

Educational Policy, Power, and Gender Inequality in Afghan Secondary Education under Taliban Rule

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Abstract

Since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, restrictions on girls' secondary education in Afghanistan have intensified gender inequality and reinforced political control. Although existing studies document these restrictions, less attention has been given to how education policy operates as a mechanism of patriarchal authority and how affected communities respond. This study examines how current policies restrict girls' access to secondary schooling, shape their experiences, and sustain wider structures of gendered power. Using a qualitative design, it draws on interviews with female students and teachers from four Afghan provinces, supported by policy documents, NGO reports, and academic literature. The findings indicate that educational exclusion is legitimized through religious and cultural narratives that strengthen male-dominated authority. Participants reported psychological distress, diminished aspirations, unequal treatment, curriculum limitations, and exclusion from decision-making. At the same time, girls, teachers, families, and reform-oriented actors pursued online learning, underground schools, female-led learning spaces, and advocacy framing girls' education as both an Islamic and human right. The study contributes to debates on gender, education, and authoritarian power by showing how schooling can function as social control. It concludes that restoring access requires inclusive policy reform, protection for alternative learning, and women's participation in educational governance.

Key Words: Authoritarian governance, educational exclusion, gender inequality, girls' education, patriarchal power, secondary education, social control, Taliban

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INTRODUCTION

Since the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, the exclusion of girls from secondary education has become one of the most visible and consequential expressions of gendered political rule. Afghan girls and women have long encountered educational barriers shaped by poverty, insecurity, displacement, and patriarchal social norms. Yet, the current restriction on girls' secondary schooling marks a different political moment. It has transformed historically uneven access to education into an institutionalized regime of exclusion, in which gender, ideology, and political authority are mutually reinforcing. The issue, therefore, is not only whether girls are permitted to attend school. It is how education itself becomes a site through which power defines gender roles, regulates female mobility, and determines the boundaries of women's participation in public life.

Existing scholarship has made important contributions to understanding this crisis in Afghanistan under Taliban rule. Studies have shown that the current restrictions are connected to a wider effort to reduce women's autonomy and visibility in public life (Toran 2024; Akbari and True 2022; Sahill 2023; Tan and Ineli-Ciger 2023; de Silva de Alwis 2024; Keshavarzi et al. 2025; Shahir et al. 2025). Other research has documented the psychological and social consequences of exclusion, including anxiety, loss of aspiration, early marriage, and the forced redirection of girls into domestic roles (Malekzai 2024; Sediqi 2026; Mohammadi et al. 2024; Orfan and Shams 2026; Alemi et al. 2025; Keshavarzi et al. 2025; Sahill 2023). A further body of work examines how Taliban policies are justified through cultural and religious language, especially through appeals to modesty, family honour, and moral protection (Amiri 2024; Sahill 2023; Beidollahkhani 2026; Farooq, Newsom, and Lengel 2026; Sarwari and Adnan 2023; Mosamim and Villeneuve 2026; Moghadam 2002). At the same time, scholars working from within Islamic educational and feminist perspectives challenge the claim that Islam legitimizes gendered exclusion from learning, arguing instead that education is a moral, social, and spiritual right for both women and men (Mazankova 2022; Abukari 2014; Davids 2015; BurrIDGE, Payne, and Rahmani 2016).

These studies are valuable, but the literature remains insufficiently integrated in one important respect. Much of the existing discussion treats the crisis either as a human rights violation, a problem of access, a matter of religious interpretation, or a set of social consequences for girls and women. Less attention has been given to how these dimensions work together as a coherent form of gendered political authority. The gap is not the absence

of research on Afghan girls' education, but the need for a sharper analytical account of how educational policy becomes a technology of governance: a means through which ideological claims, patriarchal institutions, and state power are organized to produce and legitimize gender inequality.

This article addresses that gap by examining girls' secondary education in Afghanistan through the nexus of gender, ideology, and political authority. It asks how educational restrictions are framed, justified, and institutionalized, and how these restrictions shape girls' present opportunities and future life trajectories. The analysis also considers alternative forms of learning, including female-led madrasas and online education, which have emerged as partial responses to school closures (Rahimi and Din 2024). These alternatives are important as practices of resilience and symbolic resistance. However, they cannot fully replace formal secondary education, particularly in relation to recognized credentials, leadership formation, civic participation, and long-term economic autonomy. Research on Afghan refugee women further suggests that early educational exclusion can produce cumulative disadvantages across the life course, including economic dependency and reduced decision-making power (Khan et al. 2024).

