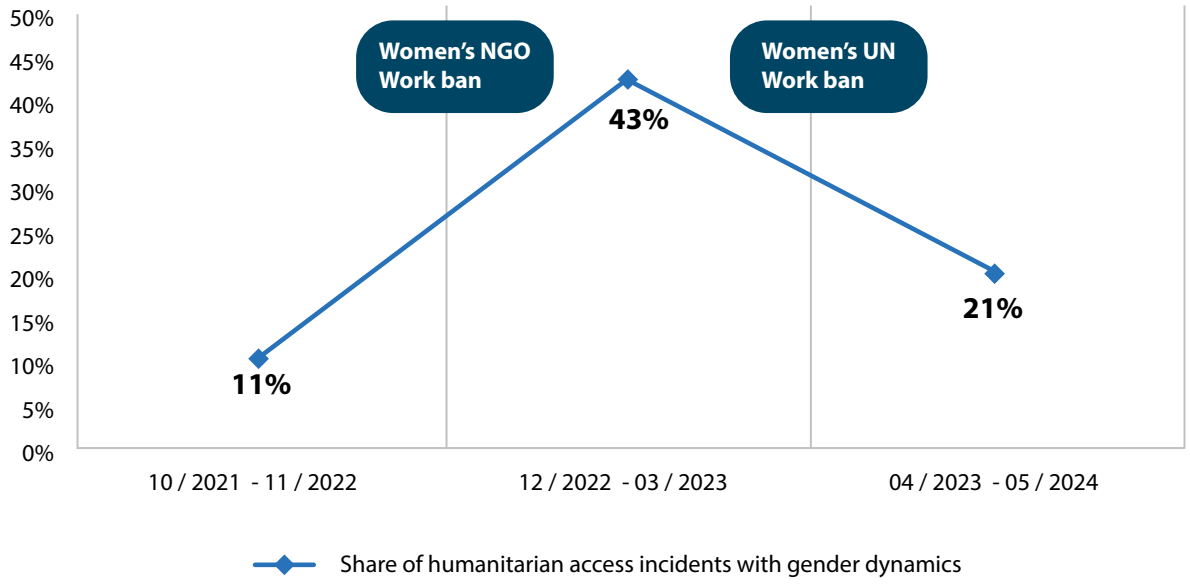
Data sources: From Humanitarian Access Snapshot August 2021, September 2022, August 2023 and May 2024, by OCHA, © United Nations [Last consulted on 02/08/2024]. Used with the permission of the United Nations.

Among the total incidents reported in this period, more than 21 per cent were gender-motivated. The impact of the DfA's bans on women working for NGOs (in December 2022) and United Nations agencies (in April 2023) is clearly visible in the share of incidents with gender dynamics[27] over time, as they represented 11 per cent before December 2022 and increased to 43 per cent between December 2022 and April 2023. However, after that date, they decreased to 21 per cent.

26 The majority of reported incidents were categorized under the following: 'Interference in the implementation of humanitarian activities'; 'Physical environment'; and 'Violence against humanitarian personnel, assets, and facilities' (OCHA, 2024a).

27 Gender dynamics are understood here as 'The relationships and interactions between and among boys, girls, women, and men. Gender dynamics are informed by socio-cultural ideas about gender and the power relationships that define them. Depending upon how they are manifested, gender dynamics can reinforce or challenge existing norms.' (USAID, 2008, as quoted by INEE, n.d)

Figure 9: Share of humanitarian access incidents with gender dynamics before, during and after bans on women's employment in NGOs and the United Nations



Data Source: Authors' calculation based on OCHA Humanitarian Access Snapshot Dashboard, last consulted in July 2024.

In March 2024, 10 directives were issued nationally and across various regions, to reinforce existing procedures which had a direct impact on the humanitarian response in the country (OCHA, 2024a). The implementation of the new DfA procedure for coordination of humanitarian response and new directives will most probably create additional challenges for humanitarian actors, including increases in (OCHA, 2023b):

- bureaucratic impediments resulting in delayed project implementations
- interferences by the DfA in the humanitarian programme
- violence against humanitarian workers and community volunteers
- restriction on the movement of humanitarian operations.