Methodologically, the article draws on primary and secondary qualitative material to interpret the relationship between education policy and gendered power. The qualitative material is used not to measure the scale of exclusion statistically, but to trace how restrictions are justified, how they are experienced, and how they reproduce broader structures of inequality. In this sense, the study treats policy not merely as a formal governmental instrument, but as a discourse and practice through which gendered authority is constructed. Building on the work of Amiri (2024), Delju and Habibi (2024), and Friman (2021), the article shows that the exclusion of girls from secondary education is an active political intervention into mobility, aspiration, and social participation.

The contribution of this article is threefold. Empirically, it provides a focused account of how girls' secondary education has become a central arena of gendered exclusion in post-2021 Afghanistan. Analytically, it reframes the school ban as a mechanism of political control rather than as a narrow education-sector policy. Conceptually, it contributes to broader debates on gender and authoritarian governance by showing how control over education can be used to regulate not only access to knowledge, but also the social production of gendered citizenship. Although the article is grounded in the Afghan case, its implications extend beyond Afghanistan. It demonstrates how regimes of power may use education policy to define

moral order, discipline women's bodies and futures, and restrict the conditions under which girls can become public, economic, and political actors.

The article is guided by the following research questions: How do Afghanistan's current educational policies reflect and reproduce gendered power relations in the context of Taliban rule? How do restrictions on girls' secondary education limit girls' agency, mobility, and future social participation? And how does the Afghan case illuminate the broader relationship between education, gender ideology, and political authority?

This article argues that the Taliban's restrictions on girls' secondary education should be understood as part of a broader project of gendered governance. The ban is not simply a conservative response to cultural tradition or a temporary administrative measure. Rather, it functions as a political mechanism through which male-dominated authority seeks to control girls' agency, limit women's future economic and civic participation, and reproduce a social order in which female visibility is confined to narrowly defined domestic and moral roles. In this sense, educational exclusion operates simultaneously as policy, ideology, and social discipline.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The exclusion of girls from secondary education in Afghanistan has generated growing scholarship across education studies, gender studies, Islamic studies, human rights law, and political sociology. Most studies agree that the Taliban's post-2021 restrictions cannot be understood as a narrow education-sector problem. They are connected to broader struggles over gender, political authority, religious interpretation, and women's place in public life. However, the literature differs in how it explains the sources and effects of exclusion. Some studies emphasize patriarchal governance and authoritarian control; others examine religious and cultural legitimation; another strand focuses on structural, legal, and material barriers; while a further body of work analyses the long-term and intergenerational consequences of educational deprivation. This review brings these strands together and argues that their combined significance lies in showing education as a central site of gendered political power.

Patriarchal Governance and Education as Political Control

A major strand of scholarship interprets girls' educational exclusion through the lens of patriarchal governance. Here, patriarchy refers not only

to male dominance in families or communities, but to an institutional order in which authority, legal interpretation, and decision-making power are concentrated in male hands. Education becomes one of the mechanisms through which this order is reproduced.

Amiri (2024) argues that Taliban education policy functions as an ideological tool for restricting women's rights. From this perspective, girls' exclusion from school is not simply the result of administrative weakness or temporary instability, but a political strategy that limits women's agency by controlling access to knowledge, credentials, mobility, and public participation. Toran (2024) similarly shows that Taliban control over education extends beyond curriculum to the governance of the education system itself, including who may teach, study, and administer schools.

This argument is reinforced by studies of women's political exclusion. Rezvani et al. (2021) show that gender inequality in Afghanistan is linked to women's limited participation in policymaking. Educational exclusion and political exclusion should therefore be read together: when women are absent from decision-making, policies concerning girls' futures are designed without the voices of those most affected. Hamidi (2023) adds that girls' exclusion from schooling weakens individual opportunity, family resilience, and social development. Together, these studies show that girls' education is not only a matter of access; it is a political question about authority, citizenship, and social reproduction.

Religious Legitimation and Islamic Counter-Interpretations

The second body of literature examines how restrictions on girls' education are justified through religious and cultural narratives. Taliban authorities often present these restrictions not as political control, but as moral protection grounded in modesty, family honor, cultural authenticity, and religious obligation. This framing matters because it gives exclusion a moral vocabulary and makes resistance appear as opposition to religion or tradition.

Sarwari and Adnan (2023) show that Taliban authorities invoke Islam to oppose girls' education beyond certain levels. Yet their work also highlights that this is not the only possible Islamic interpretation. Many Muslim scholars and reformist voices argue that Islam supports education for both girls and boys. The conflict, therefore, is not simply between Islam and girls' education, but between competing interpretations of religious authority. Mazankova (2022) extends this point through Islamic feminism, showing how Muslim women and reformist scholars use Islamic ethical resources to defend justice, dignity, and equal access to knowledge.

Rahimi and Din (2024) further complicate this debate by examining female-led madrasas and alternative learning spaces. These institutions show that Afghan women and communities are not passive recipients of restriction. They adapt, negotiate, and create forms of learning that are culturally and religiously intelligible. However, such alternatives cannot fully replace formal secondary education, especially in relation to recognized qualifications, higher education, professional mobility, and civic participation. Comparative work by Cleton (2023) is also useful because it shows how governments may use ideas of protection, motherhood, purity, or family values to legitimize exclusionary policies. This comparison suggests that the Taliban's appeal to protecting girls should be understood as part of a wider politics of paternalism.

Structural Barriers, Legal Exclusion, and Unequal Access

The third strand of scholarship focuses on the structural and policy-based barriers that prevent Afghan girls from accessing education. These barriers include school closures, restrictions beyond grade six, gender segregation, shortages of female teachers, curriculum controls, poverty, insecurity, geographical isolation, and limited access to digital or private alternatives. This literature is important because it shows that exclusion is not produced by one policy alone. It emerges through the interaction of law, institutions, economy, geography, and gender norms.

Hamidi (2024) emphasizes the psychological and social consequences of these restrictions, including low self-esteem, uncertainty, and hopelessness about the future. Amiri (2024) interprets curriculum restrictions, gender segregation, and limits on school financing as mechanisms that sustain women's subordination and invisibility. Save the Children (2022) adds that rural girls face especially severe barriers because schools are fewer, enforcement may be stricter, and families often lack access to online learning, private tutoring, or safe transportation.

Legal scholarship frames these restrictions as violations of international human rights obligations. Safitri et al. (2023) examine Afghanistan's obligations under instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This legal perspective is important because it identifies the normative standards violated by the Taliban's policies. However, legal analysis alone cannot explain why exclusion persists despite international condemnation. It must be connected to an analysis of power, ideology, and institutional control.

Intergenerational Harm and the Life-Course Effects of Exclusion

The fourth strand of scholarship examines the long-term effects of girls' educational exclusion. This literature shifts attention from immediate school closures to life-course consequences, including early marriage, economic dependency, limited decision-making power, poorer health outcomes, and reduced participation in public life.

Malekzai (2024) shows that school closures have caused psychological and social harm among Afghan girls, including despair, loss of self-worth, and increased vulnerability to early marriage. Khan et al. (2024), writing on Afghan refugee women in Pakistan, show that early educational exclusion can produce chronic economic dependency and limited agency later in life. Albrecht, Rude, and Stitteneder (2022) provide a longer historical perspective by showing that Afghan women and girls made important gains in schooling, labour-market participation, and gender equality after 2001, while the Taliban's return to power placed these fragile achievements at risk. Najam, Patrinos, and Kattan (2026) provide economic evidence that women's education in Afghanistan generated significant wage returns before the full effects of the Taliban's post-2021 restrictions, while recent bans on women's schooling and employment are likely to produce substantial losses for women's future earnings and national income.

UNESCO (2025) and Save the Children (2022) similarly emphasize the broader social costs of educational exclusion, including lower future earnings, poorer maternal and child health, trauma, and the loss of women's future contributions to society. This literature persuasively documents the depth of harm caused by school exclusion. However, it often focuses more on consequences than mechanisms. It shows what exclusion produces, but less often explains how policy, ideology, and authority combine to produce those outcomes.