Furthermore, while CBE in Afghanistan has a rich history, playing a critical role in providing education especially in rural and crisis-affected areas where formal school systems are often inaccessible or disrupted, in April 2023, the DfA ordered the immediate suspension of all providers of CBE in the provinces of Kandahar and Helmand until further notice (8AM Media, 2023b; RFERL, 2023). Two months later, the DfA issued a verbal order requiring international NGOs to stop the provision of CBE in all provinces within a month and hand over the equipment of their projects to the DfA provincial education department (8AM Media, 2023c; Afghanistan International, 2023a). According to OCHA (2024b), 'the transition of more than 4,300 CBE classes from Education partners to provincial educational departments has threatened primary education for upwards of 300,000 children – including 210,000 girls – and left more than 4,300 teachers jobless'.

The activities of these international NGOs were very helpful for the communities, but due to governmental restrictions on these NGOs, their activities have decreased and limited the community's access to education. (…) In the past, the NGOs used to provide stationary, bonuses, and motivational training sessions for the teachers, but now, the organizations, people, and teachers are all exhausted from this situation. The majority of schools do not have buildings, but they are not hopeful of an NGO constructing a building for them or providing new tents anymore. Overall, due to these regulations, school infrastructures have become weak, people's interests have decreased, and the entire community's order has been disrupted. Generally, people are not mentally at peace, and they are all depressed.

Community leader, UNESCO interview conducted for this report, July 2024

The compounded effects of displacements (regardless of the reasons), which hinder access to education, undermine educational continuity, and widen the educational gap, particularly for vulnerable populations, are therefore worsened by the DfA's restrictive policies.

Figure 10: Displacement and education

C. Quality of education services

1. Quality of student learning and well-being

a. Quality of learning

With the current political context, the manner in which the curriculum has been implemented has led to changes likely to affect student learning experiences and outcomes. Before the seizing of power, the quality of primary education was already a concern. A World Bank study in 2018 highlighted that after four years of primary education, only two-thirds of Afghan students had fully mastered the Grade 1 language curriculum, and less than half had mastered the Grade 1 mathematics curriculum (World Bank, 2018). Under the DfA, according to a 2023 UNICEF report, the learning outcomes for Afghan children were alarmingly low. Only 13.3 per cent of children in Grades 2 and 3 had foundational reading skills, and a mere 17.5 per cent possessed foundational numeracy skills (UNICEF, 2023b). This indicates a severe deficit in basic educational competencies among young students, which creates a troubling shortcoming for their overall development and future education and employment path.

Reports indicate the current moves towards removal of lessons on genetics, pregnancy, civics, and historical and cultural figures, as well as all depictions of living beings, which are considered 'objectionable' (SIGAR, 2023). Human Rights Watch (2023) similarly reported that subjects such as sports, art, civics and culture have often been replaced. According to the interviews conducted for this report, there is a perception that students are given books which are too difficult for their age. The changes may reduce students' exposure to essential subjects, which are critical for their future employment prospects and the country's economic development

(SIGAR, 2023). This selective implementation of the curriculum will hinder students' right to quality learning and education.[28]

Since August 2021, religious education in Afghanistan has expanded further in the public school system and through the expansion of madrasas (SIGAR, 2023). The Islamic education curriculum established under the 2007 Education Law remains in use across registered religious education institutions (UNESCO, 2024). This curriculum includes religious subjects alongside general education topics such as mathematics, social sciences, and languages (Dari, Pashto, and English). However, crucial subjects like life skills, sciences, and information technology are notably absent (UNESCO, 2024). Jihadi madrasas appear to further limit students' exposure to a broad-based education (Education Cluster, 2023 as cited in UNESCO, 2024).