Gap in the Literature and the Article's Intervention

Taken together, the literature shows that Afghan girls' exclusion from secondary education is a multidimensional crisis involving patriarchal governance, religious legitimization, structural inequality, legal violation, and intergenerational harm. The strongest studies refuse to treat the Taliban's school ban as a narrow administrative issue. They show that education is tied to authority, citizenship, mobility, family structure, economic autonomy, and social reproduction.

Nevertheless, three gaps remain. First, much of the literature discusses governance, religion, structure, and harm as separate themes, without fully

explaining how they interact as a system of gendered power. Second, studies often identify Taliban policies as patriarchal or ideological, but do not specify the mechanisms through which education policy becomes a tool of political control. Third, comparative and legal references are often used normatively, to condemn exclusion, rather than analytically, to explain how rights, moral discourse, and state authority are mobilized in the production of gender inequality.

This article addresses these gaps by conceptualizing girls' secondary education in Afghanistan as a site of gendered political authority. It argues that Taliban restrictions do not merely deny access to schooling; they regulate the conditions under which girls may acquire knowledge, occupy public space, imagine adulthood, and participate in social life. By linking Afghanistan-specific scholarship to broader debates on gender, education, ideology, and power, the article moves beyond an access-based account of exclusion and analyses education policy as a mechanism of governance.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative research design to examine how contemporary education policies in Afghanistan produce and reproduce gender inequality in girls' secondary education. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study focuses on the meanings, justifications, experiences, and power relations through which educational exclusion is organized under Taliban rule. Rather than measuring the scale of exclusion statistically, the study analyses how students, teachers, policy texts, and institutional narratives reveal the relationship between education, gendered authority, and social control.

The study draws on primary and secondary qualitative data. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with thirteen purposively selected participants: eight female college students and five female secondary school teachers. Participants were selected because they had direct experience of Afghanistan's educational restrictions and could speak to different dimensions of the issue. Students provided insight into the lived effects of interrupted educational pathways, while teachers offered perspectives on institutional practice, classroom disruption, policy enforcement, and the changing role of schools. The sample included participants connected to urban and rural educational contexts, as well as government and private schools. This variation allowed the study to examine differences across institutional and geographical settings, although the findings are not intended to represent all Afghan girls, teachers, or regions.

Participants were recruited through purposive and referral-based sampling. Because the topic is politically sensitive, recruitment prioritized safety, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Interviews with Taliban officials or current government representatives were not conducted because direct access was not feasible and could have increased risks for participants and the researcher. To address this limitation, the study analyses publicly available policy documents, Ministry of Education circulars where accessible, public statements by education authorities, and reports from international and non-governmental organizations, including UNESCO, UNICEF, and Save the Children. Peer-reviewed studies were also used to situate the findings within wider scholarship on gender, education, human rights, and political authority in Afghanistan.

All interviews were conducted virtually through Zoom or WhatsApp to reduce logistical barriers and protect participant safety. The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, allowing participants to describe their experiences in their own terms while following a common protocol. The interview questions focused on four areas: participants' educational background and institutional context; their experiences of educational restrictions after the Taliban's return to power; their perceptions of the cultural, religious, and political justifications used to limit girls' schooling; and their views on coping strategies, alternative learning, and the future consequences of exclusion.

Data were analysed thematically. Interview notes and transcripts were read repeatedly to identify recurring patterns and significant experiences. Initial codes included school closure, gender segregation, fear, family pressure, early marriage, loss of aspiration, religious justification, cultural control, resistance, online learning, and alternative education. These codes were then grouped into broader analytical themes: education as gendered governance, religious and cultural legitimation, structural barriers to access, social and psychological consequences, and resilience or adaptation. Themes from the interviews were compared with documentary sources, organizational reports, and relevant scholarship to identify points of convergence, tension, and difference between lived experience, policy discourse, and institutional interpretation.

Triangulation was used to strengthen the credibility of the analysis. Participant testimonies were examined alongside official documents and international reports so that the study did not rely on a single source of evidence. Where participant accounts aligned with documentary sources, these convergences supported the analysis. Where they differed, the differences were treated analytically, especially in examining the gap

between official justifications of restriction and participants' accounts of fear, exclusion, and limited mobility.

Ethical considerations were central to the research design. Participant identities were anonymized, identifying details were removed, and no school, village, or institution is named in a way that could expose participants. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of the purpose of the study before the interview. Questions that could endanger participants were avoided. Member checking was not conducted because re-contacting participants could have created additional security risks. Instead, credibility was strengthened through anonymization, cross-checking across sources, and transparent discussion of limitations.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings from semi-structured interviews with female students and teachers, supported where relevant by documentary material such as policy statements, official circulars, and reports from international organizations. The findings are organized thematically around the study's central question: how do Afghanistan's current education policies reproduce gender inequality and regulate girls' agency under Taliban rule? Across the interviews, participants did not describe the education ban simply as the loss of classroom access. They described it as a wider structure of control that shapes girls' emotional lives, limits their movement, narrows their future choices, and removes women from participation in decisions about education.

Five themes emerged from the analysis: psychological distress and the collapse of educational aspiration; gendered discrimination within the school environment; restrictive policy and religious justification; exclusion from educational decision-making; and community-based strategies of resistance and adaptation. These themes are analytically connected. Together, they show that the restriction on girls' secondary education works not only by closing schools, but also by producing fear, normalizing inequality, legitimizing control through moral language, and limiting the institutional spaces in which women can contest policy.

Psychological Distress and the Collapse of Educational Aspiration

The most immediate finding from the interviews concerns the emotional and psychological burden created by the ban on girls' secondary education. Students and teachers repeatedly described fear, uncertainty, hopelessness, and a loss of future orientation. This distress was especially

visible among girls approaching the end of grade six, because they understood that the transition to secondary education might mark the end of their formal schooling rather than the beginning of a new stage.

One teacher explained the atmosphere among her students in direct terms: “My students always ask me if this is their last year. They are always under stress.” This statement is significant because it shows that the ban is experienced before formal exclusion takes place. Girls in the lower grades already live with anticipatory anxiety. They do not simply fear a future restriction; they organize their present educational lives around the expectation that their schooling will soon be interrupted.

Students described this loss in more existential terms. One student said that her dream of becoming a journalist was now “dead.” Another described her future as covered by “black clouds.” These metaphors matter analytically. They suggest that the education ban does not only remove an institutional opportunity; it damages the imaginative horizon through which girls understand who they might become. The restriction therefore works at the level of aspiration. It teaches girls that professional ambition, public voice, and independent adulthood are not available futures.

Teachers also connected this emotional distress to changes in girls’ behaviour. They described students becoming quieter, less motivated, and more fearful about speaking openly. The loss of schooling was therefore not only an educational interruption, but also a form of social shrinking. Girls were pushed toward silence, domesticity, and dependency. This finding supports the article’s broader argument that educational exclusion operates as gendered control: it disciplines girls not only through formal prohibition, but also by reshaping their expectations, confidence, and sense of possibility.

Gendered Discrimination within the School Environment

The second finding concerns the unequal treatment of boys and girls within the educational environment. Participants did not describe discrimination as limited to the formal ban on girls’ secondary schooling. They also identified everyday forms of gendered regulation inside and around schools, including dress requirements, restrictions on movement, changes to curriculum, and unequal expectations regarding obedience and modesty.

A teacher summarized the inequality plainly: “It’s not equal. If it were equal, both boys and girls would have the same rights to an education.” The importance of this statement lies in its simplicity. For the

teacher, equality was not an abstract principle but a practical condition: if boys can continue learning and girls cannot, the system is unequal by design. Participants repeatedly interpreted the restriction not as a neutral administrative measure, but as a gendered rule that marks girls as less entitled to educational development.

Dress codes and hijab enforcement were frequently mentioned as examples of unequal pressure on girls. Participants did not necessarily reject religious dress itself. Rather, they objected to the way dress became a condition for surveillance and control. In their accounts, the regulation of girls' clothing operated alongside the restriction of girls' learning. The school was no longer only a place of instruction; it became a space where girls' bodies, behaviour, and visibility were monitored more intensely than those of boys.