The effects of the current implementation of the curriculum and learning outcomes in Afghanistan are yet to be gauged. The reduction of time dedicated to essential subjects risks undermining the quality and relevance of education as laid out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 29 stipulates the aims of education, notably indicating that it should develop 'the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential' (Article 29(e)) and prepare 'the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin' (Article 29(d)). This situation jeopardizes the prospects of Afghan students and limits their ability to gain necessary skills for sustainable income and contribute to the nation's economic development.

b. Impact on learner well-being

One of the severe impacts on students is their deteriorating mental health and well-being. Human Rights Watch's interviews with students revealed a widespread sense of hopelessness about their future under the DfA ruling (HRW, 2023). The report acknowledges that the DfA's restrictive attitudes, the loss of relatives, friends and teachers, visits from the *de facto* Ministry of the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, along with cases of corporal punishment and violence, create a distressing environment for students. Indeed, corporal punishment has become increasingly common (HRW, 2023). This hostile and punitive atmosphere in schools severely disrupts the learning environment, making it difficult for students to focus on their studies.

The economic and humanitarian crises have also increased the responsibilities of schoolboys (HRW, 2023), with children being taken out of school to work (Amnesty International, 2021). Data collected from 1 November and 31 December 2021, also found that in a study of 376 adolescents in a Kabul high school, approximately half met the criteria for probable post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety (JAMA Netw Open, 2022). Such high levels of mental distress hinder students' ability to engage effectively in their education and can lead to long-term negative outcomes for their academic and personal development.

Specifically for girls, the absence of education prospects, coupled with all the other restrictions imposed by the DfA (see section 2(a) and (b)), has had severe repercussions on their mental health. BBC News (2023a) reported on testimonies of women's suicides following the ban on schools and universities, which left girls and young women 'unable to cope with their lives, [their] futures coming to a grinding halt'. In one of the interviews conducted for this report, a female student now out-of-school stated:

> **Imposing restrictions on female education caused some people to commit suicide, because they could not reach their dreams.**
>
> A female student from the interview

The lack of educational opportunities not only deprives girls of knowledge and skills necessary for personal and professional growth but also strips them of their platform for collaboration, social interaction and support networks (UNESCO, 2023b). This mental health crisis among female students highlights the critical importance of education in providing a sense of purpose, stability, and prospects, which are essential for overall well-being and mental health.

28 Quality education must be available, acceptable, accessible and adaptable. See: General Comment No. 13 of the CESCR. According to the General Comment, acceptable requires 'the form and substance of education, including curricula and teaching methods, have to be acceptable (e.g. relevant, culturally appropriate and of good quality) to students and, in appropriate cases, parents; this is subject to the educational objectives required by article 13 (1) and such minimum educational standards as may be approved by the State (see art. 13 (3) and (4))' (para. 6(c)).

2. The teaching profession undergoing change

a. Changes in teacher training and recruitment

In the past, teachers were recruited based on merit, but now, they are recruited based on affiliation with the regime or certain institutions. Individuals who had religious education were prioritized regardless of their competency […] connections are more important than qualifications.

A community leader from the interview

The shift to DfA's governance in Afghanistan has significantly impacted the role, quality, and conditions of teachers in the country. The DfA have attempted to redefine the role of teachers, replacing their role of facilitator with the role of religious clerics who are expected to integrate religious teachings into all subjects (Easar et al., 2023). Unqualified community members or officials of the DfA are also being recruited (SIGAR, 2023). The Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, along with the *de facto* Ministry of Education, has implemented religious tests for teachers, offering modest bonuses or salary increases to those who pass (Ahmadi and Sultan, 2023). This was mirrored in one of the interviews conducted for this report, with a former teacher stating that while, in the past, teacher recruitment was based on open competition, some teachers are now hired merely with a document from a madrasa.

The DfA's policy has led to unqualified individuals teaching critical subjects like physics and chemistry, causing significant demotivation among students (HRW, 2023) and risking low education achievements and an increase in school dropout. This transformation is likely to degrade the overall quality of education (UNESCO, 2024), as teachers' qualifications are now being overshadowed by their ability to adhere to religious doctrines. Furthermore, given the essential role of teachers in developing students' knowledge, skills and development, the absence of qualified educators seriously compromises the educational achievements and long-term development of the Afghan population.

b. Teacher shortage and working conditions

Teacher shortages have been exacerbated by the DfA's policies. The banning of women from teaching boys has not only removed a substantial number of qualified female educators from the system in big cities but also resulted in boys being taught by unqualified male teachers or, in some cases, having no teachers at all (HRW, 2023). The ban has therefore left some female teachers without jobs. Furthermore, the restrictions on women pursuing higher education will likely lead to a shortage of over 11,000 qualified female teachers by 2030, severely impacting the availability of education for girls at primary and secondary levels (UNESCO, 2023b). The financial strain on universities, caused by a significant reduction in the student body due to the ban on women and subsequent revenue loss, has led to layoffs, further depleting the pool of experienced educators (UNESCO, 2024). Finally, according to the interviews conducted for this report, teachers have left the country, which is part of a wider brain drain challenge faced by the country.

The working conditions for teachers under the DfA have deteriorated significantly affecting teacher motivation. Female teachers have faced harassment and intimidation, particularly those who have spoken out about issues like salaries and access to education for girls (Amnesty International, 2021). The DfA's policies have barred women from leadership roles and significantly reduced their salaries, reflecting a broader trend of gender discrimination in the workplace (Clark and Shapour, 2023). This has been coupled with measures including forced relocation from urban to remote schools, where due to the distance, poor wages and insecurity, as well as the obligation to have a mahram, female teachers have been forced to leave their jobs (8AM Media, 2022a). The pension system has also been affected, with those having worked in the public service no longer receiving their pension despite the contributions taken from their salaries during their career, putting mental and economic pressure on teachers (Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2024b). Furthermore, an interviewee noted that there are different shifts for girls and boys as female and male students are not meant to even cross paths. As a result, teachers are required to switch their shifts, which has repercussions on their family responsibilities, causes demotivation and risks leading to job abandonment.

The *de facto* Ministry of Higher Education has prohibited the use of Farsi (Persian) words in academic texts and contexts as they are considered to be 'foreign languages', thus requiring university professors to be fluent in Dari and Pashto (Euronews, 2023b). Professors are also required to have respect for national figures, include Islamic viewpoints in academic work, and not criticize the current system of the DfA (Afghanistan International, 2023b). These restrictions are against their freedom of expression guaranteed by Article 19(2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966).

Depending on regions, male teachers have been subjected to strict religious mandates, such as keeping long beards and signing pledges to observe sharia, which imposes further restrictions on their professional and personal lives (Stop Gender Apartheid, n.d.). Similarly, the Law on Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice of 2024 enforces specific behavioural and dress codes for female educators (including face covering), thus affecting the freedoms of female teachers as well as their educational environment (Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2024a). This can affect the image of teachers who have a role model function. Other sources indicate measures such as attending congregational prayers, male teachers wearing caps and for females, the obligation to wear the hijab (Amu TV, 2023). Yet freedom of thought, conscience and religion is a fundamental human right enshrined in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966). It was also reported that neckties are forbidden for male teachers (Etilaatroz, 2022). Some teachers believe the DfA are using such measures to replace former government employees with their own people (8AM Media, 2024). During the interviews conducted for this report, a community leader interviewee shared that these measures could discourage teachers who may even quit the profession. Another interviewee shared that if teachers do not keep a beard, they receive a salary deduction, and if they continue, they are fired.

By making changes in the implementation of the curriculum, adopting policies that affect gender equity, and facing challenges in maintaining financial stability, the DfA are impacting the quality of education, contributing to teacher shortages, and affecting the working environment for educators. These changes will have long-lasting effects on the academic and personal development of Afghan students.

c. Teacher salary issues

The DfA's shortcomings in ensuring timely payment of teacher salaries have resulted in widespread absenteeism (Amnesty International, 2021). Despite attempts to maintain salary payments, the reduced international aid has made it challenging to sustain the education system and adequately support teachers' salaries (OCHA, 2023a). For example, in Zabul, salaries of approximately 3,000 teachers were delayed for two months, an issue that has also been reported in other provinces. (8AM Media, 2023d). This financial instability has forced many teachers to leave their positions, further exacerbating the shortage and impacting the quality of education.