Teachers also reported curricular changes that reduced girls' exposure to subjects associated with wider social participation, such as English and computer science. Some participants noted that religious instruction remained compulsory while subjects linked to digital literacy, international communication, or professional mobility became less available. This pattern suggests that educational inequality operates not only through exclusion from school, but also through control over what kinds of knowledge girls may access. The issue is therefore not merely whether girls are educated, but what type of education they are permitted to receive and what kind of future that education makes possible.

This theme advances the central argument by showing that gendered control is embedded in the ordinary organization of schooling. Even where some learning remains available, it is shaped by rules that prioritize obedience, modesty, and restricted mobility over intellectual autonomy and public participation.

Restrictive Policy and Religious Justification

The third theme concerns how participants understood the relationship between restrictive policy and religious justification. Both students and teachers reported that restrictions on girls' education beyond grade six were presented through religious and moral language. Participants recognized that these justifications were powerful because they made opposition difficult. To criticize the policy could be framed as criticizing religion, even when participants themselves believed that girls' education was compatible with Islamic values.

A teacher connected the restriction directly to social harm: “These laws are so unfair. Girls are forced into early marriages because they can’t be in school.” This quotation links policy, gender, and life trajectory. The teacher does not treat the school ban as a single event. Instead, she sees it as the beginning of a chain of consequences: exclusion from school increases girls’ vulnerability to early marriage, domestic confinement, and loss of autonomy. The policy therefore operates beyond the education sector. It reorganizes the social pathways available to girls.

The interviews also showed that participants distinguished between religion as faith and religion as political justification. Several participants accepted the importance of Islamic education and moral values, but rejected the idea that these required the exclusion of girls from secondary schooling. This distinction is analytically important. It suggests that participants did not experience the conflict as one between Islam and education. Rather, they experienced it as a conflict over who has the authority to interpret religion and translate that interpretation into policy.

The documentary material examined for this study reinforces the importance of official justification. Public statements and policy narratives often present restrictions on girls’ education as temporary, moral, protective, or culturally necessary. Yet the interviews show that participants experienced these same restrictions as damaging, discriminatory, and politically imposed. The gap between official justification and lived experience is central to understanding how gendered control works. Restrictive policies are made more durable when they are framed as moral obligations, while those affected by them have limited space to challenge the framing publicly.

This finding contributes to the article’s argument by showing that power operates not only through coercion, but also through legitimation. The education ban is sustained by a language of morality and protection that masks its political effect: the reduction of girls’ autonomy and the reinforcement of male authority over educational futures.

Exclusion from Educational Decision-Making

The fourth finding concerns the absence of women from educational decision-making. Because direct access to policymakers was not possible, this theme is based on teacher interviews and documentary analysis of public policy processes and institutional statements. Participants repeatedly emphasized that policies affecting girls are made without meaningful

participation from girls, mothers, female teachers, or women education professionals.

A teacher stated: “Women have no voice in these rules. If we can change one thing, it is that girls can go back to school.” This statement links representation and policy outcome. The teacher suggests that the exclusion of women from decision-making is not merely procedurally unfair; it has substantive consequences. When women are absent from policymaking, the resulting policies fail to reflect girls’ needs, teachers’ experience, and the social costs of exclusion.

Another teacher argued that female teachers should have a recognized role in shaping and implementing education policy, especially because they understand the needs of girls and the realities of school life. This finding is important because teachers did not present themselves only as victims of policy. They also saw themselves as potential policy actors with knowledge, experience, and responsibility. Their exclusion from decision-making therefore represents a loss of institutional knowledge as well as a form of gender discrimination.

The absence of women from policy processes also helps explain why educational restrictions can be framed abstractly, without serious attention to their effects on girls’ lives. Participants described a policy environment in which decisions appear top-down, male-dominated, and disconnected from classroom realities. In such a context, girls’ education becomes an object of regulation rather than a field shaped by those who teach, study, and depend on it.

This theme strengthens the central argument by showing that gendered control operates institutionally. The Taliban’s education policy does not only restrict girls as students; it also marginalizes women as teachers, professionals, and participants in governance. The exclusion of girls from school is therefore connected to the exclusion of women from authority.

Community Resistance and Alternative Learning

Despite the severity of the restrictions, participants also described forms of community resistance and adaptation. These included online classes, secret homeschooling, informal study groups, support from families, and attempts to seek scholarships abroad. These practices show that Afghan girls, teachers, and families are not passive recipients of policy. They continue to search for ways to preserve learning, maintain hope, and resist the total closure of educational futures.

Students described online learning as both valuable and inadequate. It allowed some girls to continue studying, especially in urban areas where families had access to devices, internet connections, and private learning networks. However, participants also emphasized that online education could not fully replace formal schooling. It did not provide the same social environment, recognized credentials, teacher support, or pathway to higher education. For rural girls and poorer families, online learning was often inaccessible because of weak connectivity, lack of devices, household labour demands, or concerns about safety and privacy.

Teachers described secret homeschooling and informal classes as acts of care as much as acts of resistance. These initiatives allowed some girls to keep studying, but they also carried risks. Families and teachers had to balance the desire for education against fear of punishment, social pressure, or political surveillance. The existence of these alternative spaces therefore reveals both agency and constraint. They demonstrate community resilience, but they also show the extent to which formal rights have been displaced into fragile and insecure arrangements.

Family support emerged as an important factor in whether girls could continue learning informally. Participants suggested that urban families were more likely to support online classes or alternative education, while rural families often faced greater material and social barriers. This difference does not mean that rural families are less committed to girls' education. Rather, it shows how gendered exclusion is intensified by poverty, geography, and limited infrastructure.

This theme complicates a purely victim-centred account of Afghan girls' educational exclusion. Girls, teachers, and families continue to act under constraint. Yet the findings also caution against romanticizing alternative education as a solution. Informal and online learning may preserve aspiration, but they cannot fully compensate for the loss of formal secondary education. Their emergence is best understood as evidence of both resistance and deprivation.

Across the five themes, the findings show that the ban on girls' secondary education is not experienced simply as a restriction on schooling. It is experienced as a wider system of gendered control. Psychological distress reveals how the policy reshapes girls' aspirations before they are formally excluded. School-based discrimination shows how inequality is embedded in everyday rules about dress, curriculum, movement, and knowledge. Religious justification demonstrates how political restrictions are legitimized through moral language. Exclusion from decision-making

shows that women are marginalized not only as students, but also as teachers and policy actors. Community resistance reveals that girls and families continue to seek educational futures, but often through insecure and unequal alternatives.

Taken together, these findings support the article's central argument: education policy under Taliban rule functions as a mechanism for regulating girls' agency, mobility, and future participation in public life. The harm is not limited to the absence of schooling. It lies in the broader political use of education to define what girls may know, where they may go, what futures they may imagine, and whose authority determines those limits.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that the restriction of girls' secondary education in Taliban-era Afghanistan is experienced not only as the denial of schooling, but also as a broader form of gendered control. Students and teachers described the ban as producing fear, uncertainty, and a collapse of future aspiration. Girls approaching the end of grade six already understood that their educational path might stop there. This anticipatory fear is important because it shows that the policy affects girls before formal exclusion occurs. It reshapes how they imagine adulthood, work, mobility, and public participation.

This interpretation extends previous studies on the psychological effects of educational exclusion. Malekzai (2024) and Save the Children (2022) have shown that the ban has contributed to distress, depression, and loss of hope among Afghan girls. The present study supports those findings, but it also suggests that psychological harm should be understood as part of the mechanism of exclusion itself. When girls lose confidence in their future, the policy does more than close school doors; it narrows the social and personal horizons through which girls understand what they can become.

The findings also indicate that gender inequality is reproduced through everyday school practices, not only through formal bans. Participants pointed to dress regulations, unequal treatment of boys and girls, restrictions on movement, and the reduction of subjects such as English and computer science. These practices suggest that education policy operates at both institutional and symbolic levels. It regulates not only whether girls may study, but also what forms of knowledge, behaviour, and visibility are considered acceptable for them. This supports Amiri's (2024) argument that

Taliban education policy is ideological rather than merely administrative, while also showing how ideology is experienced in daily school life.