The DfA's measures to enhance religious education are also reflected in teacher salaries. According to a decree, salaries of teachers and officials at jihadist schools were set reportedly several times higher than public schoolteachers (Afghanistan International, 2022b). The media outlet indicates 'for a religious scholar at the rank of Sheikh-ul-Hadith, equivalent to a master's degree, the salary is set at 25,000 Afghanis, while a regular master's degree holder earns between 7,000 to 11,000 Afghanis' and 'the salary for a cook or baker at a jihadist school is also 15,000 Afghanis, three times the salary of a school staff member' (Afghanistan International, 2022b). The same article adds that in contrast, monthly salaries of schoolteachers and university professors have been reduced. In the interviews conducted for this report, several teachers stated that following the seizure of power, teachers' salaries have been reduced and are no longer adjusted according to their level of qualification, which further demotivates them. Additionally, retired public sector employees have not received their retirement pension since the seizing of power and the DfA announced in April 2024 that the pension system was abolished (Bjelica and Sabawoon, 2024).

Furthermore, on 22 of July 2024, the DfA announced that female teachers above Grade 6, who are not able to teach due to the ban imposed on girls' education above this grade, will see their salary decreased to 5,000 afghanis (approximately equivalent to US$70) (Amu TV, 2024). This is highly worrying as it will drastically reduce household revenue, further exacerbating the challenges previously mentioned.

The salary of those female instructors who are not allowed to teach, has been decreased to five thousand per month. They are not able to afford their expenses, struggling with diverse challenges, such as mental stress or not getting paid in their retirement period. Because a certain amount of money has been deducted from their salary every month, instructors especially the senior ones are struggling because they need their pension.

A female teacher from the interview

3. Unstable financing for education

a. National resources

The shift to DfA governance in Afghanistan has significantly impacted the allocation and management of education resources in the country. While very little information is available, Clark and Shapour (2023) have produced a report for Afghanistan Analytics analyzing where the DfA allocates its resources.

As the DfA started governing districts in the summer of 2021, they also began taxing newly controlled areas in an effort to collect domestic revenues before foreign funding disappeared (Clark and Shapour, 2023). However, the report notes that despite rapidly scaling revenue collection to a national operation, the DfA had little experience in spending money outside of war efforts. During their insurgency, the DfA had established commissions for education and other sectors but relied on the Kabul government and NGOs, funded by foreign donors, to run public services (Clark and Shapour, 2023). Despite this historical context, the DfA managed to collect significant revenue and manage public services, including education, from August 2021 (Clark and Shapour, 2023).

However, data on DfA spending remain opaque. The *de facto* Ministry of Finance's website published minimal data. Clark and Shapour (2023) note that in the three month mini budget for December 2021 to March 2022, the DfA allocated 8.2 billion Afghanis (Afs) to the Ministry of Education, making it the highest funded non-security ministry, receiving 15.3 per cent of the entire budget. This allocation aimed to maintain operational continuity with similar funding levels to the previous government's budget for the same period. Despite initial disruptions, Clark and Shapour's report notes that the DfA managed to pay teachers' salaries and arrears (although as noted in the previous section, the payments to teachers were not uniformed and were sometimes delayed), with UNICEF providing emergency payments at the start of 2022 to prevent the collapse of the education system. However, of the allocated budget, 95 per cent was dedicated to wages, leaving minimal funds for development and non-wage operational costs. Only 5.4 million Afs were set aside for new school construction and a mere 411 million Afs for repairs and general maintenance (Clark and Shapour, 2023).

This distribution indicates a focus on sustaining current operations rather than expanding or improving the educational infrastructure, despite infrastructure needs. UNESCO (2024) reported on major infrastructural challenges despite the considerable investment by partners over the period between 2002 and 2021. The report states 'half of schools across the country do not have proper facilities and must conduct some or all of their classes under a tent or outside, and more than three quarters of the schools do not have electricity' (p. 10). Coupled with the attacks on schools, school conditions have deteriorated further requiring urgent attention. In addition, the shortage of teaching materials is a major challenge. Barely 9 per cent of the country's schools have textbooks covering all subjects and over 3,000 schools, or 23 per cent, reported having no textbooks at all (UNESCO, 2024). Regarding disability-inclusive education, 70 per cent of schools did not have wheelchair ramps or rail access in 2022 (UNICEF, 2023 as cited in UNESCO, 2024), constituting an important barrier for the right to education of people with disabilities. Consequently, the lack of adequate educational resources threatens to significantly diminish the quality of education.

b. International aid

Compounding these challenges, there are significant international funding gaps for education (see additional information in Chapter I). OCHA (2024b) provides an analysis of this aid. Between April to June 2024, only US$37.6 million was received out of the US$140 million requested, representing just 26.9 per cent of the needed funding. The report notes that the lack of funding for education activities outlined in the Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP) has led to a deteriorating

quality of education due to poor teaching and learning environments, insufficient teaching materials, and inadequate teacher training. Furthermore, OCHA estimates that in 2025 the education cluster will require US$93.3 million in order to deliver a 'comprehensive range of educational activities to 831,000 children' (OCHA, 2024c).

More recently, UNICEF's 2025 Humanitarian Action for Children appeal also highlights the critical funding situation, emphasizing the need for US$1.2 billion to 'deliver life-saving humanitarian aid and build the resilience of 19 million people in Afghanistan, including 10.3 million children' (UNICEF, 2025). More specifically 24.1 per cent needs to be allocated to education in order to maintain existing infrastructure and programmes, but also to ensure the continuation of CBE services that have been pivotal in reaching approximately 415,000 vulnerable school-aged girls and boys, providing them with alternatives to traditional schooling environments that may no longer be accessible or safe (UNICEF, 2025).

If these funding gaps persist, the ability of education partners to support learning continuity for thousands of children will be severely compromised (OCHA, 2024b, see more in section 2(d)). Additionally, continued lack of funding will likely result in an increase in out-of-school children, exposing them to greater risks of illiteracy, child labour, early marriage, or abuse (OCHA, 2024b). This ongoing crisis underscores the urgent need for adequate funding and policy support to stabilize and improve the educational landscape in Afghanistan.

D. International organizations' actions for education

At the onset of the seizing of power in August 2021, all international organizations had to adapt their work in the country to be able to continue providing education services. Afghanistan's education sector is currently coordinated through both humanitarian and development platforms. The Education Strategic Thematic Working Group (Ed-STWG), co-led by UNESCO and the World Bank, is responsible for developing the Basic Human Needs (BHN) education outcome area while the Education Cluster, co-led by UNICEF and Save the Children, oversees the education humanitarian response and is responsible for organizing and coordinating partners to ensure a coherent and efficient education response during emergencies. While the needs increased, the operating environment became increasingly challenging due to cuts in international fundings and restrictions imposed by the DfA, such as the prohibition on women working for local and international organizations since December 2022 (United Nations in Afghanistan, 2023).

To guide programming and investment in Afghanistan's education sector following the seizing of power, the Education Development Partners Group (now dissolved) and the Education Cluster collaboratively developed a transitional framework through a consultative process with a wide range of education stakeholders including United Nations agencies, local and international NGOs, and bilateral donors. The resulting Afghanistan Education Sector Transitional Framework (AESTF) for 2022–2023 was designed to ensure effective coordination among donors and partners, and to maintain continuous educational opportunities for the people of Afghanistan. With the AESTF concluding in December 2023, a high-level review conducted by UNESCO highlights the need to enhance the results framework of the new sector plan with detailed indicators and measurable outcomes, supported by a robust monitoring and evaluation plan to track progress and impact. The new plan also includes a risk mitigation strategy with contingency measures for challenges such as sanctions regimes or disruptions to basic services while ensuring active participation from diverse stakeholders, including local communities and beneficiaries (UNESCO, 2024).