Another important finding concerns religious justification. Participants did not reject religion or Islamic education. Rather, they objected to the use of religious language to legitimize girls' exclusion from formal schooling. This distinction is crucial. It challenges the assumption that the conflict is simply between Islam and girls' education. Instead, the issue is one of interpretive authority: who has the power to define religion, translate it into policy, and impose that definition on girls' educational futures. This finding is consistent with Rahimi and Din (2024) and Mazankova (2022), who show that Islamic arguments can also be used to support girls' education and resist exclusionary interpretations.

The study also highlights the significance of women's exclusion from educational decision-making. Teachers emphasized that policies affecting girls are made without the meaningful involvement of female teachers, students, mothers, or women education professionals. This supports Rezvani et al.'s (2021) argument that male-dominated governance reproduces gender inequality. The present study adds that this exclusion has practical consequences: when women are absent from policy spaces, the emotional, social, and educational effects of the ban are easier to ignore.

At the same time, the findings show that Afghan girls, teachers, families, and communities are not passive. Participants described online classes, informal study groups, secret homeschooling, female-led learning spaces, and attempts to seek scholarships abroad. These practices represent resilience and resistance. However, they should not be romanticized as adequate substitutes for formal schooling. Alternative education remains uneven, insecure, and often inaccessible to rural and poorer girls. It can preserve learning and hope, but it cannot fully replace recognized credentials, classroom interaction, institutional protection, or pathways to higher education.

Taken together, the findings contribute to broader debates in gender studies and the sociology of education by showing how education policy can become a tool for regulating gendered citizenship. In this case, girls' exclusion from secondary education limits not only their access to knowledge, but also their future participation in economic, civic, and public life. The Afghan case is specific in its political and religious context, but it illustrates a wider problem: education can be used by authoritarian or patriarchal systems to define who may enter public life and under what conditions.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. First, the sample is small and qualitative, so the findings cannot represent all Afghan girls, teachers, schools, or regions. The study offers interpretive depth rather than statistical generalization. Second, the absence of direct interviews with policymakers limits the analysis of internal decision-making within the Taliban administration. For this reason, the study avoids making strong claims about internal intention and instead focuses on policy effects, participant experiences, and public justifications. Third, although the study includes urban and rural perspectives, access to remote and highly conservative areas was limited by security and logistical constraints. Fourth, participants may have self-censored because of fear of professional or personal consequences.

Despite these limitations, the findings provide a coherent account of how girls' educational exclusion is experienced and interpreted by those directly affected. The study shows that the ban on secondary education is not merely an education-sector restriction. It is part of a wider system through which gender, authority, religion, and social control intersect in Taliban-era Afghanistan.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Afghanistan's current education policies reproduce gender inequality in girls' secondary education under Taliban rule. Drawing on interviews with female students and teachers, supported by policy documents, organizational reports, and scholarly literature, the study shows that the exclusion of girls from secondary schooling is not merely an education-sector restriction, but part of a broader system of gendered governance that limits girls' agency, mobility, public visibility, and future participation in social, economic, and civic life. The findings answer the research questions in three main ways. First, current education policies reflect gendered power relations by privileging male authority, excluding women from decision-making, and framing girls' education through restrictive moral and religious narratives. Second, these policies undermine girls' agency by producing psychological distress, loss of aspiration, fear of early marriage, reduced access to recognized credentials, and fewer pathways to higher education and employment. Third, the Afghan case demonstrates that education can become a political instrument through which authority regulates gender roles, citizenship, and participation in public life.

At the same time, the study identifies important forms of resilience among girls, teachers, families, and communities, who continue to seek learning through online classes, informal study groups, secret schooling, female-led learning spaces, and scholarship opportunities. However, these alternatives remain uneven, insecure, and unable to replace formal secondary education, recognized qualifications, and institutional protection. Academically, the study calls for understanding girls' education not only as a question of access, but also as a site of power, ideology, and gendered control. Practically, it highlights the need to restore girls' formal schooling, support safe interim learning options, include Afghan women in education policy discussions, and frame girls' education as a human, Islamic, and Afghan right. Future research should include wider participant groups, such as parents, male teachers, community leaders, religious scholars, and policymakers, and should examine the long-term effects of educational exclusion on girls' employment, marriage, health, mobility, and civic participation. Overall, the denial of secondary education to Afghan girls is not only a schooling crisis; it is a central mechanism through which gender inequality is produced, normalized, and sustained.

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