UNESCO was entrusted with leading and coordinating the development of the new sector plan, known as the Afghanistan Education Sector Support Plan (AESSP) for 2024-2025, which builds upon the AESTF and reflects a comprehensive understanding of the current country context and associated risks together with diverse partner and local perspectives. The AESSP prioritizes improving access to and quality of education, with a particular focus on the right to education for girls and women, refugees, IDPs, returnees, and other marginalized groups and areas, spanning across all levels of education, including primary, secondary, and tertiary. The plan also highlights the importance of leveraging multiple delivery modalities, especially CBE and working with community-based structures to provide quality, safe and inclusive education to the people of Afghanistan (Afghanistan Education Strategic Thematic Working Group, 2024).

Since the 2021 seizing of power, UNESCO has significantly adapted its educational interventions to offer alternative modes of learning through community-based literacy and skills development classes. These initiatives have reached over 57,000 youth and adults, with a substantial focus on women and adolescent girls across 20 provinces. Additionally, UNESCO launched a series of educational radio programmes designed to extend educational opportunities to 156,000 learners. These radio programmes were meticulously developed to cater to the learning needs of various groups, including those residing in rural and hard-to-reach areas where access to educational resources is limited. By leveraging the widespread availability of radios in Afghanistan, UNESCO was able to ensure that educational content reached those currently barred from schooling and those in the most isolated communities.

As of July 2024, based on the Education Cluster's Community Based Education dashboard, a total of 22,062 CBE classes were funded by 25 donors and operated by 39 implementing partners, including UNICEF. In 2023, 686,000 children (60 per cent of girls) were supported by UNICEF through more than 21,000 CBE classes, which represented a 40 per cent increase of classes compared to the previous year (UNICEF, 2023c). In 2024, the organization continued to prioritize education by targeting 600,000 vulnerable school-age girls and boys through CBE (UNICEF, 2024b).

In 2023, about 2,300 TVET classes, mainly delivered through non-formal TVET institutions due to shifts in the external aid landscape towards off-budget support, were offered by various organizations including United Nations agencies and international and national NGOs. In the same year, 31,000 teachers benefited from training programmes. In addition, both BHN and humanitarian organizations continued to support small-scale school construction and rehabilitation, school feeding and cash assistance programmes, provision of early childhood education classes, and distribution of teaching and learning materials (UNESCO, 2024).

Despite the growing education and skills development needs among people in Afghanistan, education financing, especially in terms of external aid, has been steadily decreasing. The situation is even more dire for girls and women as the financial decline is coupled with restrictive measures imposed by the DfA, thereby further depriving them of their fundamental right to education. Reduced funding limits the ability to maintain adequate school infrastructure and facilities, provide necessary teaching and learning materials, and train and retain qualified teachers. As a result, the overall quality of education in Afghanistan suffers, with fewer resources available to support students and teachers alike. Furthermore, this dual challenge facing the education sector also severely undermines broader efforts to promote gender equality and economic development in Afghanistan.

The denial of education perpetuates inequalities by reinforcing discriminatory practices and limiting opportunities for people, especially girls and women, to participate fully in social and economic life. Without education, the economic potential of a significant portion of the population remains untapped, stifling productivity and economic growth.

Conclusion

Since August 2021, economic instability, driven by a sharp reduction in international aid and severe restrictions on women's right to work and freedom of movement, has disrupted and hindered access to and quality of education, leaving boys susceptible to child labour and girls to child marriage.

The combination of the ban on secondary and higher education for girls, the prohibition on education for girls above Grade 6, and the restriction of educational radio programmes, amounts to almost a comprehensive ban on education for girls, reminiscent of the situation in 2000.

This paints a grim picture of girls' educational and life prospects. The wide-ranging intersection of barriers not only limits educational opportunities but also broadly represses women's rights. Additionally, the limited female participation in the national economy severely hinders the country's overall development. From a global perspective, this situation alarms the international community and revives discussions on the need for a common definition and codification of gender apartheid.

This situation affects not only women and girls but also other vulnerable groups, including displaced people, minorities, and children with disabilities, who face heightened barriers to education and are more at risk of being affected by economic and humanitarian crises and climate change impacts.

The DfA's further limitations on humanitarian access and alternative learning methods exacerbate these challenges. Changes in the curriculum risk impacting teaching and learning quality, which have yet to prove their suitability for equipping students with skills required to address emerging challenges. The well-being of parents, teachers, and students has been significantly impacted by these crises. Parents are under immense stress, balancing economic hardships and their children's educational needs. Teachers, particularly female teachers, face job insecurity and diminished resources, affecting their ability to provide quality education. Students, particularly girls, experience increased psychological stress and uncertainty about their future. This collective strain on well-being worsens the educational crisis, making it imperative to address the mental health and overall welfare of all stakeholders involved.

Restoring education for girls and women beyond primary school must be a top priority. Immediate efforts should sustain and further strengthen alternative learning opportunities and pathways, prevent further learning loss, and increase funding for community-based, digital, and media-based education. Strengthening teacher training and providing teaching and learning materials is essential to improving education quality for Afghan girls and boys.

In the medium to long term, sustained advocacy and diplomatic pressure are needed to lift restrictions on girls' and women's access to post-primary education. Education for girls must remain central to diplomatic efforts and foreign aid, with a clear stance that gender-based exclusion violates international law.

Leveraging United Nations mechanisms, donor platforms, and regional actors is key to restoring post-primary education access for girls and women. Reversing learning loss and rebuilding an inclusive system require major investments in large-scale remedial and bridging programmes, ensuring Afghan children, especially girls, regain lost years of schooling.

The severe difficulties and challenges in education services will exert a devastating consequence for the entire country. It is critical to foster a multifaceted and inclusive dialogue involving all stakeholders to address the systemic, social and economic issues plaguing Afghanistan's education system. Only through concerted and coordinated efforts can the right to education be safeguarded for all Afghan children, youth and adults.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ACAPS	Assessment Capacities Project
AESSP	Afghanistan Education Sector Support Plan
AESTF	Afghanistan Education Sector Transitional Framework
AIHRC	Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission
BHN	Basic Human Needs
CADE	Convention against discrimination in education
CBE	Community-based education
CCKP	World Bank Climate Change Knowledge Portal
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CSPCA	International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid
DfA	*De facto* Authorities
Ed-STWG	Education Strategic Thematic Working Group
ENSO	El Niño-Southern Oscillation
EUAA	European Union Agency for Asylum
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HNRP	Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan
HRC	Human Rights Council
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ICC	International Criminal Court
IDEA	International: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
IDMC	Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre
IDP	Internally displaced people
IEA	Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan
ILC	International Law Commission
ILO	International Labour Organization
IRA	Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
ISKP	Islamic State-Khorosan Province
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IOM DTM	International Organization for Migration – Displacement Tracking Matrix
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OHCA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights
PEIC	Protect Education in Insecurity and Conflict
RFI	Radio France Internationale
SIGAR	Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UIS	UNESCO Institute for Statistics
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UN DPPA	United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UPR	Universal Periodic Review
USIP	United States Institute of Peace
WHO	World Health Organization

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Banned from education

A review of the right to education in Afghanistan

This report examines the impact of regulatory and policy changes on education in Afghanistan following the seizure of power in August 2021. Despite initial assurances to respect the right to education, restrictions—particularly on girls and women—have resulted in Afghanistan becoming the only country where girls are denied post-primary education. This report provides an analysis of the evolving legal and institutional framework governing education since August 2021, drawing on a combination of desk-based research and on-the-ground interviews. It assesses the barriers to education, the quality of learning, and broader societal implications. It serves as a critical tool for advocacy and awareness raising, underscoring urgent challenges and potential avenues for action.

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4 QUALITY EDUCATION

Sustainable Development Goals